

## Draw near to God (Hebrews 10:18-25)

*Jesus has brought about a massive change. The Old Testament has been fulfilled in his once and for all sacrifice. But how are we to respond? Bruce Stokes gives some insights from Hebrews in this sermon...*

Life has changed a lot since I started work 50 years ago. I moved up to London when I was 18, and started work for the Midland International Division on a salary of £666-a-year! Banking was very different then. Managers went to work wearing bowler hats. You paid for things by cash or cheque. There were no ATMs in the wall. If you wanted to track your spending, you had to wait for your monthly statement. These days there's telephone banking and, of course, you can do almost anything from your smart phone app - check your statement, pay a bill, set up a standing order, transfer money between accounts. The only thing you can't get is a face-to-face appointment with a human being! We'll soon be a cashless society, with everyone tapping their cards or phones in the supermarket. There are still a few businesses that insist on cash, but they'll probably go out of business.

Every so often societies go through major upheavals. When the railways came along in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, canals suddenly seemed a ridiculously slow way to move freight. When smart phones were marketed in the early years of this century, the revolution seemed even bigger than computers. So imagine what it must feel like to straddle such seismic shifts. You start life living with one reality and then everything changes.

Now cast your mind back to the 1<sup>st</sup> Century. In those days Jews were brought up with the old covenant, the one associated with Moses, but the life, death and resurrection of Jesus offered a new and better way. Imagine yourself straddling such a seismic religious shift. And it was huge. The great apostle Paul, himself a Jew, said that the ceremonial aspects of Judaism had been fulfilled by Jesus and were no longer necessary. The temple, the priests, the sacrifices - Jesus was effectively all of these things and was now the one who brings us to God. Forgiveness and reconciliation were to be found in him alone.

Some Jews hated Christianity and wanted Paul dead. Other Jews converted to Christianity, but many wanted to hang on to some of the old ways (e.g. circumcision, dietary laws, Sabbath observance) and even impose them on non-Jewish converts. These were the ones Paul described as Judaizers (see Galatians 2).

So what you have in the Letter to the Hebrews is a superb piece of scholarly craftsmanship. It's the kind of thing Paul could have written, and in the early centuries of the Church, it was assumed that he had written it, although modern experts say that it's too well written to be Paul's! Regardless of the author's identity, s/he lays out a detailed argument for Jesus replacing Judaism.

Anyway, linger with the thrust of the letter for a moment. All those ceremonial systems - the temple, access to God's presence, priests, sacrifices - all of them gone. Jesus is the perfect sacrifice, the great High Priest, the temple in which God's presence can be encountered. He is the way, the truth and the life.

**So, says the writer, in light of all that, there are three things to attend to:**

**DRAW NEAR** (verse 22)

**Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.**

He highlights two things - sincerity and confidence.

**Sincerity, not ceremony**

The writer has already said in the earlier verses of Hebrews 10 that God doesn't look for burnt offerings or sacrifices - He looks for a genuine, sincere heart. He doesn't care how you're dressed or whether you can speak the queen's English. Jesus told a story about two men who went up to the Temple to pray, a Pharisee and a tax collector, and the Pharisee looked down on the tax collector and said "Thank you that I'm not like him!" The truth is that the tax collector rightly came before God humbly and full of regret, and not with the Pharisee's self-congratulation!

**Assurance, not fear**

When I was at school, it was a terrifying prospect to be summoned to the headmaster's office. To be called in was a sign that you had been found out. It was a terrifying prospect. But God is a father, not an old-style headmaster. He loves us, wants the best for us, and sent his son to save us. Even though we may turn our backs on Him, He never turns His back on us.

**HOLD ON** (verse 23)

**Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for He who promised is faithful.**

In his brilliant book "The Cross of Christ", the great preacher and thinker John Stott talks about the two beasts of Revelation 13 and the great harlot of Revelation 17. They represent, he says, three ways in which Satan will try to get you to let go of Jesus - persecution, deception and seduction. There is some evidence later in Hebrews 10 that persecution was a real issue for Jewish Christians. But if it's not persecution for you, then Satan has those two other cards up his sleeve. Jesus Himself, when he told the parable of the sower, described not two but four soils. The two in the middle refer to people who start out well but don't last. And Paul himself spoke of those who had worked with him in the gospel, but who had later abandoned him (2 Timothy 1:15). Hold on, he says, because in Jesus you have someone worth sticking with, and someone who will be faithful to you.

**SPUR ONE ANOTHER ON** (verses 24-25)

**And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another - and all the more as you see the Day approaching.**

Back in the days when we all had coal fires, preachers used to say that if you take a piece of coal out of a fire, it will cool rapidly, but if you leave it in, it will burn right through and do its job. It was a comment about the importance of Christian fellowship. People say that you don't have to go to church to be a Christian, but it certainly helps. In my experience the fellowship of God's people has been an essential aid to growth. So, says the writer, encourage one another, and the best way to do that is with words. Words can be very powerful. The parent or teacher who said "You'll never be any good" has a lot to answer for. So when someone does something well, or even half-well, tell them.

Draw near, hold on, spur each other on. May God help us all as we endeavour to fulfil His destiny for us!