

## *Influential People*

140<sup>th</sup> Church Anniversary – Footscray Baptist Church preached by Rev Chris Barnden on May 28, 2023 (Hebrews 12:1-3)

Congratulations Footscray on your 140<sup>th</sup> birthday! And what a day to celebrate the birth of Footscray church on the day we celebrate the beginning of the very first church!

We tend to think of anniversaries like birthdays – we marvel at the numbers of years we've accumulated, and then maybe think about how many more might be ahead.

Perhaps some of us go further and spend some quiet time thinking back to contemplate significant events in our past that are still powerful in our minds and therefore still have some effect on us today.

Whereas birthdays are more of an individual event, we tend to think of anniversaries as shared events, whether a wedding anniversary of a couple of people, or a larger body like ours today – a church anniversary.

But these events, these celebrations still give us opportunity to think back to occasions in the life of the church which have made a difference. For example, a pastor with a memorable ministry, such as the Rev J H Goble – a unique figure in the history of the city of Footscray during the early decades of last century.

Or perhaps a time of particular growth in the church, or some event in the broader community to which the church made a particular significant response.

It could also be that as individuals we have been influenced by our own experiences in the church among our brothers and sisters of faith. Indeed, here is where my mother spent her teenage years as a young Christian.

Or, this church could be the community where we first decided to put our trust in Jesus. Or where we celebrated our wedding.

Throughout chapter 11 of Hebrews, the writer to the Hebrew Christians is doing a similar thing– looking back – recalling not events, but people – people who were notable for one thing – faith – their determination to trust God no matter what.

Now, if we were to look at that list in chapter 11 there are some names there about which we'd say, "*Of course, he or she deserves to be there.*"

But there are some others, to be honest, about which I wonder – "*Why are they on the list? The bar must have been set pretty low to include so-and-so...!*" If I'd been doing that roll-call, I may not have included some who made the cut!

But what they all had in common was they had faith – they trusted God.

And at the end of the chapter, the writer includes a host of others who are not even named – anonymous believers who endured all sorts of terrible experiences, but who held on desperately to God in faith.

And it's with that in mind that the writer goes on into chapter 12, and these verses we read earlier, referring to all those who have gone before, both named and un-named, as a cloud or host of witnesses to us, we who are living by faith in our time, in the present day.

And particularly on days like today, we feel we are continuing in this tradition of faith that we have inherited – the faith of those who have trusted in God before us, those who have set an example for us.

Their time has passed and ours is now here, and these witnesses are cheering us on in this life of witnessing to the faithfulness of God.

And in the context of Footscray's anniversary, we carry this image of people of faith who have gone before us in this community.

In many ways they were anonymous women, men, and families who belonged to this church, who played their part in its life and mission without seeking attention for themselves, who made sacrifices to build the fellowship of the church.

The world may not know them, but we know many of them – our mothers and fathers in the faith who taught us, mentors and leaders who set us examples of faith to follow, and perhaps because of whom we're here today.

They are sisters and brothers of faith who took courageous decisions – to plant a church here in Footscray, or to build these buildings, to teach and train new disciples of Jesus, or to take up new challenges in mission and witness in the name of Jesus, such as the planting of Gordon Street Church, and the establishment of Westhaven.

These people, many of whose names we know, demonstrated that same faith that our biblical writer is referring to – ordinary people with faults and frailties just like us, who lived their lives as best they could, yet who determined to do that trusting in the goodness of God.

They weren't perfect, and neither are we.

And so, let's think about the other side of anniversaries. In addition to being grateful for what has past, we consider the opportunities ahead of us.

The writer to the Hebrew Christians moves from describing the witnesses themselves to talking about what this cloud of people are witnesses to.

The way we would normally think about this is that there is this imaginary stadium of life and the stands are full of these witnesses observing us – spectating as we run our race of faith, and cheering us on.

But I wonder if that's the only way to think about that.

On the one hand it can be a great picture. The only time I played in front of a cloud of witnesses, (more like a light mist of witnesses actually!) was many years ago when I played cricket in Bangladesh – playing in a local competition in front of some thousands of people.

It was wonderful when I, as the only white person playing, did something good like take a wicket or hit a six. I felt so good!

But when I was dismissed cheaply, dropped a catch or when I got hit for six in front of so many people it was quite embarrassing!

I wonder how we feel when we think of our forebears in the faith watching us living out our lives of faith? Is that a comforting thought?

I wonder if it's not so much about these who've gone before being witnesses of us, rather witnesses for us?

They're witnesses to the life of faith – they're witnesses to the fact that God can be trusted 100%, that faith in Jesus Christ is not mis-placed, it's not out-of-date or ineffective.

They're witnesses to what may be accomplished when we determine to trust God no matter what may lie before us.

We're here today as beneficiaries of those witnesses, and we're taking our own place in the life of this church, we're facing our own challenges of mission and discipleship – our own challenges of faith.

