

Once For All

Hebrews 10:19-25

Overly long and drawn out, ancient laws and arcane procedures and rituals, difficult and complex, incomprehensible and obscure with seemingly little relevance to the day to day life of the Church.

Now some of you may be thinking that I am speaking about Synod, but in fact I am thinking about the book of Hebrews, and the way it can be so easily perceived. But I pray that as we briefly survey its main message we may be reinvigorated, reenergised and perhaps even redirected in our work at Synod and in our mission to Tasmania.

THE PROBLEM OF RELIGION

To understand the book of Hebrews we need to remember how odd Christianity was when it started. In a very religious world where everyday life was full of temples, priests and sacrifices, Christianity had none of these things. More than that the Christians didn't participate in any of the religious festivals that were around. Christians were actually called atheists at the time for their unreligious behaviour. You can imagine people saying of Christianity "What kind of religion is this? Where are its priests? How do these people worship their God?"

Christians themselves may have asked similar questions particular those of Jewish heritage, familiar with scripturally mandated ways of dealing with sin through priests and sacrifices to be able to relate to God. They may have felt that they were being presumptuous with God and abandoning his word. There would have been a strong pull back to the old ways.

THE SUPREMACY OF CHRIST

To deal with possible malady the writer of the Hebrews has only one remedy, Jesus Christ, as the one on whom the believers should fix their gaze. It is one remedy but with three different aspects.

Full Revelation (Ch 1-2)

Firstly it deals with the issue of revelation, how we know about God. As the memorable start of the book reminds us "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.

It is hard to imagine a clearer description of the supremacy of Christ over all forms of revelation of the nature and purposes of God. Old revelation is not discarded simply superceded or better fully fulfilled.

Great Salvation than Exodus (Ch 3-4)

Secondly the writer points to the greater salvation there is in Jesus. God's servant Moses led the great Exodus but this is only a foreshadowing of the rest to which God's Son will bring his people, the perfect rest which is the destiny and purpose of creation.

The Great High Priest (Ch 6-10)

Finally the writer makes his most memorable move mentioning Melchizedek to show that Jesus is the perfect priest. Jesus has already been shown by his humanity to be able to sympathise with us, but now the writer, using the non levitical example of

Melchizedek from Psalm 110, shows how Jesus is the great and final high priest to which the Scriptures looked forward.

His greatness is shown in that he has eternal tenure (7:23-25) and he serves in heaven which has got to be better than in Jerusalem (8:2). But most importantly he has in himself offered a better sacrifice that has dealt with sin once for all, a point which like in the BCP prayer of consecration is repeatedly affirmed (7:27; 9:12, 26, 28; 10:2, 10). Thus unlike other priests whose sacrificial work is never finished Jesus has finished and this reinforced by comments about Jesus having sat down, one thing that priests in the temple were never allowed to do. He can sit down because the work is done.

There is no need to sacrifice any more, sins are fully dealt with, the promise of the New Covenant has been fulfilled, we have permanent access to God through our Great High Priest.

If we were to make a add campaign about Jesus on the basis of what Hebrews is arguing we would probably have Tina Turner singing in the background "Simply the Best", best revelation, best salvation, best priest. Why go elsewhere!

Don't Go Back or for that matter move on

The message to the original hearers was clear don't turn back, don't let the lack of formal "religion" in your new faith draw you back to old ways.

I'm not sure that being drawn back to Judaism is such a temptation these days but the message is still relevant to us. For us as part of an institutional church the issue is not so much lack of religion but too much of it, but in the busyness of church business with buildings, services and Synods we must not forget the core of our message which is Jesus.

Worse in an attempt to speak our distinctly anti religious culture we may be tempted to move from Jesus and focus on religious feelings, human aspirations, the great life that God wants us to have, or the great needs of the world, rather than the great revelation, salvation and propitiation that we have in Christ: he reveals God, he holds the promises of God, he brings us into God's presence. What he did once is for all time and people.

If we are to fulfil our mission as the Church of God in Tasmania the book of Hebrews calls on us to keep doing the hard and at times difficult work of proclaiming Jesus again challenging people in all circumstance to have a deeper understanding of how Jesus is. As a Synod we need to make decisions which will promote and support the proclamation of Christ. As we run our race we are to fix our eyes on Jesus.

SINCE WE HAVE SUCH A GREAT HIGH PRIEST

If grasping all that Jesus is and has done for us is the main meal of Hebrews it is served with "Let us". There were three statements in the passage which encourage us to do something, on the basis of having this great revealing, saving high priest.

Living Faith

"let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith". As Jesus by his death and resurrection has fully dealt with our sin we can approach God in prayer and worship in complete confidence. Is this something that we have? Do we have that full assurance? Do we encourage our folk to have the full assurance in what Christ has done? We need to help people to grasp the wonder of the finished work of Christ so that we can love and serve God with confidence not to win his favour but knowing that we have it.

One barrier to this is ongoing guilt to which we need to apply the once for all remedy of Christ's death. But I suspect that a larger problem in society and sadly in our church is lack of guilt. We tend to think that we have the right to come into God's presence on our standing as good people. We forget that it only because of the wonderful and costly work of our great high priest that we can come. It is only when we remember that we come with due humility, wonder and love.

We are reminded that it is not on our own merits that we come by the language of hearts sprinkled and bodies washed, something is done to us by another, our great high priest, so that we can come. This not only picks up Old Testament and baptismal imagery but also reminds us that when approaching God in worship is not just something that is done with the heart but with the body as well. As we shall see tomorrow when Bp John considers the last chapter of the book, acceptable worship (12:28) is about our whole life before God. This is the kind of living faith we can have in Christ.

Profound Hope

“Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.”

To grasp all that we have in Christ is have a firm hope. The writer has earlier said: We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor for the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek. (6:19-20)

In Jesus entering heaven as our representative he has gone where we will be. It is appropriate to be preaching this in the season of Ascension something the New Testament is far more excited about than I suspect we usually are. For in Jesus going to be with the Father he is the working model of the hope of us all, or as the book of Hebrews will later put it he is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. We will go where he has gone it is a firm and profound hope.

This should give us great joy and again effect all our life. As I consider the Church and my own life I often reflect on Nietzsche's words “If you want me to believe in your saviour you have to look a lot more saved.”

Practical Love

And now our final bit of “Let us” which after faith and hope not surprisingly is about love.

“And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds” Notice this is saying more that we should perform acts of love reflecting the love of the God we draw near to, or to do good deeds as we follow in the steps of the saviour that we follow, although these are obviously good things to do. Rather we are told to deliberately provoke, stimulate, rouse others to love and good deeds.

It makes complete sense that this passage then ends with a reminder to meet together. The writer's statement that we should not give up the habit of meeting together is more than an attempt to get people to come to church but a statement about what should happen when we meet. Sadly Church History and even the history of our own churches has shown that all too often when we meet we act as if this passage only said “Let us provoke one another”. As we meet as this Synod may we reject such behaviour and seek to build each other up.

How about you, in your church, what are you doing to encourage and provoke others in love and good deeds? We do not meet together simply on our own private personal faith journey, but as part of a greater community which is not just about good feelings but good deeds, practical love. That is why simply turning up is of great encouragement and not just to the minister but the rest of the Christian community. But also consider as you gather how you can play your part in encouraging those around you to love and good deeds.

And as the Synod of this Diocese we need to ensure that we are making decisions which will help build such Christian communities, communities where Christ is proclaimed in all his wonder and glory and where there is living faith profound hope and practical love, for these will be *healthy churches ... transforming life*.