

SERMON FOR 12TH MAY – JAMES 1 verse 12

I want to begin this talk with the question “Who am I”

This man – an American - made a disastrous first attempt in the world of business. He switched to politics but within only one year that didn't work out either.

He tried his hand for a second time at business but failed again – that meant three failures in three years.

He proposed to his fiancée after four years of courtship, but she turned him down. Another woman he was courting died. He then became ill which required two years of convalescence, after which he relaunched his aborted political career with a bid to be elected as speaker of the House of Representatives. He failed. He was again defeated two years later for the position of elector. Another three years after this, he was defeated as he ran for a seat in Congress. Another five years passed before he sought office again - but was defeated. Tragically his four year old son died at this time.

That led to seven years in the wilderness, before running for the senate – but to no avail.

(Who is this? – put picture up and then complete the story)

Things looked more positive the following year when he was nominated by his party as their vice – presidential candidate, but his running mate and himself were defeated in the general election.

He failed two years later when trying for a seat in the Senate.

However, another two years after, in 1860, after 24 years of dogged perseverance, Abraham Lincoln was elected as the 16th president of the United States of America. Why I started with this will soon become clear!

Here at the Mission we have just started a series in the book of James in the New Testament – the first talk from Ben was last week when we were told about the background to the book and I want to briefly say something about the book as a whole.

It is a very practical book – it roots Christian thinking and belief into everyday life. James is wanting those who profess to have faith and belief in Jesus Christ to have a visible – living – productive – practical faith – a faith that is not just about words - but action. It is not a comfortable book - it is very challenging – which is consistent with the whole of the New Testament because living out the Christian faith –following Jesus daily - is never meant to be comfortable and it always involves challenge.

One of my favourite moments in the gospels is when someone comes to Jesus and asks the question “What is the most important commandment” – in other words what is it that God wants from us above everything else?

The answer of Jesus was thus:

“Love the Lord your God with all your mind, heart, soul and strength” and then he added “Love your neighbour as you Love yourself”

That does define the very essence of Christianity.

At its heart the Christian faith is not about following a set of rules – it is not about constantly doing certain rituals. Rather it is about responding to the amazing grace of God shown to us in Jesus Christ - and is to be worked out and expressed in the context of a relationship of love and trust with the God who made and knows us.

This is underlined all the way through the letter of James. One of the great themes in this book is posing the question and challenge:

“Are our hearts in Love with God – or are they more in love with the world?”

If our hearts are in Love with God – how will that show?

If our hearts are in Love with the world – how will that show?

Those questions are answered by James in this letter.

Last week we looked at the first 8 verses – which are about how respond to the inevitable trials and testing that come our way.

James says that when it comes to trials it is not a question of “if” but rather of “when”.

Being a Christian believer does not make you immune from them – I think we know that but worth underlining at the outset that God never promises a life of ease and comfort - free from trial and testing!

That is being realistic. It is also realistic to say that trials in their various manifestations are so challenging because they can bring confusion – they can cause us to get downhearted, discouraged, depressed or even disillusioned. Trials will bring with them the temptation to doubt that God is with us – or that God is good - and can cause us to ask the question:

“Is trusting in and serving God really worth it”.

What do we need – then - when the trials come?

The passage we have planned for today is Chapter 1 verses 9 – 18.

In the time we have I want to select just one of those verses – for here we have an answer to that question that gives us both a challenge and a great encouragement.

It is James 1 verse 12:

“BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO PERSERVERE UNDER TRIAL, BECAUSE WHEN THEY HAVE STOOD THE

TEST, THEY WILL RECEIVE THE CROWN OF LIFE THAT GOD HAS PROMISED TO THOSE WHO LOVE HIM”

One thing we are told to do in the midst of trials is to persevere – and one thing we need in the midst of trials is the strength and the motive and a reason to persevere.

Which is why I started with the example of Abraham Lincoln – someone regarded as one of the greatest Americans who ever lived – in a recent poll in America he was voted as being their greatest President.

At the turn of the last century – that is when 1999 became 2000 – the BBC did a poll as to who was the greatest Briton ever.

The answer? (Someone soon to be on the back of our £5 note?)

It was, of course, Winston Churchill.

He is the third most written about person in history. Jesus is first – the second is who? (Adolf Hitler! – not sure what to conclude from that.)

