

The Cloud of Witnesses – Daily Inspiration in Hebrews 11-12

This week we begin a new series which runs either side of All Saints Day (1st November) – that time of the Church's year when we remember and celebrate the worldwide church, as well as those who have gone before us in faith. Over the next thirteen days we'll look at this amazing chapter a few verses at a time to see what real faith looks like in practice – feel free to go back to the original stories if you have time. Either way, as we do so, may the faith of these great characters inspire us to keep living out our faith today!

Day 1 – Hebrews 11:1-4 'Faith gives its best'

What is faith? It's a fair question to ask – it's a word that lies at the heart of what it means to follow Jesus, but so often it is parodied today as 'the blind leading the blind'. Many compare 'faith' unfavourably to fact or reason, or dismiss it as a crutch for the weak.

But this is not how the bible sees it. Faith is something strong, active, dynamic – in fact this great chapter begins with this summary: 'Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance in what we do not see.' (v1)

Note the words used: confidence, assurance. Other translations use the words 'sure' and 'certain'. Words we associate more with facts! And whilst we can't 'prove' faith in the way that some would wish, what scripture consistently affirms is that we can rely on faith because: (a) we have good reasons to believe; (b) we have our own experiences and convictions which we know we can't deny; and (c) we have the examples of others to inspire us.

Which brings us to Hebrews 11: in this one chapter, the author (whose name we don't know) brings together many of these inspiring examples in one extraordinary narrative: the 1st century equivalent of a coach's pep talk. 'Look at these people,' the author says, 'if they can do it, so can you. So keep going!'

And this list of inspirational figures begins at an unexpected place. If I were to ask you who the first hero of the bible is, I bet most of you would say Noah. But Hebrews gives us two heroes before that, and the very first is the one we read of today: Abel (you can read his story in Genesis 4). Most of us simply think of Abel as the first murder victim of history, but what this passage does is remind us *why* that happened.

Abel gave God his best – the firstfruits of his flock. That is what put him at odds with his brother, but it is also why he is a hero of the faith. Despite what happened to his parents, Abel knew that God deserved his worship, and so he gave God something precious – which in turn showed that his heart was fully given to God.

Faith is sometimes caricatured as a free pass – but nothing could be further from the truth. Yes, faith is always our bedrock – but to live out our faith means to live with gratitude, and therefore to give of our best to God.

It is easy to get weary of doing good – but may Abel inspire us: how can you give God your best today?

The Cloud of Witnesses – Daily Inspiration in Hebrews 11-12

Day 2 – Hebrews 11:5-7 ‘Faith obeys regardless’

Many of you may be familiar with the film ‘Evan Almighty’ – apart from being very funny, the value of watching the film is that it is a modern-day re-telling of the story of Noah. It visualises what it would actually be like to receive the sort of message Noah had from God, and to actually build an enormous boat in your garden while everyone around you pointed and laughed. Like Chicken Licken in the child’s story, I wonder how many of us would have passed Noah’s home and believed that the sky really was about to fall down?

It’s easy to romanticise Noah’s story (Genesis 6-9), but the reality was hard. Noah was given an incredible task, which required unusual faith to obey. Indeed today’s passage soberingly reminds us that Noah’s faith did not just save him and his family but also condemned the world (v7). Not that this was Noah’s fault, but the stakes were high – and we know that at the end of the story God gives Noah assurance that he would never have to ‘start again’ with humanity in the future: the rainbow would be a sign of blessing to remind us – one we can still see and give thanks for today.

Noah teaches us that *faith obeys God in all circumstances*: much of the time that will be reasonable, but there will be times when God asks us to do something unusual. It is wise to check with trusted friends and companions, and to seek assurance in prayer –but we should not rule out such prompts. We are all heirs of ‘the righteousness that it is in keeping with faith.’

