

## Believing, doing, being

The writer to the Hebrews tells us “In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways...”

God spoke. People listened.

But then people invariably drifted away, and they were in trouble. So they asked God for help. They cried out to God. God acted. God intervened. The people were saved. And then people drifted away.

That cycle is the basis for much of the Old Testament. Whether it was because of the Egyptians or the Philistines or the Babylonians or whoever or natural disaster – the people of God, needed God’s help, and he variously sent them a judges, champions, and prophets to help them. And then they were saved, and they were happy, and then, over time they went back to their old ways.

But, says, the writer to the Hebrews, “in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son”.

And that ‘but’ is important, because it contrasts the ways that God had spoken to his people in the past to the way he did to the people at the time of this letter, and to us today.

In the Old Testament, God spoke through dreams and visions, through prophecy, and through sacrifices and ceremonies. With some, like Abraham and Moses, God spoke almost ‘face to face’ – with some he communicated directly, some indirectly, but not, since Adam, ‘in person’... until Jesus. When Jesus came, it was not to abolish all that had gone before, but to bring it – as Matthew tells us – to fulfilment (Matthew 5:17).

We see the Son as “the heir of all things” (Hebrews 1:2). He shares this inheritance with his people as Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans (8:17) “Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ.

In Paul’s letter to the Colossians (1:15-16) we read that Jesus is the image of the invisible God - “by whom and for whom all things were created” (Colossians 1:15-16), and that theme is carried on here by the writer to the Hebrews in verse 3, “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being”.

When we see Jesus, we see the image of God. In John’s gospel, Jesus makes it clear when he says, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30).

Jesus, God the Son, is active. We read that he “[sustains] all things by his powerful word.”

Jesus’ involvement in all things is ongoing. It didn’t end when the world was created. It didn’t end when he died on the cross. It didn’t end when he rose from the dead. And it didn’t even end when he ascended in heaven.

And the writer to the Hebrews says that “After [Jesus] had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.”

In the modern church, we’re used to the idea that Jesus provided purification for our sins, or was the atoning sacrifice for our sins, or that he died for us. In fact, we’re so used to the idea we don’t always appreciate the significance of it. But think for a moment about how the Hebrews who first heard this letter read would have reacted to this news.

Under Jewish law, dealing with sins meant sacrificing.

And that wasn't putting some money in the offering, or giving up some time to help others. Sacrificing meant killing bulls, sheep, goats and doves. And it was an ongoing process, and needed to be done with the correct rituals, by the correct people. So the Jewish priests of the Old Testament made the same offerings again and again, day after day, Sabbath after Sabbath, new moon after new moon, year after year. Their work was never done.

And it wasn't a pleasant thing. There's an account in the chapter 24 of the book of Exodus (24: 4b-8) which tells us that Moses splashed half the blood of the sacrifice on the altar – and the other half on the people.

When we celebrate communion, we drink the symbolic blood of Jesus – but in Moses' time it was real blood. Still warm from the animal. It was sprinkled on the people. That would have been a really confronting experience.

But all that is finished with, because the Son is the perfect sacrifice for sins, and now he has sat down at the right hand of God (Hebrews 1:3). We don't need to make any more sacrifices... Jesus' sacrifice isn't like the sacrifices made by the ancient priests on behalf of Israel, Jesus' sacrifice was once and for all, for the sins of the world (Hebrews 10:4-7).

When Jesus cried, "It is finished" from the cross (John 19:30), it was the end of all sacrifice. He gave up his life, was buried, rose again, and ascended into heaven and "sat down" - his work completed - at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

This is what we believe as followers of Jesus.

In verse four, the writer to the Hebrews tells us that the Son is superior to the angels, because He has inherited a better name than theirs (Hebrews 1:4). The rest of the first chapter goes on to establish this superiority by a series of quotes from the Old Testament.

But after verse 4, our lectionary compilers take us to verse 5 of chapter two, where the writer to the Hebrews talks not about how important Jesus is, but how important we are.

He writes "It is not to angels that he has subjected the world to come, about which we are speaking. "What is mankind that you are mindful of them,  
a son of man that you care for him?

<sup>7</sup>You made them a little lower than the angels;

you crowned them with glory and honour

<sup>8</sup> and put everything under their feet" (2:5,6b-8a)

In wider society, humans are sometimes regarded as not that much better than all the other members of the animal kingdom – or indeed no better at all.

But the biblical view is that we are special. We are created in the image of God. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that when God created people, he made them in one way lower than angels. Not that we are lower than angels spiritually, or lower than angels in importance to God. People are lower than angels because we are physical and tied for the moment to the physical world.

Angels as great and glorious as they are, will not rule in the world to come. People will. You and I and all the faithful people of all the generations. God's ultimate plan is for His everlasting kingdom to be ruled by redeemed men and women.

The writer introduces this idea in verse six by saying, “But there is a place where someone has testified...” which seems very, very casual: Somewhere, someone has said this. But I can tell you that place is Psalm 8, and that someone is David.

The writer then quotes Psalm 8:4-6 to show God’s original intention for mankind. We can go back further – all the way to the first chapter of Genesis, where we read “God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

But we know that in Genesis 3, Adam and Eve sinned and everything became twisted and distorted.

And as a result, as Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans (8:19-22), creation groans “*For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.*

*We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.”*

Although sin – Adam and Eve’s sin, David’s sin, our sin, has interrupted God’s intentions for the human race, it hasn’t changed them. And we know that by the death and resurrection of Jesus, God has provided a way that all things can be ultimately made right – and that’s what the writer tells us about next.

In verse nine we read the words, “But we do see Jesus,” Jesus is God’s answer to mankind’s problems. Jesus became a human being so that he might suffer and die for humans’ sin and restore the dominion that was lost as a result of sin.

And then in verse ten we read, it was to bring many sons and daughters to glory, and it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered.

It makes sense that God who made everything for his glory, would, through the suffering of Jesus, his only begotten son on the cross lead all people back to glory. This he does because he is our “pioneer” – one who opens the way for others to follow.”

We may be a little lower than angels now, but the writer assures us that “Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters.”

Isn’t that amazing? We are a brother or sister of Jesus – Jesus who came down from heaven and who lived and died and rose again and who ascended. We are his family. Not just his followers, and not just his friends, but his adopted family. And he is not ashamed or embarrassed to admit that we are his brothers and sisters.

And I guess the other side of that is to ask ourselves if we are embarrassed or ashamed to admit that Jesus is our brother. We need to do, as David the psalmist says in Psalm 8 “I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters; in the assembly I will sing your praises.”

But that’s not the focus of today’s message. So often we focus on what we must do (and we certainly have as we’ve looked through the letter of James of the last month) – that we must love

one another, and do good works in response to God's grace, and give our money and our time, and challenge our wrong thoughts and deeds.

We do need to believe in Jesus.

We do things in response to that belief.

But most of all we have to be God's people.

Be God's people in a world that doesn't know God or has turned away from God.

Today's message from the letter to Hebrews is one of hope and assurance. An assurance of our place in God's family, and as assurance that Jesus has done all that needs to be done for us and for our salvation.

God has heard, and God has acted, and God has saved.

We just need to believe. And do. And be God's.

Amen.