

If you heard last week's sermon that I gave you, that reading from the Book of Hebrews that we've just heard would sound familiar. It's because the reading from today carries on from where we were last week. And it too, has the theme of faith. Last week, the writer talked about Abraham and held him up as a great example of faith. And in today's reading, he lists a whole load of other characters who showed great faith, some of them well known, others not so well known. But I want today, in this sermon, to focus on the end of the reading, the end of this great chapter, Hebrews 11, and I want to pick out there four words that caught my attention from those verses.

The first word is pioneer. This is the only place in the Bible that Jesus is called the pioneer of our faith. So it's an interesting word. It conjures up images of Jesus blazing a trail, Jesus, our leader, our hero going before us. The key question to ask of any leader is, where are they heading? Otherwise, how would we ever know whether to follow anyone or not? A leader without a sense of where they're going isn't leading, they're just off on a walk in the woods.

The Padres, our great local baseball team, have recently brought in a new general manager, Bob Melvin. Presumably they interviewed several candidates. They'd have looked at their experience and they'd have thought, "Which of these people can take us to a place where we haven't been for a very long time? Who can lead us, not just to the playoffs, but to the World Series? Who can take us to the very top?" Well, they chose Bob Melvin and let's hope that they were right to choose him. The writer of the Book of Hebrews knows where Jesus, our leader, is heading. "He's taken his seat," he says, "at the right hand of God, into the very throne room of heaven, into the very presence of God." And he invites his people to follow him there, to walk on the trail that he has blazed, to walk on... To use a phrase, the writer to the Hebrews uses elsewhere, "to follow in the new and living way that Jesus has opened up for us." Jesus became as we are so that we can follow him to the place where he is.

The second word that caught my eye was race. The writer describes our following of Jesus as a race, which on first reading struck me as an odd word to use. Why I use the word race? Then I reflected on the fact that this week, I myself have actually entered a race. I've signed up for a half marathon in November. My wife has queried my motivation for doing so. I'm sure it's actually related to the fact I had a birthday last week and I entered my 60th year. And I'm feeling a bit sensitive about this as when I was in England recently, I went to church with my mother and one of her friends came up and said to her, "Oh, Rosemary, is this your brother?" Now my mother looks great for her age, but she is about to turn 87. I didn't hang around long enough to know whether the friend thought I was the older or younger brother. I moved on quickly. Anyway, I digress. The reason I've signed up for this race in November is to bring a measure of discipline to my training. Normally, I'm happy just to trot around Windansea every now and again, but now I feel the need to bring a bit of focus to my training, to run more regularly, to run further, because now I've got a target. Come November, I need to be able to run for 13 miles.

And the writer to the Hebrews is encouraging us to be determined in our following of Jesus, to bring to our following of him, our discipleship, a level of intensity and intentionality that might not be there otherwise. He's encouraging us to run the race. And anyone who runs a race knows that you don't want to be carrying any extra baggage when you're running a race. If you look at the running equipment in the stores, everything's built as being super lightweight, even running shoes. They're made to be light so that nothing holds the runner back.

When I was teaching, I had two friends, called John and Helena, and they went on a cycling and camping trip in France. It wasn't a race, but it was quite an endurance event. John was an experienced cyclist. He'd done many of these trips before, and he was obsessed with traveling light. He brought to show me one day the maps he was taking on his trip because he'd plotted the route to

where he was going through France and then cut the rest of the map away. So the only bit of the map he was taking was the bit he was actually going to be using. He was appalled, the first night he got to France, that Helena pulled a hair dryer out of her panier and complained that she had nowhere to plug it in. She was weighed down by unnecessary baggage on her travels.

As we run the race before us, following the pioneer of our salvation, we're not to be weighed down. We're to cast aside all that would slow us down. It could be a habit that we know isn't good for us, but saps our spiritual strength. It could be a bitterness we've carried around for years or an inability to forgive someone. It could be a desire for something which deflects and takes us away from our following of Jesus. Whatever it is, let's resolve to lay aside that which weighs us down in the race that is set before us.

Thirdly, perseverance. The writer says, "Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us." When asked to describe perseverance, a certain Christian preacher said it was about taking hold, holding on and never letting go. When we take hold of faith in Christ, there's much that could shake us off and distract us. The road that we are following to the throne room of God is not easy. It's not straight and it's not smooth. And perseverance is not about one long race. It is, in my experience, a succession of one short race after another. And the word that's translated here as perseverance is more than just patience. It's not just patience. It doesn't conjure up an image of passively waiting around for what might happen, being stoic whilst the rest of the world goes on. No, it's about steadfast endurance. That's the image that's being conjured up here. Think of an explorer heading off to the North Pole, dragging a sledge, going against the wind and the bitter cold. That's perseverance. Now, hopefully our path isn't as difficult as that, but there will be times when it feels like it is. There will be times when we need to persevere. There'll be times of doubt, disbelief and suffering. That's where we need to persevere in the race that is set before us. We have a goal. We know where we're

heading. We're not tourists in this life, strolling aimlessly around life's byways. We're pilgrims. We're heading towards a destination.

Finally, the fourth word is better. When we are called to persevere, when times are hard, we need to remember that we have a promise from God that he has provided something better. And the Book of Hebrews has many uses in ill times when it uses the word better. He's writing to a church that's persecuted. He's constantly reminding them that this material world is not all that there is, to lift their eyes to the kingdom perspective, to see that there is something better that God has planned for his people. This world is not all that there is. Our hope is of a spiritual dimension. It's the hope of heaven, a better place. Our ultimate destination is the Kingdom of God, which takes us back to what I was saying last week, about how this chapter of Hebrews begins. Chapter 11 begins like this, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Let us live as a people of faith, running the race that is set before us with perseverance, sure in the knowledge that something better awaits. Amen.