A word, too, about Enoch (vv5-6). Perhaps not a character you’re familiar with, but Enoch belongs to a very select group of people in the bible who were taken directly to be with God – as far as I can recall, there are only two others: Elijah and Jesus. So this puts Enoch in very exalted company, which might cause you to wonder why he is so little known?

In fact Enoch’s life only covers a few verses in Genesis 5:18-24, one of those long genealogical lists you find in the Old Testament. But Genesis 5:24 is quite clear that Enoch had a unique end, which is picked up on here in Hebrews 11, and the author rightly concludes that this remarkable chap must have lived an extraordinary life of faith. In fact, his name means ‘dedicated’, and so he passed on as he lived: dedicated to his Lord.

We too have a similar calling: may God grant us grace to be dedicated to our Lord, and obey him in all circumstances.

Day 3 – Hebrews 11:8-12 ‘Faith trusts God’s promises’

Today we navigate better-known waters – the famous story of Abraham (Genesis 12 onwards). Like Noah, Abraham was called to step out in faith. Unlike Noah, the greatest promise of God was one for which Abraham had to wait much longer to be fulfilled. God first promised Abraham that he and Sarah would have a child when he was 75 – it was finally fulfilled when Abraham turned 100.

Abraham’s journey was somewhat chequered, and not without its failings. But the extraordinary faith he showed when leaving his homeland to head to the land to which God had called him (v8) and then to settle there (v9) proved a sure testing ground for the promises to come. Indeed, he shared that faith with Sarah, who quite rightly gets equal billing in this text in trusting God for the family she was promised (v11).

We are the heirs of this promise – indeed all of us who worship our Lord are beneficiaries, a global movement ‘as numerous as the stars in the sky and countless as the sand on the seashore.’ (v12)

Not many of us have likely been given promises as huge as Abraham and Sarah. But most of us carry smaller promises, special to us – and sometimes those promises take time to be fulfilled. Abraham and Sarah’s story gives us faith and hope to believe that God will come through for us – even a mustard seed of that faith is enough.

Then there are God’s universal promises, the truths we find in scripture, the eternal realities of our faith. The blessings promised to Abraham are ours: God has given them to us in Christ (Ephesians 1:3-14). These promises have already been fulfilled – by faith we receive them and join God’s global family – both in this life, as well as in the one to come.

May God give us grace to trust his promises – for the one who promises them is faithful!

The Cloud of Witnesses – Daily Inspiration in Hebrews 11-12

Day 4 – Hebrews 11:13-16 ‘Faith waits in hope’

Today is All Saints’ Day: the day of the year when we celebrate the worldwide church, living and departed – the ‘cloud of witnesses’ who have lived by faith and borne testimony to their Lord in every culture throughout the centuries.

Some of them are famous, and rightly so. The vast majority are not: people just like us, who lived quietly faithful lives. All of them/us are saved by the grace of God, since none of us ever achieve perfection this side of heaven. There will be parts of our lives that remain ‘works in progress’, and certainly the societies in which we live will never be more than a partial reflection of the true kingdom of God.

After a brief tour of several of the most celebrated saints (and maybe a couple who are less well known) in the first part of the chapter, the author of Hebrews pauses for a moment today to remind us that, however much they achieved, ‘all these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance.’ (v13)

Like us, these saints saw only a partial realisation of all that they lived and prayed and longed for. Noah and his family were saved, but Noah had to trust the future of the human race into divine hands when he died. Abraham and Sarah were blessed with a son, but had to trust that this son would indeed be the ‘child of promise’. We know there were plenty of bumps along the way after that!

The author summarises by reminding us that to live by faith means to live as ‘foreigners and strangers on earth’ (v13). It’s not that we cut ourselves off from society: but there will always be a part of us that has a different home: ‘a better country – a heavenly one’ (v16).

The assurance that this is our future is what inspired the saints of old – the saints we celebrate today – but it also inspires us too. We have the same inheritance, and we trust in the same glorious Saviour to lead us there. And so, as we give thanks for the worldwide fellowship of the church of God around the world, may we also give thanks for the future hope which awaits us, too. And may that future hope also energise our present hours with faithful and fruitful service, this day and this week.

