

Sermon *God's final word*

Our first hymn today was *God has spoken by his prophets* and we've just heard from the writer to the Hebrews that "In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways..."

When the people were in trouble, they cried out to God. God acted. God intervened. The people were saved. And then people drifted away.

And when you get down to it, that narrative is the basis for so much of the Old Testament. Whether it was Egyptians or the Philistines or the Babylonians or whoever or natural disaster – the people of God, needed God's help, and God variously sent them judges, champions, and prophets to help them. Then the people were saved and they were happy, and they soon went back to their old ways.

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

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

But, he says, God has spoken to us through his Son.

In the Old Testament, God spoke through dreams and visions, through prophecy, and through the sacrifices and ceremonies of Jewish tradition. God had spoken to some directly, and 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).

Hebrews shows us 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."

Hebrews also tells us that it was through the Son that God he made the universe. You'll probably remember John 1, which we often read at Christmas

time, “Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.” (John 1:3).

And in the letter to the Colossians (1:15-16) we read that He 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 Himself. In John’s gospel, Jesus makes it clear when Jesus says “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30).

Hebrews tells Jesus’ involvement in all things is ongoing: “The Son is [...] sustaining all things by his powerful word.”. It didn’t end when the world was created. It didn’t end when he died on the cross at Calvary. It didn’t end when he rose from the dead. And it didn’t even end when he ascended to 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 read this letter would have reacted to this news, because under Jewish law, dealing with sins meant sacrificing.

And that wasn’t putting some money in an offertory bowl, or giving up some time to help others. Sacrificing meant killing bulls or goats or sheep or doves. And it was an ongoing process, and needed to be done with the correct rituals, by the correct people. 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. Listen to this account from Exodus 24 (24: 4b-8)

[Moses] got up early the next morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain and set up twelve stone pillars representing the twelve tribes of Israel. Then he sent young Israelite men, and they offered burnt offerings and

sacrificed young bulls as fellowship offerings to the Lord. Moses took half of the blood and put it in bowls, and the other half he splashed against the altar. [...]

Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, "This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words."

We celebrate communion, and we drink the symbolic blood of Christ – but back then it was real blood. Still warm from the animal, and it wasn't just a little bit in a little cup, but it was splashed about. It was sprinkled on the people. It would have been a real sensory experience. It would have been a really confronting experience.

But all that is finished with, because the Son is the perfect sacrifice for sins, and 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 the people, Jesus' sacrifice, Hebrews tells us later in Chapter 10, was a once and for all and forever sacrifice for the sins of the world (Hebrews 10:4-7).

His work was finally over when he cried, "It is finished" from the cross (John 19:30). That 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.

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. But there is a place where someone has testified:

“What is mankind that you are mindful of them, a son of man that you care for him? You made them a little lower than the angels; you crowned them with glory and honour and put everything under their feet.” (2:5-8a)

In wider society, humans are increasingly regarded as not that much better than all the other members of the animal kingdom – or indeed no better at all. We hold ourselves responsible for the destruction of the environment, the depletion of the earth’s resources and the extinction of species.

The Christian view is that we are special. We are created in the image of God. And, of course, we should be protecting the environment, using the earth’s resources wisely, and sustaining all species of animals and plants, not because we are simply just another part of it, but because we are stewards of all of creation.

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 less important to God, but that we 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 people in a relationship with him.

The writer says in verse six “But there is a place where someone has testified...” which seems very, very casual. Somewhere, someone has said this. As someone who has been to lay preacher school, this is not good practice – when you’re referencing scripture, you tell people where it comes from. You don’t just say “God so loved the world that he gave his only son” – you tell people that comes from John’s gospel, or better still, John 3:16.

But preachers are human. And from time to time we just rush through the scripture without giving all the references.

And the writer to the Hebrews is human too, and he just says “there is a place where someone has testified”... I can tell you that place is Psalm 8, and that someone is David. Now, I didn’t scour the Old Testament looking for the source – I just simply looked at the footnote that the NIV translators provided.

This quote from Psalm 8 (verses 4-6) shows 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.

But although sin – Adam and Eve's sin, David's sin, our sin, has interrupted God's intentions for the human race it has by no means 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:

But in verse nine we read the words, “But we do see Jesus,” Jesus is God's gift for us. God's solution to the problems of the world.

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

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 – who came down from heaven and who lived and died and rose again and who ascended. We are not just his followers, and not just his friends, but his 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. As David the psalmist says “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 – that we must love one another, and share the gospel, and do good

works in response to God's grace, and give our money and our time, and challenge our sinful thoughts and deeds.

But today's message from the letter to Hebrews is one of hope and one of assurance. An assurance of our place in God's family, and 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: In Jesus, God has given us his final word.

So let us join David in declaring God's name to our brothers and sisters, and let's sing God's praises wherever we may be.

Amen.