



Revd Ro's Reflection on The Eighth Sunday after Trinity Proper 14 Year C

Hebrews 11.1-3, 8-16

Luke 12.32-40

Sometimes the passage set for a Sunday may seem very remote from us and maybe we can't see its relevance to us at once. So it's always important to think about the writer and who the original audience was. That generally gives us a way into the reading and it helps to make the meaning clearer.

The Epistle to the Hebrews is unlike many letters in that it does not give authorship or audience at its beginning. It was thought to be by St. Paul, but because of the great difference in style this is not usually accepted now. There have been various candidates for its authorship but as Origen wrote in the 3rd century, that is 'known to God alone.' It is agreed that it is a wonderful epistle both in style and content. It was probably written around A.D. 63 therefore before the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70. It is now accepted that it was written for Christians living in and around Jerusalem. It is important to understand that it was written for a community of Christians suffering from persecution. We remember that James the just, the brother of Jesus and leader of the church in Jerusalem was martyred around AD 62.

Our reading is from chapter 11 but to understand the focus of the epistle we need to go back to the opening. The centre of Christianity is the figure of Jesus Christ. The writer of Hebrews makes his aim clear at the beginning; I have quoted in full because this will set the tone for the whole of the epistle. When you read the description of Christ, think of Paul's descriptions in Corinthians, Colossians and Philippians.

^{1.1} 'Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, ²but 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. ³He 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, ⁴having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.'

His audience then 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 by the angels directly from God, so the Jews believed, 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, and as this quotation shows, superior to any angel as the very image of God. 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. God has sent his only son to live with humanity. The law is no longer necessary for new Christians.

Now we can understand what the main theme of Hebrews is, have faith in God as your ancestors did. Have faith in the Messiah who is the image of God. Do not be misled by anyone or dragged back into Judaism and face persecution bravely for his sake.

^{11.1} 'Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ²Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. ³By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.'

This passage is so similar to what John was to write later,

¹ 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.' (John 1)

We know that he is referring to Jesus Christ who was in the beginning with God.

The Jewish people were chosen by God, he made covenants with them, and he loved them and guided them throughout their history. The great figures followed their Lord in faith and so the writer of Hebrews describes this here,

⁸ 'By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise.'

Abraham did not know where God would lead him but he put his trust in God totally. Why, because he knew that God had a plan and that God's plan was good,

¹⁰ 'For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.'

This could be Jerusalem; with the Temple at the heart, equally the heavenly city is God's newly created order. Abraham would not live to see either; he would not see the Promised Land but his faith was steadfast. Abraham knew he was too old to father children, he knew Sarah his wife was barren, but he also knew that with God all things are possible and his faith was rewarded,

¹¹ 'By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. ¹² Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, 'as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.'

God had promised that Abraham would be the father of a great nation, his descendants would be countless. He in faith believed and so it was. The Jews called themselves, 'children of Abraham' they held that to be a true descendant of Abraham you had to obey the Jewish law given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai. Thus far that was true until the coming of Jesus.

Hebrews refers to many other great leaders of the nation. They all had great faith in God and in his purposes for the people. He had brought them out of Egypt at the Exodus, Moses had led them. Guided by the Lord and they had eventually entered the Promised Land. Throughout their history the prophets had pointed to the coming time when God's promises would be fulfilled in the Messiah.

¹³ 'All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, ¹⁴for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind; they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.'

Next week we will see how the writer gives a short account of the history of the Jewish men and women of faith.

³⁹ 'Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰since God had provided something better so that they would not, without us, be made perfect.'

None of these saw the Messiah but all had steadfast faith in God and his promises. But now the Messiah has come in the person of Jesus Christ. Until the coming of Christ the law was given for the guidance of the Jews. Now Jesus has come, the law is no longer necessary. He is the fulfilment of the law and he supersedes everything.

So then, just as Paul has argued, Christians are no longer subject to the law, they are free in Jesus Christ. He is all in all and his sacrifice made once for all upon the cross, freed humanity from bondage and re-established their relationship with God. By his resurrection he has conquered death and will come again to rule God's perfected heaven and earth.

These persecuted Jewish converts have all kinds of pressures, from persecution to persuasion. People are trying to lure them back to the old ways of Judaism. Well of course they have Jewish history, of course they are children of Abraham but now they have recognised Jesus Christ as the fulfilment of the law and the prophets. So there must be no turning back to the old way. They have been made new in Christ and must hold fast to the teaching of Christianity, in their baptism sin has been washed away and they are new people, Jesus people.

