



## Revd Ro's Reflection on The 18th Sunday after Trinity

### Proper 22 Year B

Hebrews 1.1-4, 2.5-12

Mark 10.2-16

We have left the epistle of James and our New Testament reading is from the letter to the Hebrews. We have looked at passages from Hebrews before but it is good to put it in its context. The author of Hebrews is unknown but it is believed his audience were Jewish Christians in and around Jerusalem. The date is believed to be around AD 63 which would put it earlier than Mark's gospel if that is correct.

It is important to understand that it was written for a community of Christians suffering from persecution. We remember that James the just was martyred around AD 62.

The writer of Hebrews makes his aim clear at the beginning,

<sup>1</sup>'Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, <sup>2</sup>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.'

His audience are Jewish converts, converts facing persecution. They have been brought up in the Jewish faith and for Jews the law was all in all. The law was given to Moses on Mount Sinai and all Jews lived by it. The Law was their direction in life, God given. The Old Testament tells of the prophets who guided God's people and who promised the coming of the Messiah, God's chosen one, the King of Israel of David's line. All of the Scriptures pointed forward to the coming of the Messiah. God spoke to his people through the prophets but now the Messiah has come as the scripture promised. He is the fulfilment of the law and he is bringing in a new way, a new chapter for all people to live by. So God has sent his only son to live with humanity. Here we have a wonderful description of the nature of Jesus the Christ. It will be reminiscent of other great passages. This is Colossians 1.15,

‘He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.’

How similar is this to the magnificent beginning of today’s passage,

<sup>3</sup> ‘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. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, <sup>4</sup>having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.’

Jesus is the exact imprint of God, look at Jesus and you will see the Father. Jesus is part of the Trinity, he is co-creator with God. In the beginning he was with God. Look now at John 1 written much later but with a similar theme.

<sup>1</sup>In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup>He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup>All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being <sup>4</sup>in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.’

Jesus’ divinity is made clear in all these passages. He is God’s only Son creator of all. These Jewish Christians are facing persecution but they must not leave the church of Christ to go back to the old Judaism. They must not turn away from Jesus’ church into the old ways. The old way has been superseded by God’s new way in Christ.

<sup>2.1</sup> ‘Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it.’

Jesus has the key to eternal life.

‘When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.’

Jesus brought the good news of God, he taught human beings the way of God, the new way God had planned for them as a successor to the old order. With Jesus God’s New Creation was breaking into the world. Jesus died in love for humanity to save us from death and sin. He has won salvation for us by his death on the cross. No one could do that but God incarnate.

<sup>2.2</sup> ‘For if the message declared through angels was valid, and every transgression or disobedience received a just penalty, <sup>3</sup>how can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? It was declared at first through the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him, <sup>4</sup>while God added his testimony by signs and wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, distributed according to his will;’

Jesus’ words have taught us of God’s new way. Jesus’ followers received the gift of God’s Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Through the Holy Spirit they performed great works in the name of God. They passed on the gospel of Christ. The Holy Spirit is still with us and we are strengthened by it.

The next passage can seem confusing,

<sup>5</sup> ‘Now God did not subject the coming world, about which we are speaking, to angels.

<sup>6</sup> But someone has testified somewhere,

‘What are human beings that you are mindful of them,  
or mortals, that you care for them?’

<sup>7</sup> You have made them for a little while lower than the angels;  
you have crowned them with glory and honour,  
<sup>8</sup> subjecting all things under their feet.’

The words here may sound familiar, that is because they are from Psalm 8 the traditional harvest psalm. The angels are the messengers of God; humans are lower than the angels and have control over God’s created order. Sadly we know humanity has made a mess of that control, in some cases abusing their power over creation. That was not what God intended. The new order began in Jesus Christ and humans should be working to bring it to fruition.

Another way of looking at this passage is in the light of the incarnation. Jesus became human and therefore for a time lower than the angels. He taught human beings how to live by his perfect life, to which humanity must aspire.

Jesus is the representative of humanity and in that respect he will take all human sin on himself and he will suffer and die for humanity. On Calvary he will conquer sin forever and win for humanity reconciliation, salvation and a place with God.

‘Now in subjecting all things to them, God left nothing outside their control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to them, <sup>9</sup>but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honour because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.’

Jesus on the cross achieved the freedom of all. Belief in Jesus means that we are co-heirs with him, brothers and sisters of Christ, children of our heavenly Father.

<sup>10</sup> ‘It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. <sup>11</sup>For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, <sup>12</sup>saying,

‘I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters,  
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.’

Jesus is the representative not only of the Jews but the whole world, to whom his gospel will spread. He has won salvation for all humanity, reconciling them to God through grace. It is a gift freely given, won for us through love by Jesus. Humanity was helpless. God, ‘opened wide his arms for us on the cross.’ By doing so he drew all to him.

