

It was a dark night but as I left my house the street lights were on as I went through the little alley at the end of our road, round the back of Simons Close and over the bridge across the A33. However, once over the bridge when I turned left there were no lights. I was on my own and it was hard to stay on the path. I was grateful for my little maglite but even then I was very tempted to turn back and go a different way. But soon I came out into the light of Elvetham Rise only to be plunged once more into darkness on Pyott's Hill. So it went on light and dark until I found my way through a patch of darkness and gloom to the bright and welcoming light of the Millstone pub.

It was not an easy journey. Much of it was in the dark and I was tempted to turn back but the goal kept me going and I eventually made it.

The letter to the Hebrews was written to Christians who were on a journey. They had come from a Jewish background and some of them on that journey were feeling the pressure to turn round and go back to the Jewish faith. The writer's main aim through the letter is to show that Jesus is better than the best the Jewish faith could offer and that therefore they should continue in their faith in Jesus.

1. A clear call

In the light of that his plea to these Christians in v23 was "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess".

We may not find ourselves in quite the same situation as these early Christians and yet for many of us there is the draw back to where we have come from. The world draws us back and would immerse us in a life of materialism and selfish pleasure away from Jesus. Jesus spoke of this in the parable of the sower when he said of some seed which fell among thorns, "The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature." (Luke 8:14)

Choked by the worries, riches and pleasures of our earthy existence. We feel very much the pull of the world as we seek to walk the way of Christ. The old life, the old ways drawing us back away from Jesus while the spirit of God is drawing us to him. As I wrote that I was reminded of the scene in the Jungle book where Mowgli catches sight of the girl coming out of the village to collect water and is entranced and as he starts to follow her the bear Baloo is saying "come back" while the panther Bagheera was saying "go on".

Here is a battle we experience in our Christian lives just about every day between living for Jesus and growing in him and living for the world and immersing ourselves in the things of this world.

The writer encouraged his readers to, "hold unswervingly to the hope we profess". As we were being reminded last week we live by faith and not by sight but, like Peter having got out of the boat to

walk to Jesus, sometimes doubts creep in and we begin to sink. The writer's concern here was that the readers should be able to stand fast and continue walking the way of Christ and not slip back into their old ways.

He would encourage us in our day to do the same, to continue walking the way of Christ no matter how hard it may be with the assurance of our hope held firm. But how did the writer expect these Christians to do that and how does he expect us to "hold unswervingly to the hope"?

I think the context is helpful here.

2. The Bonds of Faith

If you just look at the passage with me for a moment as I read v19-22a, "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith".

The writer has been speaking about the unique sacrifice of Jesus through which they and we have access to the throne of God the Father. So, he says, as we have this assurance we can come into God's presence through Jesus so let us do that with confidence. Let us come into God's presence and then as you follow down the passage v23 "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess", v24 "let us consider how we may spur one another on" and v25 "let us encourage one another".

There we have more lettuce than a Greek salad!

But what I want us to see through this is the emphasis on the word 'us' which occurs 5x in these verses along with the word we and our. The writer is leaving us in no doubt that the Christian faith is something we do together.

How can you and I "hold unswervingly to the hope we profess"? Well not on our own.

I think the writer to the Hebrews would say a. We need the help of God and b. We need the encouragement of our fellow Christians.

a. Let us draw near to God , v22.

Back in Heb 4:16 the writer has said the same thing, "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need". If we are to walk the way of Christ it will be as we daily come to God our Father and ask him for the strength we need to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus and to ward off the temptations of the world around us. Daily we need to come to God and find the "strength for today" as well as the "bright hope for tomorrow". It is as we do this that we keep our hope of heaven clear and as we do that so we are able to tread more firmly the way of Jesus even when it takes us through dark and rocky places.

b. Let us consider how we may spur one another on, v23 and let us encourage one another v25.

