**8th April 2018**

**Hebrews 1.1- 2.4**

A man and his wife were having an argument in bed about who should make a cup of tea each morning.
The wife said, "You should do it because you get up first, and then we don't have to wait as long to get our cuppa.
The husband said, "You are in charge of cooking around here and you should do it! That is your job, and I can just wait for my tea."
Wife replies, "No, you should do it, and besides, it is in the Bible that the man should do the tea"

She fetched the Bible, and opened the New Testament and showed him at the top of several pages, that it indeed says .......... "HEBREWS"

We start today to look at the letter of the Hebrews. It has nothing to say about who makes the tea. It was probably written between 50 - 60AD to Jewish Christians, by an unknown writer, possibly Apollos or Priscilla (Acts 18.24-26) (come to the Bible Class later this month to find out why I’m saying all this). The letter addresses believers who have grown weary in the Christian way and who are in danger of abandoning their Christian vocation. Their earlier enthusiasm has faded, their faith commitment has waned. They are in danger of drifting and falling away and maybe lapsing back into Judaism. Persecution is also whittling down the flock.

The letter to the Hebrews seeks to rekindle our vision of what God has accomplished in Christ, how that is far superior to anything else and if you have progressed you don’t want to go back to something inferior. The letter reminds us of the great personal resources available to us through Christ’s completed work. The author of Hebrews seeks to rejuvenate weary readers of every age for the pilgrimage of faith. So let us set out.

One of the great challenges to our Christian faith today is the culture we live in that sees religion as either dangerous or irrelevant or unbelievable or all the same. Certainly the intellectual climate is now predominantly atheistic and people who confess faith in God are given a rough ride. The debate about whether God exists is long and complicated and usually tries to prove or disprove God’s existence through observing the world in some way. The Christian claim has been that that approach is always limited and open to ambiguity. The Christian claim is that God has revealed himself. God has spoken – there has been revelation.

I don’t know if you caught on BBC2 over the last week or so a series of programmes of how celebrities walked the Camino de Santiago Compestela – the ancient Pilgrimage route along northern Spain to the shrine of St James. It’s a bit like celebrity Big Brother goes on a long walk and visits some churches. Along the way these celebrities open up about their beliefs about God and also their lives. A whole range of views is expressed, as you can imagine. In common with a lot of people in our society people have vague and often distorted views of God. How does one know what God is like?

I had Jehovah Witnesses knock on my door the other day. They showed me their Watchtower and asked me the question on the front cover: ‘Do you think the Bible is relevant for today?’

I replied: ‘depends which Bible you’re using’.

The JWs Bible, The New World Translation has notoriously change the original Greek so that Jesus is not divine Word, Son of God and member of the Trinity but is a divine angel. Something that the Letter to the Hebrews would take issue with.

Muslims believe that the Prophet Mohammed is the final prophet of God and his revelation, the Koran, is the last word. They too change the New Testament to say Jesus didn’t really die and wasn’t resurrected. Choose your revelation, and then you still have to interpret it.

Hebrews starts by saying God spoke in the past through the prophets and now he has spoken through his Son. He, that is Jesus, is the radiance of God’s glory, the stamp of God’s very being’ (verse 3).

I heard someone moan the other day that her teenage daughter had taken up smoking. She had dyed her hair and had a stud in her nose. She was seeking her sympathy. But then she added that she herself did this kind of thing when she was her daughter’s age. Looking at her, she could see herself. Her character – or one aspect of it, at least – was radiating out of her.

Jesus is described as the radiance of God’s glory – a chip off the old block. Look at Christ and it’s like looking in a mirror at God himself.

Jesus is the stamp of God’s very being. In the ancient world, before printing presses the emperor would employ an engraver who carved the royal portrait on a stamp made of hard metal. The engraver used the stamp to make a coin, so that the coin gave an exact impression. This is the Christian claim. Many people are confused as to whether to believe in God and what kind of God to believe in. The writer of Hebrews, indeed the writers of the New Testament, all say that God has spoken – God has revealed what God is like – look here is his stamp on humanity in the face of Jesus.

