

Shirehampton Methodist Church

Penpole Avenue, Shirehampton. BS11 0DY

11am Sunday 17 August 2025

Lectionary:

Jeremiah 23:23–29

Psalms 82

Hebrews 11:29–12:2

Luke 12:32–40

SERMON

I wonder if any of you listen to Radio 4's panel show "I'm Sorry I Haven't a Clue"? It describes itself as "the antidote to panel games". The latest edition was recorded at the Beacon in Bristol. Each show starts with an amusing monologue by the host, Jack Dee, which gently pokes fun at the host city.

This week Jack said "Bristol has two successful football teams, or one if you include Bristol Rovers. Bristol Rovers' memorial stadium ground was built in 1921 on former allotments were used to grow potatoes during the Great War and potato seeds are still planted next to the pitch each year. The club says maintaining the tradition is good for morale as it at least gives the team something to lift at the end of the season."

I confess I found that really funny, but I know in Bristol it's a dangerous game to mock either local club, depending on where you are in the city at the time.

But football teams can command great loyalties, and also great divisions – particularly in Cities which have multiple teams – with Rovers and City in Bristol, Wednesday and United in my home Sheffield, Liverpool and Everton on Merseyside, City and United in Manchester (or in the case of Manchester United, pretty much everywhere!).

All teams have their heroes – maybe current players, or maybe particular 'greats' among preceding squads. Busby's Babes at Manchester United, Stanley Matthews at Stoke City (and England), Alan Shearer at Blackburn Rovers and Newcastle... and we shouldn't forget our Lionesses such as Mary Earps and her successor in goal Hannah Hampton, or Lucy Bronze who played the Euros with a fractured tibia!

We love as a society to set up our sportsmen and women as great heroes to be admired, and looked up to, to be emulated.

Our media love to do it with other celebrities too, although having built them up they seem to enjoy knocking them down again too...

Think of Michael Barrymore – at one time you couldn't watch anything without him, now he's demonised, despite never being found guilty of any criminal act.

Phillip Schofield – built up as the poster boy for clean living and with a midas touch, but as soon as he put a foot out of line with a relationship that was not unlawful, although maybe unwise, he has been made the butt of jokes and ostracised.

Megan Markle, initially put across as a breath of fresh air into the monarchy is now demonised as one trying to bring it down.

Everyone was so happy for Paul McCartney after losing Linda, that he found love in Heather Mills, but when the relationship went sour she was portrayed as the devil woman.

In our Hebrews reading, Paul starts by recalling the great heroes of the past. Inevitably he only has the old testament to work with but he selects so many ‘heroes’ of the faith and heroic moments;

- Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt
- Joshua bringing down the walls of Jericho
- Gideon
- Samson
- David and Samuel

Nowadays as preachers we are advised not to ‘assume’ that the congregations we preach to will know who we are talking about, especially when we cite examples from the Old Testament – don’t panic, I’m not proposing to give you a test!

When I was being interviewed for a place at university to study religious studies, the Dean of students asked me why I thought it was still important to teach religion in an increasingly secular society (and it’s much worse now than then). I surprised him with my answer because I told him the story of a (then) recent Lenny Henry comedy routine I had seen on TV.

Lenny Henry set the scene by trying to explain how black churches are a bit different to white UK churches. In his words, a bit more enthusiastic. He then proceeded to tell the story of Zacheus as if in a black church, and comparing it to the then popular quiz show ‘The Price is Right’.

So Jesus called out “Zacheus, do you want to be saved?” and all the people went “YEAHSSSS” waving their arms.

“Zacheus, do you want to be redeemed?” and all the people went “YEASHHHHESS”

“Zacheus, do you want to be washed in the blood of the lamb?”... “YEAHHHHHHES”

“Then Zacheus, come on down”!!!!

I explained to the Dean, that joke makes no sense unless you know the story and are aware that at the time Jesus is talking to him, Zacheus is up a tree (because he was too short to see over the crowd).

The reality is we need to understand our faith to understand the culture of our country. We also increasingly need to have at least a basic understanding of other faiths in order to relate to those who follow other faiths – that we might work together for the benefit of all.

So if Paul was writing to us today, who would he be citing as great examples of faith?

I guess as Methodists in Bristol, we would be very remiss if we didn't put in a bid for the Wesleys – John and Charles both lived in the City and we have the New Room as the oldest Methodist Church in the world and Charles Wesley's house near the Magistrates' Courts. Also relevant to Bristol, William Wilberforce was a contemporary of the Wesley's whose work to abolish the slave trade was influenced by his Christian faith, but impacted significantly on a city whose wealth has been rooted in slavery and other questionable products – cigarettes and tobacco, alcohol etc.

