

Service of Confession and Absolution

Hebrews 12:1-3

Since I've come back from leave, I had various people come up to me to ask me whether I've lost weight. That's gratifying, I guess. It's not been part of any conscious weight loss plan, but rather the outcome of three months of living a more balanced life, during the course of my rest and recuperation leave. The challenge, now that I'm back at work, is to maintain the space for regular exercise, which brings great benefit to body and mind, and also spirit, as I clear my mind of anxieties over the kilometres, and allow my subconscious to process what it must.

One of the fortunate by-products of losing a few kilograms is that I'm finding it easier to climb hills on my bike. Paradoxically, it took many kilometres of hill climbing to shed this weight, but I can climb longer and a little faster because I'm no longer carrying around so much excess. It's much more enjoyable because it's no longer quite so painful.

The epistle reading set for Holy Wednesday comes from the Epistle to the Hebrews. It has a sporting motif, speaking of running a race rather than cycling. In the previous chapter, the writer has drawn our attention to the great figures of faith. "Faith is being sure of what we hope for, and certain of what we do not see." Abel, Enoch, Noah (whose star burns a little brighter in these days of the Noah movie), Abraham and the patriarchs, Moses and Rahab, all of these people exemplified hope in the face of great suffering.

"We are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses..." Living in and with God, these ancestors in faith are in actuality cheering us on. Some of them are witnesses in a double sense: the word witness also means martyr, and some of them "resisted to the point of shedding their blood." The name and the courage of Stephen would have been well known to the followers of Jesus who first read this letter.

It is these people who surround us, encourage us, and provide an example for us as "we run with perseverance the race set before us." People of the ancient world were as familiar with this example as we are today. Paul writes in I Corinthians: "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize. Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training."

Discipleship means being engaged in this race. Our training regime consists of the simple habits of faith, like the ones we are participating in tonight: worship, hearing and internalising the word of God, prayer, confession and absolution, and the body and blood of Jesus. We need to train because our natural spiritual state tends toward inertia. And when we are not disciplined in spiritual growth through these divinely prescribed means of grace, we slowly lose fitness. Our fitness is marked by the way that our lives mirror the life, the words and the actions of Jesus, whom Hebrews describes as our "forerunner."

Jesus, however, is much more than our example, or even our spiritual coach. In the way he ran his race, in the way that he followed the course set before him, in the way he "was tempted in every way, just as we are, yet without sin;" in the way "he learned obedience from what he suffered and once made perfect...became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him," he has opened up a new and living way into God's presence and power and blessing through his shed blood.

The extent that we stay close to Jesus, the way that we “fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith” is the way that we run the race of faith well. The writer of this letter urges us to “throw off everything that hinders us and the sin that so easily entangles us.” The sense of these words are the spiritual lethargy that afflicts us, the slow drift away from wholehearted trust in God to a trust in the things we achieve and the things we have. The sin that clings closely to us are our particular points of weakness, which the evil one goes after. You and I know what these are.

A runner would not compete in normal clothes, not then and not now. I get into the purpose-designed lycra when I jump on the bike. In the ancient world, athletes took this one step further. They ran naked. Repentance is coming to God spiritually naked. This is an incredibly vulnerable position, but the truth is that God knows the things that we are convinced we have hidden from him. God doesn't despise this spiritual nakedness, or take advantage of us. Instead, but he covers us with the garment of righteousness that comes from Jesus himself. He is the one who was stripped, beaten and dehumanised on the cross, to bear the shame of our sin, and to open up this new and living way to God our Father.

Tonight come before God confidently. Acknowledge those things that slow your race of faith down, even to a stop. Tonight “draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith.” Know that in your baptism “your heart has been sprinkled to cleanse you from a guilty conscience and your bodies have been “washed with pure water...” Hold unwaveringly to this hope, and to the faithfulness of the one who has given you this new life, Jesus. Amen.