The Cloud of Witnesses – Daily Inspiration in Hebrews 11-12

Day 5 – Hebrews 11:17-19 ‘Faith holds nothing back’

Yesterday, and for the next two weeks, the world’s attention is fixed on Glasgow. Global leaders have gathered to try and hammer out viable commitments on climate change, while the rest of us look on: praying, hoping and possibly fearing as well.

As someone who has been involved with the environmental movement for more than 30 years, my sense is that the elephant in the room is the same as it when I first signed up in the late 1980s: there is no pain-free solution. Technology will go some of the way to helping us out of this hole – but the rest requires a change of lifestyle on a huge scale. Changes that our leaders are unlikely to commit us to this week, because they know that they are things which most of us still won’t accept.

The reason we are where we are now is that we’ve always held something back – either as individuals, or as a country, or as a global community. Our ‘faith’ in the future of the planet has a cut-off point. There are sacrifices that we would refuse to make. Today’s passage is profoundly challenging because it reminds us of a story in the bible where the central character held nothing back: he was prepared to surrender the most precious thing in his life if God called him to do so.

We know the end of the story – Abraham was spared having to go through with it. But it remains disturbing, nonetheless. Would God ever call us to something similar? Thankfully for nearly all of us, the answer is no. This passage is a prophetic foretaste, not of what God would ask of any other human, but what God would ask of *himself*. Isaac points to Jesus, first and foremost.

But there is a spiritual lesson for us here: faith is about the surrender of self, the willingness to give everything to God, who gave everything for us. We may never be asked to offer what Abraham did, but we are still called to hold nothing back. And in doing so, there is true freedom. The secret of surrender, if I can call it that, is that there is great blessing in the act of full surrender to God. ‘They are no fool who gives what they cannot keep to gain what they cannot lose.’ (Jim Elliot)

And so we watch, and wait, and pray. We hope that our leaders will finally commit to something momentous, will hold nothing back for the future of the planet. But even if they don’t, may God grant us grace to hold nothing back from him, and in so doing, to find fullness of life, both now and for eternity.

The Cloud of Witnesses – Daily Inspiration in Hebrews 11-12

Day 6 – Hebrews 11:20-22 ‘Faith blesses others’

‘God’s people in God’s place under God’s blessing.’ This simple definition of the kingdom of God I learnt many years ago, and it’s a pretty good summary, which also allows us to track the progress of this amazing divine plan throughout the bible. Adam and Eve begin very much as God’s people in God’s place under his blessing, but then lose those benefits through their rebellion. When God calls Abraham in Genesis 12 he promises the restoration of that pattern – ‘to the land I will show you’ (v1 place), ‘a great nation’ (v2 people), ‘I will bless you’ (v2 blessing).

So far, so good – but there’s something missing. It somehow feels a bit... introspective. And in fact, helpful as this summary has been for my understanding of the bible and growth in faith, it neglects a fourth dimension: ‘All peoples on earth will be blessed through you’ (Genesis 12:3).

God’s people are blessed *to be a blessing*. We pass it on. The word for ‘love’ invented by the early Christians – *agape* – means selfless giving, inspired by Jesus’ own example.

So a huge part of the life of faith is the capacity to bless others: to pass on our blessings, to share them around. And so we see in today’s passage, that ‘by faith’ Isaac passed it on – he blessed his sons Jacob and Esau (v20). Similarly, Jacob on his deathbed blessed his twelve sons, and also Joseph’s sons too (v21) – you can read this in detail in Genesis 49-50.

Even Joseph too became a blessing – while today’s passage looks forward to the return from Egypt several hundred years later (v22), it was Joseph’s wise leadership and gracious forgiveness extended to his family which saved their lives and allowed their lineage to continue.