As Bristolians you can also claim links to William Tyndale who translated much of the Bible into English, who grew up in Wotton-under-Edge. He was later executed for his troubles. But he has good links with Bristol, hence Tyndale Baptist Church near Sainsburys on Whiteladies Road.

If we start trying to list notable Christians it can be quite interesting who might come to mind...

Corrie ten Boom was a Dutch girl whose family sought to help Jewish families being persecuted under the Nazi regime as a result of which they all ended up in a concentration camp where her parents and her sister all died. Yet she said of the time there that "there is no pit so deep that the love of God is not deeper still" and spent the rest of her life as a Christian writer and public speaker.

CS Lewis, is best known by most people for his Narnia series of books, the best known of which is "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe" which sought to make Christianity accessible for children and young people (and many adults too!). He also wrote some amazing theological texts such as The Four Loves, Mere Christianity, and A Grief Observed where he reflects on the loss of his wife.

So many of our Christian 'heroes' have not only lived out their faith, but have done so through social action that has made tremendous change in society;

- Desmond Tutu, the amazing South African Archbishop who along with his friend Nelson Mandela did so much to transform the evil of apartheid in such a way as to facilitate a remarkably peaceful transition to majority rule.
- Mother Theresa, whose service of the poor and needy in Calcutta changed lives.

- Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King whose peaceful actions helped movement to reduce racial segregation in the USA – although it might be said that there is still a very long way to go in that country.

So are all our 'heroes' historic?

Well I hope not. It becomes harder as we look closer to 'now' because as I indicated earlier, we've got used to seeing the faults in our 'heroes'. Even Mother Theresa's motives and work has been challenged in recent times.

If we were to ask the media for 'famous' British Christians, they have for years always gone with the default answer of 'Cliff Richard'. He's been in the public eye for a long time and has publicly declared his faith with Christian songs for Christmas, the Millennium Prayer and with specifically Christian concerts. He has shared platforms with such as Billy Graham and made specifically Christian films. As a youngster, I was short of Christian role models and followed a lot of his Christian music and books. As I've matured I still like some of the music, other bits I find a bit too trite, and I struggle now with his politics.

But if I want to find someone I might be more comfortable with politically, I might cite someone like the Glastonbury host Michael Eavis. A well known Methodist and trustee of John Wesley's New Room, Michael is open about his Christian faith. But I know there is much about the Glastonbury festival that some people find controversial, and as with so many 'famous' Christians, you might question how do they square significant personal wealth with Jesus' teachings on camels through needles, and riches in heaven...?

The actor David Suchet of Poirot fame, has recorded the whole New International Version of the New Testament. His classical tones make for very easy listening.

Comedian Tim Vine is open about his Christian faith and there are often specifically faith orientated jokes within his shows. I last saw him live at Spring Harvest where the entire 'set' was Christian in tone – and sadly I'd say somewhat less funny than he usually is because of it. But where do you draw the line on Christians in humour? Miranda Hart and Bobby Ball are two other Christian comedians who have found success in secular shows but as a result some of their TV persona can appear less 'Christian' than some might desire.

Many will be aware that former Chief Scout Bear Grylls is a Christian and has been deeply involved in the Alpha Courses designed to help new people encounter Christianity. But he has upset a number of people by being involved in baptising Russell Brand who has recently professed a Christian faith, but is currently awaiting trial for multiple counts of rape and assault.

TV cop Graham Cole, who played PC Tony Stamp in The Bill, is a Christian who uses his public profile to support emergency services workers (particularly Police) who struggle with poor mental health as a result of their work.

And, just to throw a controversial one in for Bristol, our former Mayor, Marvin Rees (now Lord Rees of Easton) is a deeply committed Christian, significantly involved in his church – and a close friend of Rev Andy Paget, who until recently was the Police chaplain who succeeded my father!

So, looking at all of these as modern or more recent, heroes of the faith – and I'm sure you will all know your own 'unsung heroes' – are all examples of what Paul refers to as a "cloud of witnesses" whom we are encouraged to see as those to be emulated.

We are encouraged, like them, to run the race set before us – to live our lives with total perseverance, following Jesus' example. Like these we have thought about, to set out not only to pursue a future hope in faith, but to work to make things right on earth.

Luke tells us of Jesus instruction that we sell our possessions and give alms, focussing on heaven – for where our treasure is, there will our hearts be also.

We are called to work for the Kingdom, not only in heaven, but on earth.

Finally we are instructed to be always ready because Jesus is coming again, or indeed we might be called to heaven (what the Salvation Army so wonderfully call 'Promoted to Glory'. We need to be willing to serve as Jesus served – he was the Servant King and we need to recognise that sometimes the answer to our prayers lies with us.

AMEN