



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

Dawn of a new day

By Rev Dr Keith Garner

4 October 2015

Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12

Hebrews is a unique document in the New Testament. It was undoubtedly written for a Jewish audience and had a prevailing purpose of encouraging the early Christians not to abandon their Christian faith in favour of returning to Judaism.

The epistle to the Hebrews is sometimes known as “The Forgotten Epistle” and that might result from the fact that it doesn’t sit easily with what we call our modern thought forms. Much of its religious imagery is fundamentally different from how most people live their lives – and it is certainly true that the thought-forms that we find in Hebrews are not familiar to those of us who live in a technologically-oriented world.

What is clear, however, is that the author of Hebrews has been captivated by the Person of Jesus Christ. You cannot help but notice that the writer uses the name ‘Jesus’ (usually without qualification) over a dozen times. And, when he does, it invariably comes at the beginning or end of a phrase such as *“looking to the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, Jesus.”* (Hebrews 12:2)

The intimacy with which the author writes indicates he is referring to someone he knows; someone in and through whom he is convinced we can have life and a relationship with the living God. Such was his understanding of Jesus Christ.

Putting things in a nutshell, this letter is written by a great teacher to what may have been a small but significant group of Christians in Rome that were in danger of drifting away from their faith. It is a *“word of exhortation”* (13:22).

We could hazard a guess at who wrote this letter; it was almost certainly not Paul. But I think Origen was right when he said that God is the only One who knows who wrote Hebrews, because the evidence itself remains inconclusive.

In his New Testament commentary, Barclay wrote, “To us the author must remain a voice and nothing more; but we can be thankful to God for the work of this great nameless one who wrote with incomparable skill and beauty about the Jesus who is the way to reality and the way to God.”

We live in a context which sees millions of dollars every year spent on persuasive advertising, which is designed to draw us in sufficiently that we purchase goods or make decisions about the way we vote or change our perspective on one aspect of life or another. This is all the business of communications.



We know all too well what happens when there is a serious “breakdown in communication”. This can happen in families, between friends and between people who talk to each other but fail to communicate successfully.

In this significant letter to the Hebrews, we recognise that it begins with the assertion about God’s greatest communication of all. The single most important fact of Christian revelation is that God has spoken in the Person of his Son, Jesus Christ.

Raymond Brown concluded in this regard that “In Christ God has closed the greatest communication gap of all time, that which exists between a holy God and sinful humanity.

I want to use the first three verses of the whole epistle and place these thoughts in the context of the majesty of God.

Hebrews 1:1-3

“In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.”

The opening words of this epistle are reinforced by the rest of this first chapter, which emphasises that God has spoken very clearly to us through One who shared with him in creation and sustains the world.

Let me then offer you three thoughts which each in their own way speak powerfully into our understanding of the Person of Jesus, the importance of the new era that he came to bring for all of us, and what this has to say to the communication exercise that all of us have to engage in, if we are concerned about Christian mission.

The adequacy and superiority of the son – v.v. 1-4

The whole purpose of the book seems to centre on this theme. One of the ways the writer chose to persuade this group of first century Christians, who were in danger of giving up, was to commend to them the superior nature of Jesus Christ.

It is rare that you will hear a Christian sermon suggesting that we should concentrate on superiority, but this is superiority in a particular way. In the latter part of this chapter, we see the various ways in which Jesus Christ is superior. Returning to Brown, he offered eight ways in which this was true.

The narrative on the theme of superiority is in the context of comparison to the angels:-

- He had a superior name (v.v.4-5)
- He had a superior dignity (v.6)
- He had a superior nature (v.7)
- His role is superior (v.8a)
- He becomes a superior example (v.8b-9)
- His work is superior (v.v.10-12)
- He is superior in achievement (v.13a)



- He is superior in destiny (v.13b)

Having said all of this, we recognise that the writer has made the point that Jesus Christ is superior to the prophets of old who were the people that God used to speak in the most challenging of circumstances. Hebrews asserts that Jesus is the very image of God and, when we see him, we see God in all his fullness.

My take on this concept of superiority is not that the Old Testament is less true or worthy than the New Testament. Peter Adams wrote, “The Old Testament presented the promises which are fulfilled in Christ in the New Testament.”

Because of the other liturgical nuances, I don’t use this word very often, but I think it is helpful to talk about the ‘primacy’ of Jesus Christ. The Greek word translated ‘superior’ is *kreitton*. It is often used throughout Hebrews and could be translated ‘greater’ or ‘better’, but they both fall short of superiority or primacy.

All that we discover about God’s greatness and majesty shines through the Son of God, Jesus Christ. This concurs with what we have in the marvellous Prologue of St John, which declares:

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14)

The unique nature of the Christian faith is the clear and radical way in which we are called to embrace paradoxical concepts such as “grace and truth, life and death, darkness and light, duty and delight”. It is Jesus Christ himself who shows us exactly how this can be lived out.

Karl Barth, the remarkable scholar of the first half of the twentieth century, wrote, “Jesus does not give recipes that show the way to God as other teachers of religion do. He is himself the way.”