As perhaps only becomes clear later in scripture, this lineage is special as it becomes the family through which God’s global promises are fulfilled – leading all the way to Jesus. What this family only understand vaguely at the time of their lives takes on huge significance.

So often the same is true for us whenever we are called to take steps of faith. Often we can’t see its true value at the time – but later we can see how God worked through it and brought a blessing.

And so, as spiritual descendents of this family – of Isaac, Jacob and Joseph – we too are called to bless others, in faith that the same God will work in us and through us, and that we also might be blessed, according to his infinite love and grace.

The Cloud of Witnesses – Daily Inspiration in Hebrews 11-12

Day 7 – Hebrews 11:23-28 ‘Faith overcomes fear’

What is the opposite of faith? Many of us when asked that question, would say ‘doubt’. But the bible’s answer is different. The opposite of faith is not doubt, but fear. Fear is the thing that stifles faith the most. It’s no surprise that when God meets people in scripture, the first thing he often says – whether it’s Jesus or an angelic being – is ‘don’t be afraid’.

We all feel fear to some degree. Some of that is a biological necessity – as humans we learn to feel healthy fear whenever our physical wellbeing is in danger, that’s part of what keeps us alive – and why we tell toddlers not to wander towards a road or eat the litter they pick up from the floor!

So it could be said that one of the keys to flourishing in faith is learning to overcome our fear, whatever that might be: fear of failure, of unpopularity, of being wrong, of conflict, of appearing weak, of accepting help, of trusting a friend (or God).

Today’s passage surprised me when I read it. Moses inspires me in lots of ways, but I hadn’t expected the way that Moses was described. Events that are described in one way in the book of Exodus (you can read the full story in Exodus chapter 2) are re-cast here. Moses is left in a basket not just because it was too dangerous to keep him hidden, but because his parents ‘were not afraid of the king’s edict’. (v23)

Similarly, Moses is ostracised from the royal court not just because he killed an Egyptian but because ‘he chose to be ill-treated along with the people of God.’ (v25) And he left after the 10th plague not just because he was told to go by a duplicitous king, but also because he did not fear the king’s anger. (It’s possible that v28 refers to Moses’ first flight, which makes the bold statement that he did not fear the king’s anger even more striking.)

Now we know that Moses felt fear at various points in his life, even during the famous Exodus narrative – he was reluctant to obey God’s call to go back to Egypt, and his initial response to the discovery of his killing was to be afraid (Exodus 2:14). But this passage reminds us that Moses overcame his natural fear – it did not come to define him, or prevent him from fulfilling his calling.

The book of Hebrews was written to Christians under extreme pressure – far greater pressure than we face today. But its encouragement is just the same. We face fears, just as they did, just as God’s people have always done. But faith helps us to overcome our fear. Faith keeps God on the throne, and lifts our eyes to see beyond our current circumstances, perhaps to do things we didn’t think we were capable of. Faith is the antidote to fear, and calls us today to trust anew in both the power and the goodness of God.

The Cloud of Witnesses – Daily Inspiration in Hebrews 11-12

Day 8 – Hebrews 11:29-31 ‘Faith is found in surprising people’

Today, in quick succession the author of Hebrews skates over two famous episodes – the Crossing of the Red Sea and the Fall of Jericho – and then reminds us of the role that Rahab played in the latter drama. Rahab is one of those unsung heroes, who eventually merits a place in the genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:5). Today I’m going to hand over the rein to Nell Goddard, who wrote this excellent reflection on Rahab a couple of years ago for an Advent series:

Sometimes it feels strange to tell people that one of my biblical heroes was a prostitute. It feels even stranger to tell them that this prostitute appears in Jesus’ genealogy. But that is the case with Rahab, the second woman to appear in Matthew 1.

As a prostitute, Rahab was the lowest of the low – especially according to Israel’s laws. And yet when two Israelite spies appear in her city, trying to work out how they can conquer it, she helps them. Instead of obeying Jericho’s king, she hides these men in her house and lies to the authorities, sending them on a wild goose chase across the desert.

