

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

(Hebrews 11: 13-16)

Visited by an average of 20,000 people a day, Cologne Cathedral is Germany's most visited landmark

- Building work began in 1248 but was halted in 1473 leaving it unfinished
- It was not until the nineteenth century that work resumed in 1842, the cathedral being completed in 1880
- In total the completion of the cathedral was celebrated 632 years after construction began
- Information about the cathedral on the UNESCO world heritage site reads as follows:

Over seven centuries, successive builders were inspired by the same faith and a spirit of absolute fidelity to the original plans. Apart from its exceptional intrinsic value and the artistic masterpieces it contains, Cologne Cathedral testifies to the enduring strength of European Christianity.

The architect and the master builders who designed and oversaw the building works

- Never saw the completed cathedral, generations of masons and craftsman could only dream of it
- There must have been many times when it seemed as if the great project would never be finished
- But the day came when the great work was completed and despite being hit 14 times in World War II
- The cathedral stands today as a huge testament to architectural and building genius on a massive scale

One of the aims of the writer to the Hebrews in this great letter is to encourage Christians in their faith

- As far as we can tell, the first recipients were mainly Jews who had come to faith in Jesus Christ
- But these believers were on the verge of ‘shrinking back’ (Heb. 10:38)
- These believers had seen many of their friends fall away from Christian faith
- The Christians who remained in the church were discouraged – had they made a mistake by staying?
- In order to spur them on, the writer to the Hebrews is giving a list of heroes of the faith
- But even these are just a small selection from a great crowd of believers, as it were, urging them on

After the opening list, the writer, as if drawing breath gives a little summarising section

- ‘All these people were still living by faith when they died’ (Heb. 11:13)
- It’s not quite clear whether, ‘by all of these’, the writer means the whole list from Abel to Abraham
- Or just Abraham and his family – his wife, Sarah, and his son, Isaac
- But if the writer’s contemporaries were complaining that they were not seeing God’s promises fulfilled
- The writer to the Hebrews reminds them that this has been true for generations
- Indeed, even hundreds of years after Abraham, the people of God had not received the things promised

While I would probably contend that it never has been easy to be a Christian – it is certainly not easy today

- In modern Britain we have plenty of evidence as to the decline of Christianity – many churches closed
- And many churches that remain open, more than half-empty, and often somewhat lifeless and demoralised
- But we must remind ourselves that we too can be inspired by these witnesses
- Who were still *living* by faith when they died
- Who were *looking* for a country of their own
- They were *longing* for a better country

I LIVING BY FAITH

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth.

(Heb. 11:13)

Last summer we enjoyed visiting some beaches on the Côte d'Azur in France and in Northern Spain

- On one of the beaches we met a man wearing a string vest, rolled up trousers held up by braces
- wellington boots and to complete the ensemble he had a knotted hanky on his head
- presumably, because he heard us speaking English, he said, 'you'll never guess where I am from'
- actually, it's not true – we could guess where he was from – no all of it is not true
- but we recognise the caricature and while it might not even happen in Blackpool now it was out of place

The writer to the Hebrews wants to encourage Christians, providentially twenty-first century was well as first

- all these people were still living by faith when they died – why does he mention 'when they died'
- because at no point did they give up – though they had not received things promised they did not give up
- they still took God at his word and trusted him. Like Moses they had a glimpse of the Promised Land
- The birth of Isaac was the start of the fulfilment of the promise (innumerable descendants) to Abraham

It may well be that the original readers were undergoing some kind of persecution for their faith

- They were effectively 'resident aliens', 'foreigners and strangers' – they were looking forward
- And though the promises to which they were looking forward had not yet come, they still trusted in them

II LOOKING FOR THEIR OWN COUNTRY

People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return.

(Heb. 11:14)

In 1999, I had spent seven weeks with a church in the USA, the main focus of my project was soccer coaching

- But I was also a great novelty in the church community – many of whom had not met an English person
- I was commended on my ‘lovely English accent’ – something that does not happen here that often
- My expressions caused great amusement to my new friends. Sometimes they did not understand me
- And, more often than I let on, there were times when I did not understand them either

Being taken out for lunch was part of my daily routine – and on this particular day I was hosted by a gentleman

- Who belonged to an organisation named Kiwanis International – which wants to improve the world
- One child and one community at a time – after the lunch we sang national songs, some of which I knew
- And at the end we faced the flag (which I did) and said the pledge of allegiance (which I did not)
- To my surprise, after the meeting, my host asked me why I had not said the pledge of allegiance
- I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands,
- one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all – I replied, ‘because I’m British’

Citizenship remains an important idea – it is possible to apply to be a citizen of a new country

- but you are unlikely to do so if you are holding out hope of going back to the old one
- so with Abraham and family, they were not citizens of where they were, nor were they looking to go back

III LONGING FOR A BETTER COUNTRY

Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

(Heb. 11:16)

In case the reader should be in any doubt as to what country they were looking forward (Canaan perhaps)

- the writer to the Hebrews makes it clear – they country to which are looking forward is a ‘heavenly one’
- the emphasis being on the spiritual rather than the material nature of the inheritance

For 27 years, one of my friends was minister in Cornwall – born and raised in New York state

- he came to work in England with the Methodist Church and had a highly successful ministry
- in 1993, he and his congregation decided that the way forward was to be an independent congregation
- on one occasion, when one of his children was born, I visited the US Embassy with him
- Inside the doors of the embassy, it was just like being in the United States – to a lesser extent in his house
- The children were home-educated and spoke with American accents, just like their parents
- Perhaps there is a lesson for us all here – to speak with the accent of our homeland
- Not in mimicry but naturally because it reflects our growth in spiritual identity and maturity

While Abraham and others trusted God, believed in his promises and lived as foreigners and strangers on earth

- So we also have been given promises and a greater vision of the Kingdom of Heaven
- A vision that is supremely revealed to us in Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith (Heb. 12:2)
- As pioneer and perfecter, Jesus died on the cross, rose again, ascended and is seated at God’s right hand

If the first recipients of this letter to the Hebrews needed any greater motivation, then it is this

- God is not ashamed to be called their God. God used the names of these men of faith to describe himself
- ‘the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’ (Ex. 3:6), the God of Israel
- And his people were *longing* for a better country – a heavenly country
- The word ‘longing’ should not be missed – this is more than just ‘looking forward to’
- It carries the sense of ‘stretching out in order to touch’ – it’s not a passive waiting but an active reaching
- This is reaching out, in faith and hope, to the city of God

To live by faith in this way challenges us to contradict that the world is everything and this life is all there is

- And to point, in word and deed, to a far greater hope – hope in Jesus, to whom we are accountable
- To live by faith which challenges us to live not for material gain or entertainment (the gods of the age)
- If you ask people today what are the important issues in their lives you will probably discover these are
- Family, work, possessions, get on in life, experiencing life (through travel, culture, and so on)
- While the biblical word, ‘repentance’, is rightly associated with sin, it has a new-thinking dimension
- To live by the values of the Lord Jesus Christ and his kingdom, as expounded in the Sermon on the Mount
- We need to be men and women acknowledging we are poor in spirit and need God’s spirit
- Men and women who are mourning over our sins, we are just sinners saved by grace and no more
- That we are meek, that is humble and submissive to God
- Hungering and thirsting for the righteousness that comes from God
- Merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, willing to be persecuted because of righteousness
- The men and women of faith we meet in the Bible were not perfect
- but they were responding to the divine promise that invites us to refocus the direction of our longing
- the heavenly homeland, to live and die by faith, looking for our own country, longing for a better country