# Hebrews 11.29-12.2Jeremiah 23.23-29

17th August 2025

## Living the Faith

In the summer of 2012, we were rather surprised to find ourselves attending the Olympic Games.

Earlier that year, just on a whim really, we entered the ticket ballot, never expecting to receive an email telling us our four seat numbers for the first morning of the Track and Field Event in the Olympic Stadium in East London.

The night before, not wanting to be late for the next day, we stayed at the YMCA next to St Paul’s. I rather wish we hadn’t, because it came as a shock to me that the quarter bell from the cathedral chimed throughout the night! Still, nothing dampened our excitement the next day as we took our seats just to the right of the Olympic flame, indeed we even felt its heat, and from high up in the stadium enjoyed a full morning of watching world class athletes run their hearts out. A real privilege.

Today’s reading from Hebrews 11 and 12 has a similar context. The ancient world seems to have loved sport as much as does our contemporary one, and so the writer of Hebrews pictures a stadium full of spectators and participators and likens it to our spiritual journeys as we run the race of faith.

And we are still in the stadium by the time we get to chapter 12 with the phrase: *With this great cloud of witnesses around us …* because to be in *the clouds* in those days meant being high up in the stadium, rather like we may say being *in the gods.* Just as we were at the London Olympics, high up, almost at roof level, cheering on the runners down below.

So, what do we make of today’s reading from Hebrews? A book that we think of as addressed primarily to Christians from a Jewish background, hence its name of *Hebrews.* People who were well versed in the ancient stories of the Old Testament. So now, as the first century AD is in its second half, and as the church faces persecution, the unknown author of Hebrews seeks to encourage the readers of this letter with these examples of living faith.

We often talk about *faith,* or even *The Faith.* I sometimes hear myself being described, perhaps rather too generously, as a *Person of Faith.* And in some churches part of the liturgy, The Creed, will often be introduced with the invitation to *Let us now affirm our faith.* Whilst in the church of my youth much emphasis was put on *coming to faith,* being converted. Interestingly, Marcus Borg, a 20th century Christian leader and writer, used to talk not about his one-time conversion, but of his four conversions. He said he couldn’t help it; he kept on being converted. And behind the self-deprecating humour, I suspect he was making a very serious point.

So, often when talking about faith we are emphasising the *belief* part of our pilgrimage. The head part. The thinking part. And that, of course, is so important.

Yet, we hear people talk in a folksier way and say that *faith is often caught rather than taught.* Perhaps through the lives of others impacting our own lives. And this is to talk about faith more as a verb. It’s about living the faith. Living out our beliefs. It’s about down-to-earth, day-to-day practical, compassionate and active faith.

So in today’s reading we have examples of this. Of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea, a journey of faith. Of Joshua bringing down the Walls of Jericho, a confident faith. And of Rahab looking after the spies and keeping them safe, a compassionate faith.

Hebrews 11, a chronicle of faithful people from the Jewish scriptures, tells story after story about faith in action – of Living out the faith.

Now, I’m intrigued by a beautiful verse from Jeremiah 23, one of the other passages set for today and how it might bring our two readings together. It’s verse 24 when Jeremiah, in a poetic way, has God saying: *Can anyone hide in some secret place, and I do not see them? Do I not fill heaven and earth?*Really, it’s a piece of wisdom from the Jewish Scriptures rejoicing that God’s presence is everywhere. High and low, God is there. *Do I not fill heaven and earth?*

So, when we think about our faith, our mission is to join in with God’s mission. God’s presence, God’s love, God’s hope is already there in every place or situation in which we are called to serve. Our task is to join in, to identify pathways of hope and to incarnate expressions of love. And if we really do believe, as Jeremiah obviously does, that God’s presence is everywhere, then a life of faith surely has a thousand and one possibilities both inside and outside of the Church.