The question asked about Churchill is what was it that enabled him to stand so steadfastly and how did he inspire the British people so effectively to endure great hardships during the Second World War?

Something of Churchill's secret is revealed in one story told of him.

When he was towards the end of his life he was asked to speak at a university graduation. The car he was in broke down and when he arrived the meeting was all but over. There was no time for a long speech – so he was asked to the platform to just say a few words. He looked at all the young graduates - paused for a minute during which everyone thought that his mind had gone blank – and then in his gruff manner he boomed:

“Never give up”.

He paused again and then said “never – never give up” and then after another pause shouted “Never – never – never give up”.

He then sat down – and the audience rose and gave him a standing ovation.

(I tried it – it didn't work for me!)

I love his definition of perseverance. He once said this:

“Perseverance is being able to go from one failure to another while still retaining your enthusiasm”

Back to our verse.

James tells us that one thing we do need during trials and testing is perseverance.

Perseverance – staying the course – keeping going despite the obstacles in the way. Perseverance - the willingness to put up with tough times because of the promise and belief of better times ahead.

It involves keeping going to the very end. It involves looking forward with hope and not despair.

For the Christian believer the focus is never just to be on the here and now –but rather having an eternal focus – for that is a vital ingredient to being able to press on.

The truth is that for all our gifting – or what we may have done or experienced in the past – without perseverance and endurance we will lose our focus and possibly our way. In another letter in the New Testament that was written by the apostle Peter, he gives us the vital ingredients to live a fruitful, productive, effective Christian life.

Here they are:

Faith, goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, mutual affection, love.

To me it is striking and significant that the list starts with Faith, it ends with Love and in the middle we have perseverance.

The three are all interconnected aren't they?

Life in the New Testament is frequently pictured as being a race – we are told to run the race of faith in order to receive the prize – which is the crown.

That race is not the 100 metres sprint.

But rather it is the marathon.

A true story about a marathon race.

(Picture of Rosie Ruiz.)

Rosie Ruiz took part in the Boston marathon in 1980 and was the first woman to cross the line. Amid the cheering crowds and a blaze of lights she had the coveted laurel placed upon her head. But one of the officials was somewhat suspicious – she just didn't look like she had run a marathon.

Apparently the giveaway sign was too much cellulite on her legs. He called for an investigation – and then the truth came out.

It turned out that she mingled with the crowd and then picking her moment entered the race during the final two miles.

That may be a temptation for us spiritually speaking. We want to get to the finishing line – we want the crown – but we want to avoid the tough part that takes endurance and perseverance.

But that is not an option not if we want to grow in faith, goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness and love.

For we won't grow if settle for something easier, less demanding, something more comfortable than what God calls us to.

Look at the verse from James again.

We are told to run the race to win the prize – we are promised a reward that is waiting – and we are told – here - that it is the crown of life.

And as we persevere – to encourage us - we are promised the blessing of God. His presence with us and His provision for us - on the way to that reward. We are summoned to persevere in light of the truth that has been graciously revealed to us through the Scriptures and which we have gratefully received. We are told to cling to these truths as a secure stronghold in the storm and to stand firm on the foundation which is Jesus Christ – all that He has achieved for us through His death and resurrection and all He has promised us both in both the present and the future.

I said at the outset of this talk that the essence of the Christian faith is not following rules or carrying out certain rituals but is a relationship with a God – revealed to us in Jesus Christ – who made us and knows us and Loves us.

It is a relationship - like any relationship – that is based on trust – for you cannot have a proper, fulfilling relationship with someone if you cannot trust them.

Which is why in any relationship promises are important. For a promise is declaring that you will keep your word - that you will be predictable.

Which is why God has made promises to us. He wants us to trust Him – to discover for ourselves that He will not break His word and that He is faithful.

But is it not true that in the immediate sorrows and pressures and disappointments of life – it is easy to forget that God is faithful.

As you read through the pages of the Bible it is striking the way the people then had to be constantly reminded of God's faithfulness and His trustworthiness. Why?

The answer is because they kept forgetting!

And we are no different are we?

So, let us be reminded this morning from James of something that God has promised us.

What is it?

It is the promise of the crown of life to those who love Him.

That is the encouragement – the reason – the motive to keep persevering.

The challenge is to have this in our thinking – to see all that we go through from an eternal perspective.