This idea of progressive revelation was taken up by John Calvin, the great Reformer, to suggest that when we read back in the Old Testament we need Christ shaped lenses. The writers of the Old Testament couldn’t see the full revelation of God in Christ so they wrote with partial sight. Just as John claims in his gospel, in Jesus the Word has become flesh, we have seen his glory.

If you have seen the glory of God in Jesus Hebrews then goes on to claim, you don’t want to get go back to worshipping lesser things.

When our children were young as toddlers they often found the boxes in which toys come in are more attractive and exciting than the toy itself. I know from my own family that sometimes they have opened a toy on Christmas Day and spent more fun and time playing with the wrappings and the packaging and have forgotten all about the toy that was in the box – the real present.

Hebrews is anxious that the people its written to shouldn’t make that same mistake by getting distracted with all the wrappings and missing out on the real present. The Jewish Christians to whom the letter was written may have been under all sorts of pressures to try and make them go back to where they had been before, to abandon this strange new religion and to go back to their old ways and practices and customs. Hebrews argues that you can’t go back to an earlier stage of God’s purposes but must go forward instead. The writer begins with a demonstration from the Jewish scriptures, that the Messiah was always intended by God to be superior to the angels, and hence superior to the law that they brought. The law wasn’t fixed for all time, as many Jews thought then and still think today, it was part of God’s preparation, part of the brilliant and beautiful wrapping in which the ultimate present, God’s gift of his own self in the person of the son, would be contained. This is where the letter is warning against the mistake of playing with the wrapping instead of with the present itself.

The writer points out how Jesus is superior to the angels. First in verses 8 and 9 quoting Psalm 45 he addresses Jesus as God and speaks of a king who exercises justice and loves what is right. One of the great themes about God’s future purposes throughout the Bible is that God longs for real justice. We who are all to aware that injustice and wickedness and suffering flourish all over the place could do worse than reflect on this promise that God is creating a world where evil will have no place. But the writer’s point is that this is to happen not through angels but through the anointed king, the Messiah. The angels may prepare the way but the Messiah will bring life and a saving rule. The Messiah, not the angels will sit at God’s right hand. Once you see who the Son really is and the role he was always intended to play in God’s plan, you won’t want to go back to anything or anyone less.

I don’t want to be negative about angels. The Bible tells us angels act as God’s messengers and agents to help us, guard us (think of guardian angels) assist us. I know people who claim they have experienced meeting angels. I remember one woman who came on our Alpha Course many years ago, tell me the story of how her father was dying in hospital and two men appeared at her door dressed smartly. They greeted her and said that all they had come to say was 'all who call on the name of the Lord will be saved’. And then they left. She thought they were the strangest Jehovah Witnesses she had ever met.

But as they left the phone rang. It was her brother who had been doing his turn of vigil by their father’s bed. He rung to say their father had died. Their father was an agnostic but her brother said their father had asked him to read something from the Bible to him. What did you read him asked the woman? He had been reading to him from Romans chapter 10 – which includes the verse ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’. To this day she believes she had been visited by angels.

Certainly if you go into a bookshop and their religion and New Age Mind Body Spirit section books on angels and angelology are numerous.

Not many of us will be tempted to abandon Christianity in favour of going back to Judaism. But many today, including many in the churches, seem dissatisfied with what they have, and are eager to expand their spiritual horizons (as they might see it) to include angels, saints, the spirit world and other interesting distractions. This letter issues a warning and an encouragement. Don’t start playing with the wrapping paper instead of the real present. Pay closer attention to who Jesus really is; to the role he played and still plays, in God’s plan; and to the life of worship and service to which he, and he alone, calls each one of us.

Hebrews insists not just that Christians must stick with what they’ve got, rather than abandoning it, but also that they must pay closer attention, must go deeper into the truth and life which is theirs because they belong to the Messiah.

The picture Hebrews uses in the first verse of chapter two may echo the idea of a dangerous sea: ‘That is why we must pay all the more heed to what we have been told, for fear of drifting from our course.’