You can live out your faith as an elder, a school governor, a local councilor, a care home volunteer, or a fair trade campaigner. Your faith can find its expression in your work life, your home life or your leisure life. There are, in so many ways, no sacred and secular divides because in the words of Jeramiah 23.11 God says: *Do I not fill heaven and earth?*I love the statues above the West Door of Westminster Abbey. 20th Century Christians who served God in all sorts of places in all sorts of ways. Mancha Masemola, a young girl in South Africa, Martin Luther King, a Baptist Minister in the USA, Oscar Romero a Catholic Archbishop from Central America, Wang Zhiming, a Pastor from China.

Faith, it can be lived out in all places – because God is everywhere and invites us to join in with a Mission of Love that’s already begun.

So, back to our *Cloud of Witnesses* who are cheering us on from up there in *the gods* of the stadium as we run our race of faith. I wonder who you might imagine cheering you on?

We sometimes talk about *Standing on the Shoulders of Giants,* meaning that usually all our work is built on someone else’s. We are part of a continuum, filling a chapter in a much longer story. Yet maybe your life isn’t so much built on well-known giants but upon much-loved family members and friends, maybe only known to you, yet much cherished and respected. Indeed, if we have been fortunate to have inspiring role models in our lives, we have been much blessed.

However, wherever our inspiration comes from the race is ours and we have to run it in our own way. We can’t borrow someone else’s faith. Oh, perhaps that works for a phase or a season, but sooner or later, we’ll need our own. Faith needs to settle in our hearts.

As a significant 20th century theologian, the German Rector of Hamburg University, Helmut Thielike said: *The gospel must constantly be forwarded to a new address.* That’s my address, not my grandparents’, former minister’s, or old Bible Class leader’s address, but mine. The challenge is mine, to live out faith in my own time and in my own situation. For faith to become a part of my own story, yet also lived alongside you in what becomes, supportively, our story.

And because all our role models will have feet of clay the writer of Hebrews encourages everyone who is running in the life of faith to, how do they put it; *keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, the pioneer and perfector of our faith.*Now, I just want to finish with this thought. I think our unknown writer of the letter of Hebrews wanted the idea of a *great Cloud of Witnesses* cheering us on to be encouraging.

We all know that not everyone sits well on our shoulders whispering good things in our ears. Sometimes it’s those negative voices from the past that are the loudest in our minds. The criticisms we’ve received from our yesterdays can linger far too long in our todays.

This *Cloud of Witnesses* is different. I think they are urging us to keep the faith and to live the faith. They are on our side – for the Cloud of Witnesses are essentially portrayed in Hebrews as Encouragers.

Back on that morning of 3rd August 2012 in the Olympic Stadium we witnessed the first heat of the Women’s 400 metres. Once round the track, and for most of the competitors that meant crossing the line in under a minute! Magnificent!

But not for Zamzam Farah from Mogadishu in Somalia. One of only two athletes from her country. She knew she wasn’t going to win and had already said as much, but she said: *I will be representing my flag, my soil and my people. Somalia is not dead, it is alive.* Zamzam came in at 1 min 20 seconds, the slowest athlete that morning, yet as she crossed the finishing line she was greeted with one of the loudest cheers of the day. People stood up and cheered her on, inspired by her courageous participation at the London Olympics. It was a heartwarming moment to be part of.

So, this morning, as I continue my race of faith, perhaps like you in yours, in my mind’s eye I picture the minister who baptised me, the Bible Class Teacher who taught me, members of the family of faith who have nurtured me. I think too of Martin Luther King and Desmond Tutu who have inspired me. And I set my gaze upon the Lord Jesus Christ – my goal and enabler who runs alongside me.

It's the race of faith in which actions matter. And from high up a Cloud of Witnesses is cheering us all on this morning. We hear them saying to us: *Never give up. Never give up believing. Never give up loving. Never give up fixing your eyes upon Jesus.*So, as you run the race here on earth, may you hear the cheers from heaven in every step you take. Amen.

*Ian Green, Amersham, 13th August 2025*