At his resurrection Jesus conquered death and sin forever and won for us eternal life, both now, when we die and in the life to come when he returns once more to complete God’s new order. This passage really reminds me of some words of Tennyson, “‘The old order changeth yielding place to new and God fulfils himself in many ways.’ The old order of Judaism has been superseded by Christ’s new order and by God’s new creation begun in him. These new Christians have God’s Holy Spirit indwelling within them. They are children of God and the brothers and sisters of Christ as are all who turn to him and live in his way.

Our gospel passage begins at verse 2 of chapter 10. I often say what happens prior to a reading is important and it certainly is in this case. Let's look at the first verse,

<sup>10.1</sup> 'He left that place and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan. And crowds again gathered around him; and, as was his custom, he again taught them.'

Jesus has moved from the towns in Galilee and he is in Judea, in the wilderness country by the Jordan River. That immediately rings a bell. The person who taught there was John the Baptist. He was forthright in his teaching and demanded repentance for sin. He never colluded with wrongdoing but condemned it out of hand. John ended up in prison; because he spoke out against the behaviour of Herod. Herod had married his brother Philip's wife, whom she had divorced. Herodias had engineered John's arrest and then his execution because of his condemnation of their behaviour. Now on the very ground of John the Pharisees come to Jesus, in front of the crowds so there are plenty of witnesses they put a question to him to 'test him' which of course means they are trying to trap him.

I have already said that the storm clouds are gathering around Jesus, he will have to face arrest and execution soon enough. The Jewish religious sects are looking for ways to trap him. Sure enough the law they bring up is the one about divorce. They ask it to get Jesus to say something worthy of reporting to Herod to get him arrested as John was. They know perfectly well what the Jewish law said about divorce.

'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?' <sup>3</sup>He answered them, 'What did Moses command you?' <sup>4</sup>They said, 'Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.'

Moses did not encourage divorce. The law was trying to protect the woman, who incidentally, could not divorce her husband. A woman cast aside thus would have no way to live if she could not go back to her family. She would face destitution. The law should protect a wife. Jesus does not get into any arguments with them because he knows exactly what they are up to and he quotes from Genesis, they can't argue with Scripture.

Jesus said that this law was given because of hardheartedness. Wasn't that the problem throughout their history? The people had turned from God again and again to follow after their own selfish ways. The law should safeguard society. It should help the vulnerable.

"God made them male and female." <sup>7</sup>"For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, <sup>8</sup>and the two shall become one flesh." So they are no longer two, but one flesh. <sup>9</sup> Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.'

Certainly the last line is enshrined in the marriage service when the priest wraps the stole around the hands of the newly married couple. It is a lovely moment in the service.

Jesus says no more until he is away from the Pharisees who are out to get him and he is in safety with the disciples.

<sup>10</sup> 'Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. <sup>11</sup>He said to them, 'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; <sup>12</sup>and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.'

Jesus states quite clearly here what he thinks of the goings on in the royal court. Remember it isn't just about divorce as far as Herodias and Herod were concerned, he had married his brother's wife. That was against the law. Jesus was no idealist. He knew how human relationships could break down. Jesus is seeking to protect vulnerable people. He is talking about the sanctity of marriage and that it should not be taken lightly or given over at a whim.

I remember watching a series on television called the choir based on the novel by Joanna Trollop. The Bishop who is a love and a really humble man (he goes around with his glasses stuck together by selotape) is talking to his wife about divorce. He says this. 'I think a Christian marriage is a good marriage.' He has a point. A marriage should be founded on love and trust.

A husband and wife come together and create another human being, a child of God. Those children have the right to love, security, care and protection as indeed does anyone. This leads directly on to Jesus talking about the little ones.

<sup>13</sup> People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them'

People naturally want Jesus to bless their children; it just shows how little the disciples have learned about love that they try to turn them away, they put a barrier between these people and Jesus.

Jesus will have no truck with their behaviour.

<sup>14</sup>'But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.'

Jesus welcomes the children into his arms. They come with trust to him, with no preconceived ideas and no malice, the complete opposite to the worldly wise Pharisees who are out to get him. Here then are innocent children of God. It is up to everyone to learn to welcome all who wish to come to Jesus irrespective of status, learning, wealth or whatever. Come to Jesus as a child would in love and trust.

<sup>15</sup> 'Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.'

<sup>16</sup>'And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.'

The passage ends with the beautiful depiction of Jesus with a child in his arms blessing it. If we extend that image we must treat all people especially the vulnerable, the poor, those who are weaker than we are as children of God. We all have a huge responsibility of trust.

We all have someone or something that is dependent on us. Some people have more power than others. Jesus' message is to use the position you have to bring healing and happiness. Respect all who you come into contact with as children of God. As Christians we must see others as Jesus saw them, treat them as Jesus would have done.

*'Bless this day, all that I might comfort, all that I might help, all that I might guide'*. John Birch.

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