The word we have here for spur on is a very strong one and means provoke or incite and both of those have a negative feel. But the point is clear in that staying on the path of faith is so vital that the Christian should be willing to strongly urge his or her brother to keep going. As it says in the hymn “brother clasps the hand of brother stepping fearless through the night”.

I remember when I was about 17 being in the venture Scouts and a group of us were taken up to the Derbyshire Peak district to do a walk. We were dropped in groups of about four at different spots and had to get to check points on route to the goal, which was the van to take us back. It was quite a nice day but having been walking for some time and the last part uphill we came into snow and it was bitterly cold. As we trudged through this one of the group began to lag a bit. Then he sat down and rested. He got up and walked a bit more before going down again. Now I don't want to overstate the situation but you do hear of people being so tired walking through snow that they lie down and eventually die. We weren't really thinking that way but we did prod pull and push him through the snow till we began to go down hill and left the snow behind us and the warmth and eventually the sight of the next check point helped to revive him. That is spurring one another on, that is encouraging each other, which is the title of today's sermon.

So what practically did the writer think those Christians should do to spur and encourage each other on?

3. Encourage one another

a. think about it

The first thing to note here are the words “let's consider how...”

If we are to spur each other on and to encourage each other in the Christian way we need to be thinking about it and we need to be thinking about others not just ourselves. That thinking will then show in practical action of spurring on and encouraging other Christians.

The first of those practical actions is there for us in v25, “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another”.

b. meeting together

We encourage each other by meeting together. We encourage each other in our Christian life by coming to church together, by meeting in our homegroups, by being in our prayer partnerships or triplets. Friends I again want to challenge us on this from the word of God. God's word encourages us to meet together for the sake of encouraging others. Yes I would encourage us to be here Sunday by Sunday because we need the encouragement ourselves of worshipping together but here the writer encourages us to join together in worship for the sake of encouraging each other. Friends we need to meet together we must meet together and I want to urge you to take more seriously this call from God's word. Yes there are many things that we need to do in a week but given that there

are seven days in a week and only one when we meet together like this we have to ask honestly do I give the priority to God and to meeting with his people?

c. sharing

just coming and being here is good and I certainly am encouraged as I see different people walk through the doors on a Sunday, and especially if I haven't seen them for some weeks. However, it isn't the sum total of what I think the writer was meaning.

Just as I was leaving school they introduced what they called a language laboratory. It was a room with a series of little booths set out in rows. You went in as a class sat in a booth put on some headphones and set a tape recorder going. It was a class but everyone was on their own being taught different things. I think we can treat church like that just coming for what I can get out of it. The call of the writer here is to think of others, how we can spur on each other, encourage each other. It is the servant attitude of Jesus that is required so that we are keen to help each other. We do that as we share. As we share in the singing of the hymns, as we share the word and what God is saying to us through his word. We do it as we share answers to prayer we do it as we share things that God has done for us.

As I was reflecting on this it struck me that the way we put all these things together of thinking worship and sharing is worked out in the questions we ask.

Earlier in the autumn when we began our series on prayer I encouraged people to ask each other a. what can I pray for you and b. how is your prayer life going?

When we meet together if we seriously are thinking how can I encourage my brother or sister then perhaps to ask this kind of question opens up the opportunity to share something of where we are at and it might open an opportunity to provoke or incite others in their walk with Jesus.

We have come at encouragement in a slightly round about way but we have come at it I hope through the word of God.

God's concern for each one of us who have made a start with Jesus is that we "hold unswervingly to the hope we profess". We do that as we draw close to God but we help each other to do it as we provoke and encourage each other.

We encourage each other by thinking about others and how we might encourage them and by meeting together and by sharing together – simples.

So let me as we close encourage you to think for a moment about others who are walking the Christian way with you. Who is it that God might want you to spur on and encourage. Are you willing to give the time to meet with them and with the whole church? What might you share with them or what might you ask them so that you can incite them?

Brothers and sisters God says to you and me, to us together, “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another”.