

IN THE TRAINING ROOM

Hebrews 12:3-17

There's a well worn story that tells of a sticker in a telephone box that read, "If you are tired of sin read John 3:16" under which some wag had written, "If you're not tired of sin, phone 555-1234." Now, the Preacher's congregation are tired, but not tired of sin. Nor are they tired of sainthood. It is the struggle between the two that is wearing them down.

The Preacher has never explicitly described the congregation's problems – why should he, they know them all too well, but this lack of explicit means that we can listen to the Preacher, even if our problems are not exactly the same as theirs. For example is the "struggle against sin" (12:4) a battle against temptation to do wrong or a righteous stand against injustice. Of course, the difference is irrelevant, through the ages Christians have struggled to do what is right and avoid what is evil; this is part and parcel of the Christian life.

True discipleship always carries a price. Different cultures and times exact different prices, but it's always there. Sometimes the cost is financial. There are jobs Christians cannot do, deals they will not make, and promotions they will not get. Or the cost may be social. Families and friends disown converts, and not just in Muslim countries. In our society, at parties and family gatherings you can talk about any subject like, even the most taboo of topics, but if you mention Jesus more than twice you probably won't be invited again. There again, the cost may be emotional. As a Christian we have to work out how to love our enemies, which is a lot more taxing than figuring out how to get even. But all of this should come as no surprise. After all, one of the heaviest burdens ever devised is a cross, and we are called to carry ours around on a daily basis.

This price is one Christians have not always been willing to pay. The price may seem worth it at the beginning but, like a commuter using the Severn Toll Bridge every day, the cost just seems to mount up. It begins to seem futile to keep paying the cost when nothing changes. One commentator has said, "if you are going to live in [today's world] you're in for a fight... A Bible study group up against the corporate wealth of big business; a sermon on sacrifice against a million pound advertising campaign... by all the odds, we haven't got a chance!"

For all these reasons, and more, Christians grow weary and lose heart. They get tired of the struggle, tired of fighting social problems and institutional injustice, tired of serving the needs of people who turn away without a word of thanks, tired of battling to keep the Sunday school going, tired of making visits to people who are just shopping for a church, tired of battling their own addictions, their own cravings, tired of fighting of the desire to down tools and let someone else do the work for a change.

And so they go. They don't do anything dramatic. They don't join the JW's or a local atheist group. They don't go away mad; they just go away. It's not those who storm out the front door in a demonstration of anger, it's those who quietly slip out the back door that the Preacher is concerned about. He is concerned about those who pour out their lives but never seem to see any blessing; those who have all the scars but none of the hope; those getting up morning by morning to discover the world of struggle and suffering have not gone away in the night and who face each day with feeble arms and weak knees.

The Preacher's response to this encroaching weariness is two-fold: First he once again points our attention to Jesus. This started back in the previous section when we were called to look at him as the head runner in a great race (12:2). Now the image is of a warrior in battle, standing firm against a determined enemy. "Yes, you are under fire", the Preacher tells them, "but you haven't yet drawn the sort of fire Jesus did, and he remained firm" (12:3-4).

Second, the Preacher gives a framework in which we can find some meaning to our suffering; and suffering is more bearable if we know it isn't meaningless. Some years ago, I had major surgery. I was not in a great deal of pain but I was finding it increasingly difficult to eat or even breath, and the emotional strain of suspected cancer was very high and it all seemed so pointless. After the operation, I was in pain for some time, more so than before, but it was the pain that goes with healing and so was bearable. The Preacher uses the image of parenthood. He is like an uncle telling his nephew, who is complaining that his parents are too hard on him, that they act as they do out of love, (12:5-7, quoting Proverbs 3:11-12 from the LXX).

Discipline is a slippery word these days. Many people seem to think of discipline as the use of force, but that is not the preacher's point. Discipline, to the Preacher, is simply the process by which a parent passes on a sense of right and wrong and self-worth. No child wants to be restricted but for their own sake, their safety now, and their future understanding, they need to be controlled. The alternative as far as the Preacher is concerned is abandonment. True discipline is a sign of parental love. Parents discipline their children because they want them to grow up well, to share their values, commitment and way of life. In short, good parents want their children to grow up like them.

God, as the good parent wants exactly that for us, his children. He wants us to follow in our father's footsteps. Also, he wants us to grow up into a life that has meaning and joy, that is satisfying and filled with good things. Like a good parent he knows that what looks attractive to a child is not necessarily good for them in the long run and conversely, what seems a burden now may be just what that child needs.

We need a little care here. We have seen a number of times that the Preacher is dealing with pastoral concerns, not writing a theology textbook. Taken as an absolute principle the idea that suffering is a sign of the loving, fatherly hand of God is untenable. Concentration camps and the violent death of a child are not signs of God's love (though he may use them in ways beyond our imagining or understanding). The Preacher wants us to see beyond our eyes. The lesson he wants us to learn here is not "suffering has much to teach us", so much as, "praise be to our loving God".

As we move into the last few verses of our passage this evening we see another shift of metaphor. In 12:1 we were at the end of a great race with the crowds cheering us on. In 12:3 we found ourselves briefly on the battlefield, then in 12:5 we are a loving

family. Now in 12:12 we are back at the races, but this time there is a difference, this time we limp.

Many cities have annual marathons, often involving 1000s of runners. Up front are the professional athletes. When the starters pistol fires they're away. They make the race look easy and are off to the showers and an interview on Grandstand before others have passed the first marker post. It's these runners who bring up the rear that the Preacher is now concerned about. They are the ordinary guys – a few more years under the belt and a little extra weight over it. They pause often to sip water and catch their breath. Sometimes, one of these runners near the back will stumble with weariness or even faint from exhaustion. When this happens other runners will stop or help. Back here at the tail end compassion is more important than competition. The Preacher tells us that our race is more like the back end of the marathon than the front. We are not great athletes. We are weary, discouraged and somewhat out of shape but nevertheless the Preacher encourages us to “strengthen our feeble arms and weak knees” (12:12). What's more we are to help each other so that even those lamed by the race may not be disabled and withdraw (12:13).

The Preacher then goes on to say what running a race with a limp looks like. If you and I are one of those at the back of the race, for whom just finishing the race will be a personal best, what will our race entail? 12:14ff tells us that in the Christian race concern for our fellow runners is of utmost importance. This means living in peace with others, in as far as it is up to us, and to live holy lives. In other words, our lives are to reflect Jesus. 12:15 refers to the opportunities to show compassion to others that come our way from time to time. We are to be sure to make the best of such opportunities so that we may both receive and pass on the grace of God. Put negatively we are to avoid bitterness. Within any group of people, Christians no less than others, there is the possibility of misunderstanding and upset. These things will happen, but we are not to water and fertilize them. Remember, we too run with a limp.

Maybe this idea of running with a limp reminds the Preacher of Jacob, who, having wrestled with God to obtain a blessing, walked away with a limp. This connection with Jacob leads his thoughts to Esau, Jacob's twin brother, who was more concerned with short-term blessing. For the third time in this sermon the Preacher reminds us of the danger of giving up the struggle. As Jesus says, “No-one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:62).

That is what the Preacher fears some of his congregation may do. Like Esau, they feel under pressure, some hunger pains and the temptation to foolishly and short-sightedly abandon the faith for something more immediately gratifying.

If they do, if they limp off the track and head for the pub, they will miss what awaits them at the finishing line, “the joy that is set before us” (12:2). As the Preacher nears the end of his epic sermon he now turns to the joy, giving a foretaste of what is to come. More of this next time.

Amen.

Kevin Dare
Beeston Baptist Church
Sunday evening, 14 January 2007