His coming marks the dawn of a new beginning – v.v. 1-2

In Jewish thought, there was clearly a different understanding of the ages. There was always the present age and then there was the new age that was to come. The present age might be considered to be dominated by sin and death and the new age was the time of the kingdom of God.

In seeking to offer words to Christians in danger of departing from the faith, it would be important to recognise the continuity of the Old and New Testaments. As one writer put it, “Christ does not break with the great Jewish past. He comes to bring it to fulfilment.”

- Without the coming of Christ, the revelation that we discover in the Old Testament is partial, preparatory and fundamentally incomplete.
- The word that we now discover in Jesus Christ is a decisive, final and complete revelation.
- The age in which these words were both written and heard for the first time was the period of time when the old was giving way to the new. This helps us to understand the use of the words, “... *in these last days.*” (v.2)



This new beginning emerges with an inevitable comparison with all that has gone before. It is good to remind ourselves of the comparison between the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and that of the prophets of the Old Testament, through whom God had spoken.

Put simply, the prophets were *friends* of God, but Jesus Christ is the *Son* of God. The prophets skilfully understood *something* of the mind of God, but Jesus Christ *is* that mind.

One commentator reminded his readers, “It is to be noted that it is no part of the purpose of the writer to the Hebrews to belittle the prophets; it is his aim to establish the supremacy of Jesus Christ. He is not saying there is a *break* between the Old Testament revelation and that of the New Testament; he is stressing the fact that there is *continuity*, but continuity that ends in *consummation*.”

Because of the kind of work we do at Wesley Mission, I frequently have to sign contracts – and usually many each week. We have the company seal that has to be placed at the bottom of each contract. The seal makes an impression and, in a very similar way, the writer to the Hebrews is saying that ‘the impression has the exact form of the seal.’

When you look at such an impression, you see an exact replica of the seal which made it. So it is when you look at Jesus Christ; you see exactly his nature, purpose and grace.

When you consider the fact that many of the early Christians were part of a persecuted minority, it is interesting that the focus is clearly upon “a new beginning”.

The great themes such as “the way of the cross” and “the way of suffering” resonate meaningfully in this book. The practical application would be understood easily by these early Christians.

It was Martin Luther who wrote:

In his life Christ is an example,
showing us how to live;
In his death he is a sacrifice,
satisfying for our sins;
In his resurrection, a conqueror;
In his ascension, a king;
In his intercession, a high priest.

This profound Christian theology is demonstrated nowhere more completely than in the Hebrews epistle. It is clear that the ministry of Jesus in its totality is the mark and identity of the Christian life, when lived in its fullness.

Jesus Christ is more than a message – v. 3

The prophets of old were called by God to deliver a message to a specific people at a clearly-defined point of time. Although that message still resonates with us today, we understand it best by looking at the setting of those who first heard the message.



In Jesus Christ, God delivers more than a message. He communicates the very light and glory of God's presence. *"The Son is the radiance of God's glory ..."* (v.3)

For the Jewish people, the glory of God or what was in the early days known as the 'doxa' of God, was a visible and outward expression of the majestic presence of God.

- When the law was given at Sinai, *"the glory of the Lord"* settled on the mountain (Exodus 24:15-17)
- When the ark of the covenant was captured, the people lamented that *"the glory has departed"* (1 Samuel 4:21-22)
- But the writer here reminds his readers that nowhere has the glory of God been more perfectly manifest than in the Person of God's Son.

Many of us would find the thought of the Son being superior to angels out of the sphere of our understanding. We would have to go on to say that if we have a low opinion of the angels, we will regard the thought as faint praise indeed. The reason it is so important is the powerful link to the Old Testament: at the giving of the law, the presence of angels marked the moment and, in Jewish thinking, angels had responsibility for ruling various nations. But the power of the Son of God and his authority extends also to the world to come. This notion is expanded in the second chapter (2:5).

F F Bruce wrote what for me is the finest commentary on the Book of Hebrews. He describes the greatness of the Son of God in this way: "He is the Prophet through whom God has spoken His final word to men; He is the Priest who has accomplished a perfect work of cleansing for His people's sins; He is the King who sits enthroned in the place of chief honour alongside the Majesty on high."

It is this thought which encouraged the great hymn writer John Newton to pen:-

Jesus! My Shepherd, Brother, Friend,
My Prophet, Priest and King,
My Lord, my Life, my Way, my End,
Accept the praise I bring.

The opening verses of Hebrews are a sharp departure from the usual first century opening to a document of this kind. They are certainly markedly different from the style of the Apostle Paul or Peter or others.

There are no opening greetings, no indication of the writer's name and no expression of good wishes. It is almost like a sermon – or words which evoke the time and space for worship.

Susan Andrews summed up the reality of these words as they were written to what could be described as "second generation Christians". She writes about "believers who were removed from the intensity, the intimacy, the passion of the early years of the movement. With the seductive pressures of a materialistic and violent world bearing down on them from every side, these disciples had become burned out, discouraged, apathetic believers."



When I read those words I was reminded of the context in which we have to live out our Christian faith today – and the fact that a fearful malaise has settled across many parts of the church and we may be afflicted with a spiritual version of chronic fatigue syndrome.

May these words in Hebrews reignite faith among us!