Then comes the best bit. Rahab goes up to the men that she’s hidden on her roof, risking her own life by doing so, and says this:

‘I know that the LORD has given this land to you ... For the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below.’ (Joshua 2:9, 11)

For these words to come out of the mouth of a non-Israelite is completely unprecedented. The wording of this confession of faith in Joshua 2:11 is matched in only two other places in the whole Old Testament: the confession of Moses in Deuteronomy 4:39, and the confession of Solomon in 1 Kings 8:23. This woman, this prostitute, this ceremonially unclean, broken woman of the world has just made a confession of faith in the Lord which puts her up there with the likes of Moses, friend of God (Exodus 33:11), and Solomon, the wise King (1 Kings 3:12).

Not only that, but by bravely hiding these Israelite spies from the authorities and preventing them from being captured and killed, she is behaving in a way that chimes with the very heart of the covenant between Israel and the Lord. Her actions are completely in line with the deeds and quality of life that was supposed to distinguish the Israelite people from people like her. These actions and this confession lead her whole family to safety and result in her joining the Israelites after Jericho falls.

Rahab is a curveball in the story of Israel; another example of God’s plan deviating from what we might expect. But it is also a reminder – that God was at work in the most unlikely of places, and in and through the least likely of people. And he still is today.

Which unlikely people is he at work in around you? Take a few minutes to pray, in faith, today.

The Cloud of Witnesses – Daily Inspiration in Hebrews 11-12

Day 9 – Hebrews 11:32-38 'Faith is known to God'

I like to call today's passage 'the avalanche of faith'. The chapter as a whole feels like the spiritual equivalent of a snowball picking up speed as it careers down the mountain. The first 29 verses focus largely on a few central characters and only take us a third of the way through the book of Exodus. Verses 30 and 31 speed us up to the book of Joshua – and then the avalanche really begins!

In verse 32 we cover the rest of the Old Testament, with some accompanying description of the valiant deeds of this additional list thrown in for good measure in verses 33-34. And then the perspective widens out completely to the great cloud of witnesses: the thousands upon thousands of faithful souls who lived and loved and served their Lord – unknown to history, but known to God.

Many of them paid a significant price for their faithfulness, as the passage reminds us in verses 36-38. Even those who didn't, however, kept the flame alight, kept the faith alive. These are the people that Pete Greig describes so evocatively in his poetic vision which birthed the 24-7 prayer movement:

'Don't you hear them coming? Herald the weirdos! Summon the losers and the freaks. Here come the frightened and forgotten with fire in their eyes. They walk tall and trees applaud, skyscrapers bow, mountains are dwarfed by these children of another dimension. Their prayers summon the hounds of heaven and invoke the ancient dream of Eden.'

The frightened and forgotten with fire in their eyes... children of another dimension. Most of us know someone like this. A quiet hero, who lived their faith in a way which inspired us. Probably someone unknown to the wider church, but known to us – and known to God.

And that's the point: in the end whether others applaud our faith doesn't matter that much – but God sees, and commends, and blesses. Our faith is always known to him – and God is cheering all of us on. Including you, and me.

So perhaps as this week draws to a close, give thanks for those quiet heroes, those children of another dimension that have inspired you. And pray that you too might live faithfully, according to their example, adding your contribution to the continuing story of faith in our world.

Day 10 – Hebrews 11:39-40 ‘Faith looks forward to something better’

Yesterday it was my privilege to attend the annual MK Confirmation Service, where 13 candidates from around the city – including two from our Partnership – publicly affirmed their faith in Christ, and their determination to live for him through the rest of their lives. It is always an uplifting occasion, as we celebrate what God is doing here, especially in the hearts and lives of particular people.

