

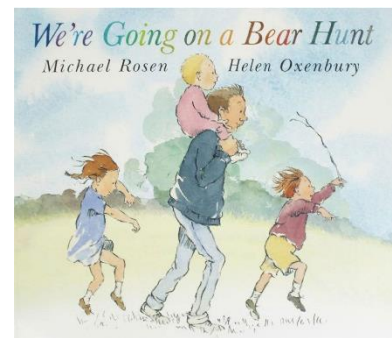
# We've got to go through it

One of the most popular children's books of the last 20 years has been Michael Rosen's *We're Going on a Bear Hunt*. Since it was written in 1989, it has been a best seller every year, sold over 9 million copies and won numerous awards. For those of you who may have missed out on the pleasure of reading it, it is a poem telling the story of a family who go on a bear hunt ...

We're going on a bear hunt.  
We're going to catch a big one.  
What a beautiful day!  
We're not scared.

... and meet a series of obstacles - long wavy grass, a deep, cold river. thick oozy mud, a big dark forest and a swirling whirling snowstorm. And at each of the obstacles comes the response:

We can't go over it.  
We can't go under it.  
Oh no! We've got to go through it!



Michael himself has had his own obstacles to face this year. After contracting COVID-19 he spent seven weeks in hospital on a ventilator, several times close to death. Now on the slow road to recovery, as he learns to walk again he is discovering that 'COVID has a long tail. It isn't an illness you just have and leave behind.'

In this time of pandemic, we are all discovering that what we are facing isn't something we can just pretend isn't happening, nor something that we just have to put up with for a few weeks and then get back to normal. It's a time when our own response has to be:

We can't go over it.  
We can't go under it.  
Oh no! We've got to go through it!

Twenty weeks or so in and we have begun to realise there is a lot more ahead. We're going to need patience, persistence and perseverance. And for most of us, at least some of the time, that is hard to swallow. We've managed to keep going so far, but even those of us who have not had the virus are now feeling worn down, weary and desperate for this unwelcome time to end.

Many of the letters in the New Testament are written to people who are struggling and finding it hard to keep going. Persecution and hardship was an experience faced by most of the early believers. The writer to the Hebrews speaks of a sense of weariness and losing heart (12:1-3). *'Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us'*, he urges them. The image is of a marathon runner growing increasingly tired, legs aching, chest sore, longing to stop, but with a way still to go. 'Let's keep on keeping on', he says. It's easy to feel hard done by when hard things happen to us, especially ones that drag on and on and slowly wear us down. Jesus, however, never pretended that suffering was anything other than an inevitable part of life (John 16:33). We see Jesus fearing the suffering that was ahead of him, but we also see him facing it and going through it in the hope of what would come out of it. And he tells us not to lose heart.

Perseverance when times are tough seems like a difficult ask. So what are the things we are told will help us? Heb 12:1-3 offers us three.

### **1. Discard unnecessary burdens**

The first is to throw off anything that is weighing us down, so we are not having our energy drained by things other than the race itself. There's a good reason why we don't see athletes wearing duffle coats, even though at other times they might never choose to leave the house without one! Many of us have found lockdown to have been a time of adjusting to living more simply, whilst others have found the opposite - with extra demands and burdens. We need to discern what things we may have regarded as essential to our lives before that can be put aside for the time being. And what things (which may all seem like good things to do, such as responding to others' requests for help) are those that are too much and will gradually wear us down if we try to carry them with us for too long.

### **2. Remove all trip hazards**

The second thing we are told is to throw off entangling sin. The hazard is not so much being weighed down as being tripped up. The last thing we want to do on a marathon is to have a fall. That would make persevering to the end so much harder. Picking ourselves up and starting to run again takes much more effort than simply keeping going. So this is the time for us to recognise and attend to all the things that rob us of the full and free life God wants us to live. Sin is far wider than wrong behaviour and harmful habits. Try reading Paul's list of the fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23) and thinking what the opposite of these might be and whether any of these are apparent in your life right now. Sin is essentially going our way not God's, living according to what we want to do when that disregards God's way of doing things. None of us can say we never sin (Rom 3:23).

### **3. Fix our eyes on Jesus**

That is why the third thing we are told is to fix our eyes on Jesus - keep looking to him and drawing strength and encouragement from him. This is the focus that will help us carry on, no matter how many miles are still ahead. Just now we feel we have an uncertain future - we cannot see what is ahead. It's like being on a run on a misty day. The next landmark cannot be made out. But we can have confidence that Jesus has gone ahead of us and is guiding us towards him, just as a shepherd calls to and comforts his sheep (John 10:4). We may not be able to see clearly for now, but we can all listen for his voice. He will give us his strength so we have all the endurance and patience we need (Col 1:11).

There is more good news in that we are promised that perseverance is a good thing - it produces fruit in our lives (Luke 8:15). Paul writes from hard experience (2 Cor 11:24-33) that perseverance in suffering produces character, and character produces hope (Rom 5:3). JB Phillips translates James 1:2-4: *'When all kinds of trials and temptations crowd into your lives, my brothers, don't resent them as intruders, but welcome them as friends! Realise that they come to test your faith and to produce in you the quality of endurance. But let the process go on until that endurance is fully developed, and you will find you have become men of mature character.'* There are times when welcoming trials as friends might seem like too hard an ask, but the idea that good things can come out of them can give us encouragement and hope. They can be times when we learn things we could learn no other way; when our understanding of God and our relationship with him deepens in a way it would never do without the pain and the pressure. Maturing in character and being

perfected in faith imply that we change, and change for the better. In other words, that we become people who somehow reflect more of the presence of Christ to others, and in blessing others through this, we too are blessed.

It may be that our experience of this pandemic feels a bit like Michael Rosen's bear hunt; that no sooner have we got through one obstacle and turned over the page, there is another one right ahead. Or it may be that it seems more like the marathon race, with mile after mile of exhausting monotony. But one thing these have in common is that they are not faced alone. The family on the bear hunt had one another for company and a race is never run alone. Runners strategise long distance races by forming a pack, who then take it in turn to take the lead and hold the pace, allowing those who have led for a while to drop to the back of the group for some respite. We are in this together. The way we will persevere for the long haul of whatever is ahead will be by keeping alongside one another, being that reassuring presence, urging one another on, and taking the lead from time to time. Fixing our eyes on Jesus reminds us *'He died for us so that ... we may live together with him. Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing'* (1 Thess 5:10-11). We can be *mutually encouraged by each other's faith* (Rom 1:12).

We can't avoid this testing time. We can't go over it. We can't go under it. For us too, it is indeed a case of 'Oh no! We've got to go through it!' But we are not alone. Jesus is with us and we go through it together.

Read Hebrews 12:1-3 slowly a few times.

What are the things which encourage you most?

How are you prompted to respond?

Read Paul's prayer in Colossians 1:9-14

Use his words to pray for yourself

Use his words to pray for someone else who is struggling at present

Use his words to pray for us as a church.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13).