We draw strength from the witnesses who have gone before, and from what they discovered to be true – that Jesus is still Lord, that Jesus is still building his church.

With all that in mind I wonder if perhaps the picture is that these witnesses from our past are waiting at the finish line to cheer us to the finish – like when Olympic marathon runners enter the stadium, having endured their 42 kms, and have only the last 400 metres to run to the finish line and the crowd cheers them home.

In mentioning the finish line I move on to the next image the writer uses to encourage us – a race. Living as disciples of Jesus is like running in a race. However, it's an interesting type of race, because this is not a competitive race we're in, but a cooperative race.

It's not that we're trying to beat everyone else to the finish line but that we ensure we all get to the finish line! So in this life of discipleship we're not only looking out for ourselves, but we're looking out for everyone else also.

It's a race we want everyone to win!

To make it to the end in this race the writer mentions three things we need to do. The first is, “*..let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up..*”

If you have ever tried to run in full clothing, or in a raincoat and gumboots, you'll know how clumsy that is. Far more comfortable to run in singlet and shorts, like the marathon runners.

But in this particular race of faith that we're in, what are the weights that slow us down? Well, the obvious are the sinful thoughts and behaviours that occupy our minds and take us away from trusting in Jesus and living obediently to his teaching.

But also, I think there are other weights that we saddle ourselves with which need to be discarded.

Such as, expectations, both those we place on ourselves, and those others put on us. Or holding grudges and being unforgiving – “I'm not taking to him because he was rude to me.”

Things like these weigh us down, taking away the joy, freedom and hope that Jesus has given us when he took over our life. They sap our motivation for living, and for sharing our lives with others.

Jesus wants us to be ourselves, new creations through our faith in him, and to enjoy that together.

The second thing we need to do is to have patience – “*..let us run with endurance the race God has set before us..*”

Growing in faith as a Christian, growing as a follower of Jesus involves discipline and endurance – maintaining regular habits of reading and prayer.

Eugene Peterson wrote a book for disciples called “A Long Obedience In The Same Direction.” And that exactly what the Christian life is.

Building genuine friendships with people takes time, it takes investment of ourselves in the lives of others. It means being patient with one another. It means persevering with each other, being determined to be friendly and helpful no matter what.

I volunteer as a chaplain with an Under 18 AFL NAB League team. Many of the boys aren't sure about me. For a while, most of the coaches were polite but distant. However, as I have persisted in being present each week, slowly friendships have sprouted, conversations have developed, slowly they have opened their lives to me, and my life to them.

Who knows what Jesus might do with that, but I'm investing in faith with confidence that one day something good will happen. It's all about persevering in whatever it is Jesus has called you to do.

Finally, the third, and perhaps the most important thing helping us to succeed at this race of faith is being clear about our focus, our goal.

What or who are we focussing on?

Have you watched small children running, looking down at their legs moving? Inevitably they fall over because they are not yet aware they need to watch where they're going.

What's our focus? *“We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith.”*

In the early 1980's, Kingston Town was considered one of the best racehorses in Australia. In 1982 he ran in the Melbourne Cup. It was about the only major race that he hadn't won. In the final straight he forged to the lead.

Malcom Johnston, his jockey, instead of focussing on the winning post and driving Kingston Town to the line, turned and looked back to his right to see where his challengers might be. As he did that, a horse called Gurners Lane snuck up on the inside and got to the line first, thus winning the Cup. The jockey lost focus.

When we focus on Jesus we're not constantly being side-tracked by others and comparing ourselves with them. When we're focussing on Jesus we're not criticising our fellows.

In John 21, when Jesus was telling Peter what was ahead for him as a disciple, Peter asked about John, “So what about him?” Jesus replied, “Where John's life might go is no concern of yours. You follow me.”

Our relationship with Jesus is unique – it's us and him. And our faith is all about him, from beginning to end.

He planted that gift of faith within us when we first believed, he invites us to trust him each day in all the situations of our life, and he will keep that flame of faith burning through all experiences until the end.

That's the story of Footscray Baptist Church.

Jesus trusted God, even in the shadow of betrayal and death. He trusted God in the humiliation of being treated as a criminal, of dying on a cross, yet trusting, believing, having faith that God would keep his promise and raise him from death. Therefore, he is the supreme example of faith for us also.

We don't need to worry about any embarrassment we might feel on his behalf – he's been there, done that.

We needn't fear letting him down by what we have done or not done. He was willing to endure the worst of shame and humiliation just for you and for me.

So, on this day of anniversary celebration let's express our gratitude for all those sisters and brothers of faith who went before us. But then, take their example as our own, trusting in Jesus who is the source and destiny of the life we have committed into his hands.

He accomplished for us freedom, forgiveness, joy and hope, and so, in this peculiar race of faith that we're in, let's live and work characterised by those gifts, let's look out for one another, focussing on and trusting in Jesus till we meet him face-to-face at the finish line.