It was also an inspiring reminder that faith continues to blossom and grow from one generation to the next. God is still looking after His Church, and the kingdom of heaven continues to be at work on this earth. Throughout this wonderful chapter of Hebrews we have told the stories of some of the great heroes of the faith, as well as honoured the unknown saints who served faithfully in their generation. And last night’s service reminded us that this story of faith continues to this day. Who knows what heroes were there last night?

As the author brings this amazing chapter to a close, he or she summarises what energised the people described very simply and profoundly: even though they did not receive the fullness of what was promised (v39), they perceived with the eyes of faith that ‘God had planned something better for us, so that only together with us would they be made perfect.’ (v40)

Faith is ultimately a forward-looking attitude. Yes, it looks back to the saving work of Christ as a constant encouragement and source of our assurance. Yes, it lives in the present outworking of our day-to-day lives – but it also carries us towards ‘something better’. Coming full circle to where we started this chapter, ‘faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance of what we do not see’ (v1)

The full revelation of God in Christ was ultimately what the ancient heroes of faith were looking in hope towards – hence they also share in the benefits that Christ has won for all of us. And this forward-looking perspective is what energises our present. It is not ‘pie in the sky when we die’: but something real to carry us through all the seasons of life, both good and bad, light and dark, happy and sad. As any seasoned walker will tell you, that moment when we see our end destination puts new energy in the legs, however far away it seems at the time.

Over the next three days, we’ll look at three practical tips that the author gives us to put this forward-looking perspective into practice. But today, let’s give thanks that we *do* have such a hope – and may that future hope give us fresh energy for all we face at present.

Day 11 – Hebrews 12:-1-3 ‘Faith travels light’

Most of you know that I love cycling. I’m not a serious cyclist: I only potter about, mostly around the parish and rarely making journeys of more than a few miles. But, apart from the pleasure of cycling itself, I do love to watch the Grand Tours and Track Championships as well, seeing the real pros at work.

And in the world of cycling, one of the big changes of the last 15 or so years is what you might call the ‘Law of Marginal Gains’. Sir Dave Brailsford, erstwhile Head of UK Cycling, was very much a pioneer in this regard: the idea that the way to beat your competition was not by one massive improvement but by a huge number of small advances: slightly smoother clothing and better bike position to reduce wind resistance, exact timing of when a cyclist should eat to maximise the energy boost, and even (so the urban myth goes) rounder wheels! I kid you not, this was actually the subject of an informal complaint by another team at the 2016 Olympics – the GB Track Cycling Team had wheels that were perfectly round, instead of being out by 0.1%.

The other huge area for ‘marginal gains’ concerns weight: every gram you can shave off the weight of the bike is one less gram for the cyclist to have push around the track or road. Track bikes used for sprinting now routinely have no brakes, as this adds weight and possible friction with the wheel. It’s all about travelling as light as possible.

And what’s true in cycling is just as true when it comes to following Jesus. We are to travel light – Jesus himself famously told us this in one of the best-loved passages of Scripture: ‘My yoke is easy and my burden is light’ (Matthew 11:30).

The author of Hebrews describes it in a different way here: ‘Since we are surrounded,’ he or she begins – and this signals to us that what comes next is the ‘so what’ of everything we’ve looked at over the last ten days – ‘let us throw off everything that hinders.’ Thankfully it’s not quite the same as taking the brakes off our bikes! It’s more like taking the heavy rucksack off our back as we try and cycle, or removing the gunk from our brake pads which slows the bike down.

As we journey in faith, we pick up baggage. Scars from failures, sins we struggle to shake, doubts that nag away at us. Today’s encouragement is very simple: cast them off! Keep asking God to heal your scars, forgive your sins (and have new hope to walk free) and give you courage to face your doubts.

Our baggage does not have to define us. Our God is in the baggage reclaim business – let’s offer *everything* that weighs us down to him, so we can keep running (or cycling) our race.