I would say there is no persevering in the Christian life unless we believe there is, indeed, the reward of the crown of life to those who love, trust and persevere.

Perseverance comes when we believe that our present sufferings are not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed in us.

That is either true or it is not.

I believe it is true – because Jesus has promised it – and I do trust Him.

Have you heard of a Christian preacher who lived last century called Dr Martin Lloyd Jones?

He was born in Wales, trained as a medical doctor, then became a minister and one of the most influential Christian teachers of the 20th century – spending nearly 30 years teaching and preaching in London at Westminster Chapel.

After he died in 1981 there was a marvellous biography written about him by Iain Murray – a close friend who had been chosen by Martin Lloyd Jones to write about his life.

I want to finish by reading an extract that I find humbling, enlightening, moving and encouraging.

Iain Murray records for us a conversation he had with Martyn Lloyd Jones just before he died. I have written this down as a quote from the book:

“In his last days Martyn Lloyd Jones’s peace was deepening – and it was a peace he wanted to emphasise that comes through believing all is done by Christ. This is what he said to me:

“When you come to where I am there is only one thing that matters – that is your relationship with Him and your knowledge of Him. Nothing else matters. You realise that all our righteousness is as filthy rags – all our best works are tainted – we are sinners who are saved by grace – we are debtors to mercy alone.”

I listened and then replied that I used to think that there was something wrong about the old saints who - when dying - prayed the words that Jesus commended which were:

“God, have mercy on me a sinner”

Martyn Lloyd Jones then proceeded:

“Ah, so did I – but that thinking is rubbish! For that is where you will come to – I now have been brought to that place and can truly say that I am nothing but a sinner saved by the grace of God”

And then after a pause - and with profound emotion and a broken voice - Martyn Lloyd Jones said:

“God is so patient with us – and so very kind – and He suffers our stubbornness like He did with the children of Israel.....Oh, the deep, deep love of God”

Because of that Love – that patience – that mercy – ultimately shown to us in Jesus Christ - we can have a relationship with the living God and be secure in His love for us.

Rejoice in that – and also rejoice that the Christian life is not all down to us – that perseverance means somehow we have to keep going and hope that we can somehow muddle through get there in the end.

Our part is to feed on the promises he gives us and to trust and live in the light of them. The promise of the crown of life gives our earthly trials the perspective we need to keep persevering. We also have the promise of His blessing in the present – which is his presence and provision for us – and we need that amid the trials in the here and now.

But – and I can’t emphasise this enough – I believe I can have confidence about getting to the end and receiving the crown of life not because of my faithfulness to him – but His faithfulness to me.

Not because of my commitment – which I know is so fragile and fickle – but because of His commitment - which is so strong and steadfast.

He is, indeed, so patient with us and so very kind and His Love so deep.

A prayer – written by Steve Turner – called “Psalm” to finish.

“Not my works

– but your work

Not my perfection

– but yours

Not my grasp

– but your grip

Not my completeness

– but yours

Not my strength

– but your strength

Not my honesty

– but yours

Not my trust

– but your truth

Not my will be done

– but yours

Amen.

QUESTIONS FOR SMALL GROUPS

“BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO PERSERVERE UNDER TRIAL, BECAUSE WHEN THEY HAVE STOOD THE TEST, THEY WILL RECEIVE THE CROWN OF LIFE THAT GOD HAS PROMISED TO THOSE THAT LOVE HIM” (James 1 verse 12)

1. How, in your own words, would you describe and define “perseverance”?
(The dictionary definition is – “continued steady belief and effort; persistence; to continue to make an effort despite difficulties”)
2. The talk began with Abraham Lincoln as an example of perseverance.
What other examples can you think of that have been an inspiration to you. It could be someone well known or just someone known personally to you.
How do you think they found the resources to persevere?
3. What do you understand by the term “The Crown of Life”
How important is the promise of this when going through trials and in what way does it make a difference?
4. We are told that when we persevere during trials that we will be blessed. How does God show His Blessing in the midst of trials?
On reflection. Have you a testimony of this?
5. The ultimate example of endurance and perseverance is the Lord Jesus.
Think of ways He persevered and endured.
Read Hebrews 12 verses 1- 3 and compare it with James 1 verse 12.
Use the encouragements and challenges in both passages to pray for each other.