

IMAGINE

→ Where is home for you? Is it where you live now? Or is it where you grew up? Or is it somewhere else that you have spent a good deal of time along the way? Or is it more than one place? Or is it somewhere that you're still looking forward to? When I'm away on holiday or at a conference or residential meeting, I speak of coming home to Bramhall. But when I'm here and am planning a holiday in Cornwall, I also speak of going home, of going back to my roots, to the place and the people that nurtured me in my youth and helped to provide the foundations of my life. That is home! But it's also a place that I left behind a long time ago as work and eventually a call to ministry led me to new places and new experiences.

.....Most of us will know what that feels like; leaving home to head off to university or college, leaving home because of a job or because of marriage. Most of us leave home behind and then create or find home in a new place where new relationships develop and where we grow as people and have an identity of our own that is not necessarily formed in people's minds because of what they know of our parents or other family members! It can be a really positive experience to move on but it can also be quite scary and sometimes we find ourselves wanting to return to what we knew and where we were comfortable.

→ In this passage from Hebrews that we have heard this morning, it seems as if those to whom the letter is addressed have been enduring some kind of persecution and they were seriously considering returning to the old ways of their Jewish faith rather than staying with their new found Christian faith. They were discouraged and feeling a bit trampled upon. They were wanting to go home!

.....So in their attempts to encourage these discouraged readers the writer of this passage paints them a picture of some kind of spiritual homecoming. He gathers together a list of those people from their past who have faithfully passed on the faith from generation to generation and he reflects on their lives – Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, David and Samuel. He didn't write in detail about all of them, but he does tease out some characteristics from some of their lives which may help us when we are feeling discouraged and trampled on and wanting to give up today.

.....All of those listed died without necessarily receiving the things that they had been promised. They saw those things in the distance; they headed towards them following the path that God had called them to follow. They aspired for something better and greater than they had already known even though on many occasions it would perhaps have been far easier to simply go back; to return to their old home. But no! They kept going towards the home that was promised.

→ "Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see!" That's the faith that these people displayed. That's the faith that kept them going when things seemed unlikely or even impossible. That's the faith that kept them going in the direction that God had called them. That's the faith that kept them doing what God had asked! Step by step they gingerly moved forward, trusting in God to continue to lead them.

.....What lies ahead of you at the moment that feels a little uncertain? What is there in your future that you wish you could see more clearly – a new job, a new university, a budding relationship, a new home, a different state of health, a new grandchild, a change in your financial situation, a change in what you sense God might be asking of you within the life of the church or the community? Some of the possible changes may seem positive, others not quite so and all of them with the potential to make us feel a little hesitant – that’s certainly how things feel in our home at the moment as we wait to know where Leslie will work, where we will live and where Laura will go to school this time next year! How can the lives of these characters help us all as we move forward and we trust God for those things that we cannot yet see!

→ Well, first of all perhaps, there’s the confidence that they displayed. They all moved closer and closer to what they had been promised without ever actually arriving at or receiving it. But they believed God’s promises of a better place or a better life or a change in circumstances and they kept the faith right to the end. They didn’t quit! They didn’t rebel! They didn’t give up thinking that it was hopeless or that it was too hard! People of faith have a quiet confidence that God will take care of them even though things may be tough, even though it may feel as if everything is collapsing around them, even though they may feel trampled. They remain confident in God; they keep the faith, because they know how faithful he has been in the past. How much confidence are you placing in God with regards to your future right now?

..... Then secondly these people all managed to live and behave in ways that were often quite different from those around them. Their values and their priorities weren’t the same as the other people or other nations amongst whom they lived and worked. Why? Because they had realised that ultimately this world wasn’t their home and so they lived their lives in obedience to what was to come. They refused to get too caught up in the temporary things of the life around them and to get too comfortable with where they were because they knew there was something more to come.

.....In the Old Testament, many of these faithful people describe themselves as “aliens and strangers” in the land. Later in his letter, the apostle Peter wrote, “Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul.” Being a stranger in a foreign land can be exciting but it can also be terrifying as we struggle to communicate or to make the simplest transaction. Faith invites us to leave our comfort zone and risk experiencing those feelings of unease. People of faith can continue to enjoy the blessings that are found in this world, all of which God provides for us of course, but they also make a statement through the way they live about just how much control those things have over them. People of faith have a different set of priorities and speak a different language because they always have an eye on what is ahead. What does your life say to others about what is important to you? Are you just as caught up as everyone else with making money and acquiring possessions or is living God’s way more important than holidays and cars and careers to you?

→ Thirdly, all these people of faith that the writer of Hebrews lists are searching and moving on. Right from the very beginning of scripture in Genesis, we get a sense of journeying. The Bible is a bit like a travel journal, recording the

travels of people like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph who journeyed from one place to the next, looking for somewhere to live. And then it progresses to the nation of Israel who journeyed into Egypt and then back out again and into the wilderness for many years.

.....And then as we move into the New Testament we still find this sense of journey. Jesus journeyed from heaven to earth. His parents were on a journey when he was born. They journeyed into Egypt afterwards to protect him and then they journeyed to Nazareth, setting the scene for Jesus' life of journeying from place to place as he preached the gospel and finally journeyed to Jerusalem where he accomplished all that he had come to do before journeying back to heaven again.

.....People of faith realise that they are on a journey; that there's a need to keep moving on in some way or other and that this life is simply a part of the journey. This is a great place to be and a great life to live, but there's more to come and whilst we're here we can enjoy getting ready for that and longing for it because we're not home yet. If life is tough at the moment, remember that there's something better on the horizon, and if life is good right now, remember that the best is still yet to come!

→ And finally they were discerning about where their security lay. They looked at what was around them and soon realised that all of those things were temporary and perishable. And even when times were hard and they were perhaps tempted to turn back or to give up, they continued to recognise that no matter how bad things became, God had made them a promise and he wouldn't fail them. He would always be with them and provide for them. That's where their security lay.

.....So, here we are confronted with these heroes and heroines of the faith – but really they are just ordinary people like us who put their confidence in God, confronted their fears, were willing to be different and pressed on towards whatever it was that God had promised them. So, having heard about these ordinary people are you feeling challenged, inspired, encouraged or rebuked? Remember the writer of the Hebrews wrote this passage to inspire those that were feeling tempted to give up and that's exactly what he would hope we feel as we hear these words today.

.....The writer of this letter seeks to encourage us to live our lives for the things that really matter so that we can pass on the legacy of our faith to our children and to the next generation and together live in the light of all that still lies ahead of us. The bread and wine in which we will share in just a moment are a foretaste of the heavenly banquet that is prepared for all those of us that trust in Christ now. The whole of this life, wonderful as it so often is, is also just a foretaste of what we have yet to experience.

.....Whatever is happening in our life right now, we are all on our way home. Home at its best is where there is warmth, welcome and love. Home is where we feel safe, secure and comfortable. Home is a place we can share with those that we love. One day, all those of us who trust in Christ now can expect to hear those words "welcome home" as our earthly journey and our earthly troubles come to an end. But in the meanwhile we are called to faithfully journey, not necessarily knowing where we are going, but knowing who goes with us.