The patriarchs and the prophets held fast to their faith and hope in God. The prophets foretold of the coming of the Messiah. That hope has been fulfilled in the person of Jesus, Messiah and God incarnate.

Our New Testament reading follows on from last week when we looked at the case of the rich man who lived for the here and now with no thought of God or of what life after death would hold for him. It seems that he was spiritually dead. Like the young man whose question pre-empted the story, it is material possessions that matter.

Jesus then goes on to talk about worry and anxiety. So many of us worry about tomorrow and have so many cares. Some are legitimate, others are self-made by the desire to get on, to achieve success, to fulfil our ambitions. These cares and concerns must not mean that God is put on the back burner as the rich fool did. We must not chase after idols of this world's materialism. This is the advice Jesus gives just prior to our reading.

²⁹ 'And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. ³⁰For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. ³¹Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.' That is the key of course, keep God at the forefront of your lives, live by his kingdom values and everything else will fall into place,

³² 'Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. ³³Sell your possessions, and give alms

I wonder just how many times Jesus says 'Do not be afraid.' These are wonderful words and if we really believe and trust them they bring the deep peace that only God can give. Life is not about running around gathering more wealth, more status or more power. That is not the point. Our aim should be the good we can do while we are on this earth. Think of Jesus' behaviour towards others. Think of his commandment to, 'love one another as I have loved you.' We must use our money and talents wisely. Jesus is not advocating that we should give it all away; it is a person's attitude to that money that is important. Jesus did not say, 'money is the root of all evil,' but that 'the love of Money is the root of all evil.' That little word love makes all the difference. Do not hoard your money, use it to enable you to help others 'giving alms'

'Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. ³⁴For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

I expect that quotation about treasure is one of the most famous in the New Testament. What does Jesus mean by 'treasure'? Well I think it means the focus of a person's life, what is central to them, important to them. If something is important to you, you focus everything on it. It is the focus of a person's life that is important. Jesus poses the question, what is it that you really care about? Who or what is your treasure? Because where that is so your heart will be. Do you care about God and your fellows or do you care about yourself? Do you put God at the centre or something or someone else? Do you worship him or another idol? It is a challenging question, something we all need to look at. It's easy enough to try to justify what we do to ourselves but God is all in all and he knows our hearts. He puts us at the centre of his relationship with us and we must do the same. God does not ask for second best. If we really put him at the centre we will live in the way of Jesus, we will care about other people, not be the centre of our own universe. That, says Jesus is a no no. So question yourselves and answer truthfully. Who or what is most important to you? It's a challenge for us all.

What exactly does Jesus mean when he speaks of heaven? Well I am going to quote Professor Tom Wright here,

'Heaven' is God's sphere of created reality which, as the Lord's Prayer suggests, will one day colonise 'earth' our sphere completely.'

God is bringing his kingdom values to the newly created heaven and earth and Jesus will reign in majesty. The whole of what Jesus says now is about living our lives as its citizens.

³⁵ 'Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; ³⁶be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. ³⁷Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. ³⁸If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves. ³⁹ 'But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not

have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁰ You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.'

Jesus is preaching on his way to Jerusalem. This is the final chance for the Jewish people to recognise him for who he truly is, Messiah and king. It is their chance to turn to him and live in his way, to realise that the accepted ways of this world, its accepted values have been turned upside down by his revolutionary teaching of peace and humility and putting God at the centre and not oneself.

Soon Jesus will enter Jerusalem; soon the forces of good and evil will meet in a great battle on the cross. Jesus will be victorious and he will rise from the dead. Will the Jewish nation follow him or turn away? We know that so few did accept him. They did not accept his way of peace and that would have cataclysmic results for them. The rebellion against Rome would lead to the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple in A.D. 70.

I believe Jesus is also referring to the coming of God's kingdom here on earth. To the new creation when Jesus will return as King and Lord. It will be the culmination of the promises enshrined within the scriptures, the time longed for by the patriarchs and prophets. The time looked forward to by all Christians, 'the promised day of God' when the kingdom values are the earth's values.

We need to ask ourselves what our values truly are. Are we Christ centred or self-centred? Do we strive for what we want or ask what God wants? Jesus issues a stern warning; get your lives into order, live according to my teaching because no one knows when God's kingdom on earth will come or when you will be asked to give an account of your behaviour. It is a sobering thought for us all. It is a beautiful picture Jesus gives us here of the servants who are ready to welcome their master; and their reward is that the master serves them. This takes us straight to the Last Supper and to Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. We remember his words, 'I come to serve not be served.' This is Jesus' instruction to us all.

'Lord of eternity dwells in humanity, kneels in humility and washes our feet.' Graham Kendrick

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