

**Cromwell Presbyterian Celebration Service
Hebrews 12:1 – 2; Revelation 7:9 – 12**

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the Author and Perfector of our faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”

Hebrews 12:1 – 3

“After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.

And they cried out in a loud voice:

“Salvation belongs to our God,
who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb.”

All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying:

“Amen!
Praise and glory
and wisdom and thanks and honour
and power and strength
be to our God for ever and ever.
Amen!”

Revelation 7:9 – 12

4 billion,
733 million,
538 thousand, and
900 seconds ago,

Cromwell Presbyterian Church was born.

150 years later, here we are.

Today and over this weekend we have been celebrating – hearing the stories, catching up with friends old and new and honouring the past.

Most of all we've been celebrating God's faithfulness – God's faithfulness and activity in an every changing and challenging society.

And because of God's faithfulness Cromwell Presbyterian in it's various seasons and chapters has not only survived, at times it has thrived.

As gather today, in a very real sense, we don't do that alone.

We have this is the picture given to us from Revelation, "a great multitude that no one could count..."

We are part of the greater community of all God's people, both the living and the dead.

It is the body of Christ extended throughout time as well as space, the whole company of God's redeemed people through the ages.

It is the collection of everyone who has, is, and will be faithful to Jesus Christ.

From every nation, tribe, people and language – every iwi, every hapu, every clan, every matakali, every stam...

- In 1910 only 12 million or 9 percent of the population in Africa were Christians; today the number 734 million, which 49.3 percent of the populace.
Last Sunday *in each* of the nations of Nigerian, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania and South Africa individually, there were more Anglicans in church than there were Anglicans in all of Britain and the United States combined.
- Research by Operation World makes clear that **Iran** is home to the fastest growing church in the world. Some estimate that over one million people have come to know Christ.

- But did you know that in 1970 there were 11.4 million Christians in East Asia (that is China, Korea and Japan), making up 1.2 percent of the population.
Now there is 234 million Christians, which is 12 percent of the population.
In 2010 in the entire Asia region there were 287 million Christians.
As of 2021 there is an estimated 415 million(!)
- Research by Operation World makes clear that **Iran** is home to the fastest growing church in the world. Some estimate that over one million people have come to know Christ.

And God in His grace has allowed many of you to be a part of this.
(And as an aside, any accusation of racism pitted is against Christianity is undercut but this one verse alone).

But it's not just "over there" – it's here.

So I would hazard a guess that if I was to do a survey right, there would be a significant number for whom other parts of the world, from strange foreign places such as Southland...😊

And how many languages are spoken here?
English of course. Afrikaans, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Tongan.

Increasingly this is Cromwell Presbyterian's present.
It is also its future.
This great diversity in unity bringing praise and glory and thanks to the God who has given us a great salvation through his Son our Lord Jesus.
This is God's plan and design.

We are also celebrating today because of those who have gone before us.

Hebrews speaks of a "great cloud of witnesses" that surround us.

In Protestant thinking this "great cloud of witnesses" not in the sense of watching us - looking on from heaven or whatever - but as those who testify and give testimony.

We recognise and acknowledge those who have gone before us.
It's to say we believe because of what others have done.
Cromwell Presbyterian Church is here because of those who have gone ahead
of us.

We still see the influence of people who served God and yet have long since
passed into God's presence.

The present generation of Christians is here because of the courageous witness
of someone in generations past.

This "great cloud of witnesses" stand as it were in the stadium and their
witness to Christ cheers us on in the race of faith.

Wherever we are on the Christian pilgrimage, in joy or despair, faith or doubt,
sin or grace, many millions of believers have gone before us.

This "cloud of witnesses" testify through their own lives, teaching, insight and
example.

These saints, by their faithful witness, remind us that we are not the first to
run this particular race, nor are we the first to suffer or to find it difficult.

We are not the first to struggle with giving thanks in all circumstances, nor are
we the first to face death.

Yet they don't testify to themselves – they bear witness to the One who sits on
the throne and the Lamb who was slain but now lives – Jesus the author and
perfector of our faith.

***So in more concrete terms, when you look at this image,
who do you recognise?***

Have a chat for a few moments.
Tell the person next to you.



From the top we have:

Bethany Hamilton (who as a teenager had her arm bitten off by a shark and who used her story to share her faith in Christ)

Reformer **John Calvin**.

Founder of the Alpha programme **Nicky Gumbel** which has reached millions around the world.

Jackie Pullinger, a missionary who found had a powerful ministry especially with drug addicts.

Catherine Booth who, with her husband, who helped found the Salvation Army. She was powerful evangelist and helped raised funds for the poor by appealing to the wealthy.

Bear Grylls who gained notoriety through his survival and outdoor adventures. and though TV and books while pointing to his faith in God.

Corrie Ten Boom, who sheltered Jews during the time for Nazi occupation.

St Timothy, who was mentored by Paul the Apostle pastored the early Church.

Sophia Scholl... a young woman who was part of passive resistance group who resisted Nazi Germany. She was found guilty of treason and beheaded at the age of 21.

Nick Vujcic who was born without arms or legs and travels the world speaking of his faith in Jesus.

John Knox from whom the Presbyterian Church sprouted.

Charles Spurgeon who drew thousands in his preaching in a time well before mega-churches.

Martin Luther who sparked the Reformation.

C.S. Lewis author and public theologian who wrote the Narnia chronicles as a way retelling the Christian story, and whose books *Mere Christianity* and *The Screwtape Letter* are still read by millions today.

Queen Elizabeth II who as the years progressed spoke more and more about the true King whom she serves.

The gallery could go into billions of faces.

We often forget all the centuries in between where faithful believers contended for and simply lived out their faith in Jesus.

We forget so quickly those who came into our lives, sent by God, sometimes unknown and unseen on Earth but legends in heaven.

If you say, for example, “I came to faith by simply reading the Bible”, you do have to ask, who translated it from Greek and Hebrew into a language you could understand?

Who published and printed it?

Who distributed it?

So joining that great cloud of witnesses are ***those who have gone before us in our own lives.***

What about you?

You are here because some has gone before you in the faith.

For me, there are so many people:

- ❖ The sovereign work of God’s Spirit
- ❖ My Bible in Schools teacher - fondly know as Mrs Disco Duck. I can’t remember her real name but God knows.

- ❖ Next door neighbours - who shared God's love in deed and words.
- ❖ Gideon's New Testament representative - who came to my high school and handed out New Testaments to every student.
- ❖ The faithful prayers of others - such as my neighbours up the road.
- ❖ Christian fellowship group at school - which was looked down on but meet every week without fail and was my first contact with the Christian community.
- ❖ Youth group where I have made lifelong friends
- ❖ A local church that continued to challenge me, who disciplined me, accepted me, embraced me and encouraged to walk in step with the Holy Spirit and grow gifts given to me.

All these people - saints - went before me in the faith, and others faithfully walked with God before them.

Some of their names I remember and most I don't – but God knows their names!

“So what about you – who has gone before you in the faith?”

Who are the saints?

Tell the person next to you.

So to finish this morning...

Someone took a risk.

Someone extended an invitation.

Someone stepped out in faith.

Someone prayed.

Someone talked to you about Jesus.

Someone gave up their time, energy or finances or maybe all three.

Someone may have put themselves in danger.

Someone may have given up his or her life.

And here you are today.

The things, most of them would have been what we call ordinary people.

So I'm wondering, is there someone who God is asking *you*
to take a risk for,
or extend an invitation,
or step out in faith,
or talk to about Jesus,
or give up your precious time, energy or finances or maybe all three...
or even put yourself in danger...
or who knows, in the years to come... give up your life for.