

Sunday morning March 4th 2018 at CBC
Sermon outline: HEBREWS 4.14-5.10

Two pieces of 'background scenery'

[a] Tired people in need of encouragement

Many of us would recognise that description. It may not be true of all of us, and it may not be true of any of us all the time, but would it be true to say that most of us may have been there, or near there, at some time or other? The writer of Hebrews seeks to encourage people in this condition.

Encouragement can take at least two forms.

[i] You urge a person on from the sidelines

[ii] You share in the need to be encouraged

In other words, you are saying, 'let us'

There are 16 distinct 'let us' encouragements in the book of Hebrews.

And in the section which we are looking at (4.14-5.10), we find:

4.14 – 'let us hold firmly to the faith we profess'

4.16 – 'let us then approach God's throne with confidence'

[b] Old is good, new is bad

The other piece of 'background scenery' is that, broadly speaking, at this time wisdom was generally associated with the past. We know that the Athenians [Acts 17.21] were always looking for something new. But that was not necessarily a good thing.

[1] THE NEW WAY IS AUTHORISED BY THE OLD

Why the need for any priest, let alone a high priest? – a modern reader (some of us) might ask.

Where priests are recognised, and in some form they appear in most if not all cultures, they are seen as bridge-builders between God (howsoever regarded) and human beings. If you translate literally the Latin word for priest (pontifex) you get: bridge-builder.

And the point of 5:1-4 is that the OT sacrificial system provided such an arrangement. Our author underlines:

- [i] the role of the priest – representative, makes offerings
- [ii] the character of the priest – gentle, understands human weakness
- [iii] the appointment of the priest – appointment conferred on him, not his own decision

Jewish readers would have recognised this ‘old wisdom’. Must they abandon this wisdom in their new-found Christian faith?

No, what has been said about the high priest in the OT times is applicable to Jesus:

[i] the role of the priest – it is implied in our verses because it has been stated earlier (1.3). He has made purification for sins by offering himself to God as a sacrifice and thus providing forgiveness once and for all for those who obey him [5.9] because his priesthood and offering is of permanent effect.

[ii] the character of the priest – gentle, understands human weakness

He has identified with human beings, though without sin. The high priest could never pay the price of other people's sins himself because he had his own sins for which sacrifices needed to be offered. But in the case of Jesus, as the hymn puts it, 'he had no tears for his own sins, but shed drops of blood for mine.' And our author makes the point, in very striking language, that the perfection of Jesus was moulded by his human experience.

[iii] the appointment of the priest – appointment conferred on him, not his own decision

In the case of Jesus, he was appointed by God himself as a permanent priest. Our author refers by way of authority to two OT Psalms: 2 and 110. He shows his readers that the new way of relating to God through faith in Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection was anticipated in the OT and thus authorised by it. The new is authorised by the old.

[2] THE NEW WAY PROVIDES EVERY INCENTIVE NOT TO GIVE UP

The recipients of this letter/sermon were in danger of letting go of the faith they professed (4.14). Why should they, why should we, continue in the faith?

[a] we have a high priest

The office of high priest had not been done away with – rather, it had been greatly improved. Jesus the son of God is alive and in heaven, in the presence of God. You could not have a better high priest!

[b] we have a sympathetic high priest

Neither God the Father nor God the Son nor God the Holy Spirit endorses our sin. We should be clear about this. We who believe in the Lord Jesus have no support in heaven for the wrong things we do.

But that does not mean that our failings are scornfully regarded in heaven as pathetic signs of human weakness. That may often be what we think – or at least some variation on that. We may not think that God scornfully regards our sins, but we might well think that they write us off in his sight, at least for a while. But we learn here that our weaknesses are understood in heaven. Jesus faced the same temptations we face.

[c] We have an effective high priest

Someone can be sympathetic, yet unable to offer much practical help.

For the Christian, the great High Priest who is Jesus, the son of God, has no such limitations. Precisely because Jesus is the High Priest, our author can encourage his readers not to give up, but instead to approach God's throne of grace with confidence. That is remarkable! When Christians approach the throne of God with confidence, they will receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need! Why no condemnation, why no judgement? The answer is that the great High Priest has ascended into heaven and permanently presents the sacrifice of his very own perfect life to God.

That sacrifice permanently covers the sins of the Lord's people. His sacrifice, of permanent value, is the only ground on which we can approach God. This is why we hold firmly to faith we profess, and this is how we can approach God's throne of grace with confidence!