The Cloud of Witnesses – Daily Inspiration in Hebrews 11-12

Day 12 – Hebrews 12:-1-3 (ii) ‘Faith perseveres’

It’s not how you start, it’s how you finish. Several hundred years before the author of Hebrews wrote this passage, Aesop wrote his famous fable about the hare and the tortoise. The moral of the story: faithful, consistent plodding beats erratic and inconsistent speed every time.

Jesus himself made a similar observation in the parable of the sower: the seed that fell on shallow soil grew quickly and then withered. Rapid progress followed by an equally rapid falling away. This last story is pertinent to the situation faced by the recipients of this letter. Times were hard for them, opposition to their faith was increasing, and some of them were tempted to give up: the cost was just too great.

The author of this profound letter is really making a simple point throughout: keep going! Don’t give up: the challenge is worth it. Faith perseveres.

During the course of this letter, the writer has made this vital point in lots of ways: the divine status of the Son guarantees that his saving work is effective; Jesus is both the perfect priest and the perfect sacrifice; Jesus is also human like us, and so is with us in our trials.

And then we get to chapter 11, and the history of faith, and it is this chronicle of faithfulness that the writer finally appeals to here in this passage. Keep going because... ‘since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses... let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.’ Better the tortoise than the hare. Better the slow-growing seed in the good soil which bears abundant fruit. True courage is not the absence of fear but overcoming our fear.

Jesus persevered in every circumstance: ‘he endured the cross, scorning its shame.’ Consider this, the writer concludes, ‘so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.’ Whatever challenges we face today, Jesus has been there before us. He overcame: and we, Christ’s adopted sisters and brothers can overcome too, in the strength of his Spirit. Keep going: you shall overcome.

Day 13 – Hebrews 12:-1-3 (iii) ‘Faith fixes eyes on Jesus’

When our kids were toddlers we went to the park most days. We were lucky to have two or three options nearby. It was a great way for them to let off steam, have some fun and provide a change of scenery. Any of you who have (or remember having) young children will know the drill at the park. Lovely as it is to be there, and even if you take a few minutes to sit down or chat to another parent, all the time your eyes are fixed on a small moving object(s) which is in constant motion – your children! Wherever they run, your eyes, like a guided laser, follow them round.

This is a skill it takes time to acquire: that capacity to follow your kids even in a crowd, or when ducking behind play equipment. You learn their methods, their preferred locations, any surprises they might have up their sleeve. The real childcare experts – and when you start at the park you are in awe of other parents who seem to have this sixth sense – manage to look unflustered, sipping their coffee or enjoying the sunshine, and yet always intervene at the right moment, just before their child gets themselves into trouble.

Learning to fix your eyes is a valuable skill – and we conclude our short series by making the same observation about faith. Over the last two weeks, we’ve mined many valuable reflections about what faith is and how it works. We’ve thought about how faith has energised people through the generations, and how it gives us inspiration to grow, to be courageous, to be hopeful and to endure. But ultimately it comes down to one thing: it’s about where we fix our eyes. Or rather, on whom.

In the end, the key to the life of faith is *to fix our gaze on Jesus*. Why? Because Jesus is the source of faith *and* the example of faith. Our faith is *in* Jesus, and also modelled *by* Jesus. And as Jesus faced all that life and death threw at him and overcame, so we too can do the same.

In Jesus we find the wisdom, the courage and the hope that we need. Jesus gave his best, obeyed regardless and trusted the promises of God. Jesus found grace to wait, and held nothing back when the time came. Jesus blessed others throughout, overcame fear and found the seeds of grace in surprising people. Jesus never lost sight that he was known, and precious to, God. He faced his struggles because he looked forward to something better (‘for the joy that was set before him’), travelled light – both physically and spiritually – and persevered in every circumstance. Truly the source and the example on which we can build our lives.

So the key to life comes down to this: ‘let us fix our eyes upon Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith’.

Faith is not easy – but we know someone who’s been there before us. And that Someone is able to keep us and empower us in every situation, every day. Amen.