I once was on an airbed floating in the sea. It was a hot day and I was relaxing and having a doze. When I opened my eyes I was alarmed to find that I had drifted a considerable distance from the shore and the tide was definitely going out. Fortunately I hadn’t drifted too far that I couldn’t paddle back.

There is warning many Christians need, perhaps especially those who have grown up in a Christian family or as part of a regular church community. It’s all too easy to suppose that we can take the pressure off, and allow other people to do the praying, the thinking, the serious business; we’ll go along for a ride, we’ll stop putting so much effort in it, we’ll go with the flow. Before long we may drift further and further away without realising it.

Everyone of us needs to ask ourselves from time to time whether we are the drifting type, or whether we are going forward, day by day and year by year, paying closer attention to the message, not assuming that we know it all and can coast along from here on.

If the King, the president, the Emperor or the prime minister or whoever is important in the country sent you a message by a special messenger you would pay attention, wouldn’t you? But, if he turned up in person to see you, you wouldn’t just pay attention; you would feel your world was turning upside down. Well the prophets brought a message from God but in the message of the gospel the King himself has come to speak to us directly. What will happen if we're too busy, we can’t be bothered to come and speak to him, we’re reading a nice book or doing some DIY and can’t tear ourselves away from it?

The writer then states that Jesus himself declared the good news of the kingdom and God bore witness to it in signs and wonders. In particular, when people believed the message, they discovered a strange new energy inside themselves – a warm, disturbing, personal presence which enabled them to do new things, which put new ideas into their heads, which motivated and energized them to become different people from the inside out. The earliest Christians knew what to call this personal presence inside them: it was God’s Holy Spirit, the gift of God’s own presence and self, not just in Jesus, important though he was and is, but living within them. Hebrews doesn’t refer to the Holy Spirit dwelling in people, but this passage in verse 4, and one or two others, show that the writer takes it for granted.

What evidence is there in our own lives, and in our church, that the gospel message of Jesus is true and powerful? If you find that question difficult to answer, could it be because we or our church has begun to drift, ignoring the royal message to which we should be paying attention and not open to the work of the Holy Spirit?

In the rest of chapter two the writer of Hebrews uses a number of ways of describing what Jesus does.

He is the pioneer of our salvation (verse 10.) Imagine an explorer cutting her way through the jungle, like Lara Croft. Nobody has been this way before; there are no paths, no trails, no signs that’s it’s possible to go this way. But once she’s done that, others can follow.

Explorers do that for all sorts of reason fame, fortune, sheer curiosity; Jesus did it out of love. The jungle was the whole world of suffering pain, sin and death. Nobody had ever gone through there before and come out the other side. When he did it, he opened the way into God’s new word, like our explorer coming through the jungle and out into the sunlit uplands of the country beyond. I leaving the old world behind the biblical way of saying this is there in verse 11: Christ makes his people holy, that is separated from sin and pollution, and makes them ready to enter the presence of the holy God.

It says he does that through his death and sharing with us in our humanity:

***14****Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil –****15****and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death*

With all our modern thinking and techniques we are still no nearer getting rid of this fear of death than our ancestors were. Death continues to remain the great mystery and a great denial of the goodness and beauty that we know in our lives and in the world. And for many people this fact enslaves them in fear, a fear which Hebrews says comes through the devil, the one who is always opposed to God’s good purposes in creation and always tries to destroy that good world and prevent the better one that is to come. But god promised to Abraham that he would have a great worldwide family and it’s this family that Jesus is concerned about saving, rescuing them from their fears and enslavements and pioneering a new way to God’s future bringing peace.

This leads to a final element that in suffering and dying on behalf of his people, Jesus becomes the true High Priest who makes atonement for their sins. More on this later – but basically the High priest on the one hand acts as God’s representative and on the other can fully sympathize with those who he minsters to.

*Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. verse 18*

There is nothing we face, today or tomorrow or the next day, in which Jesus cannot sympathize, help or rescue us, and through which he cannot forge a way to God’s new world. Trust him, the pioneer of your faith.

Bibliography: Tom Wright, Hebrews for Everyone, SPCK 2003

Oxford Bible Commentary