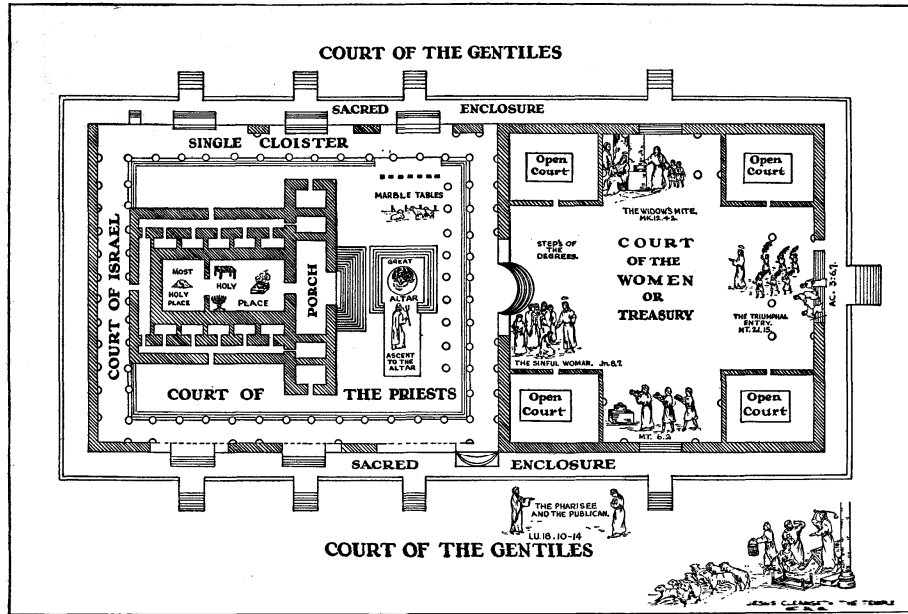


# The Epistle to the Hebrews

INTERIOR ARRANGEMENT OF THE TEMPLE AT JERUSALEM



## Bible Notes July – September 2010

50p

July 1<sup>st</sup>

Hebrews 1 v1

I have to admit that Hebrews is quite difficult, but it is very wonderful and well worth the effort of reading it and meditating on its meaning. It brings out the significance of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as encountered in the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament and does so in the light of the Old Testament, which is so very necessary for understanding Who Jesus is. Traditionally it was thought to be by St Paul, but nowhere in the text of the Epistle does it say who wrote it and it is so different from Paul's known letters that most scholars think it was probably by some other Christian writer – maybe Apollos.

Hebrews starts with God and the way He makes Himself known to us. If you think of Who God is, Who He must be if He is God at all, then it follows that we could only know Him if He makes Himself known to us. He makes Himself known to the whole human race in the wonders of creation, through the voice of conscience and in His providence for our lives. St Paul quotes the Greek poet, *In him we live, and move, and have our being*. It is therefore not surprising that scientists are increasingly concluding that it is natural for human beings to be religious. However, human beings come up with some pretty weird and even horrific ideas about God. We need His more specific revelation of Himself and this we find in the Scriptures. Hebrews here refers particularly to God's revelation of Himself in what we call the Old Testament.

July 2<sup>nd</sup>

Hebrews 1 v2

The Old Testament revelation is incomplete. For a start, it is mostly to the Jews. Secondly, the Old Testament stops short of an outright encounter with the Deity. God in the Old Testament is always partially hidden, because to enter wholly into His holiness would be fatal to sinful humanity. The New Testament reveals that God is for everyone of all races. God reveals Himself wholly in Jesus and it is possible for sinful humanity to come into His presence without perishing because Jesus deals once and for all with our sins. Even at 1 v2, Hebrews makes clear that Jesus is the One Who is before all things and by Whom all things consist (Colossians 1 v17).

July 3<sup>rd</sup> (St Thomas)

Hebrews 1 v3

Appropriately I am preparing these notes between Ascension Day and Pentecost. In all eternity Jesus is God. He is the brightness of God's glory. He is the image of God. All human beings are made in the image of God, but, in all of us except Jesus, that image is defiled by sin, our failure to attain to the wholehearted love of God and neighbour.

As God, Jesus sustains by His loving power everything that exists. Without the eternal love of God everything in time and space would simply cease to exist.

God, Who sustains the Universe by His love, in Jesus entered space and time to be born as a human being. In human form, He dealt with human sin by His death on the Cross and, in all eternity, reigns as fully human and wholly divine.

Almighty and everliving God, who for the more confirmation of the faith didst suffer thy holy Apostle Thomas to be doubtful in thy Son's resurrection; Grant us so perfectly, and without all doubt, to believe in thy Son Jesus Christ, that our faith in thy sight may never be reprov'd. Hear us, O Lord, through the same Jesus Christ, to whom we thee and the Holy Ghost, be all honour and glory, now and for evermore. Amen.

July 4<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 1 vv 4&5

This needs explaining. People might suppose that Jesus was some sort of created spiritual being, such as an angel, sent down from Heaven to do a job for God. He is not, however, an angel. He is not any kind of created being. He is God. He is *much better than the angels*. It is His right to sit at the Right Hand of the Father. He has also earned that position by dying on the Cross for the redemption of the human race. (The nearest analogy I can think of is the son of the owner of a business who would in any case inherit the business by right, but decides to earn the right to own the business by working his way up through the company.)

Hebrews tries to demonstrate this from the Old Testament and this too takes some explanation. *Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee* is a quotation from Psalm 2. God uses words similar to these at the Baptism of Jesus and His Transfiguration. The implication is that, whereas angels are created ministers of God, Jesus is the begotten Son.

The complication is that Psalm 2 originally refers to a created human being. It is the King of Israel who is described by the psalm metaphorically as the Son of God. Of course Jesus, in His humanity, fulfils all the prophecies about the ideal King of Israel, the Messiah.

Jesus is literally the Son of God as *touching his Godhead* and metaphorically the Son of God as *touching his Manhood*. Adam, too, is described metaphorically as the son of God and all human beings are maybe actually, perhaps potentially the children of God. Try and think that one through, because I am not sure I can get any further on that line.

#### July 5<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 1 v6

The first commandment is that we can only worship God. To worship anything less than God is blasphemy. You become what you worship. So, to worship anything less than God is to sell yourself short. You were made to be like Him. It is wrong to worship angels or any created heavenly beings, just as it is wrong to worship things on earth, idols, or wealth, power or celebrity. Jesus doesn't worship the angels. The angels worship Him and so should we and worship Him alone.

#### July 6<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 1 vv 7-9

Hebrews now turns to Psalm 45 in order to understand Jesus. We Anglicans used to use a lot of psalms in the services of Mattins and Evensong. Too often it would be a struggle to sing them to the chants and the meaning of the words would get lost as we strained to fit them to the music. We came to feel that psalms were difficult and even boring. So we haven't minded dropping them very largely from public worship. Psalms are, of course, easier to understand if they are said. They were, however, written to be sung and something is lost if we leave out the music. Psalms are also easier when they are written as

songs or hymns like *The Lord's my Shepherd*, but rewriting them like this often changes the meaning. We lose a lot if we don't know the psalms. There are solutions to the problems of using them in worship, but we have to be prepared to make the effort and to overcome our prejudices. You don't have to sing psalms in a Tudor English translation to a Victorian English chant. Neither do you have to ditch every traditional way of doing things.

Anyway. Psalm 45 was composed for the wedding of one of the kings of Israel – probably Ahab, who is generally regarded as a huge disappointment, weak and faithless! It refers to the blessedness of God because He is just and almighty and the blessedness of the King acting as God's viceroy. Ahab was a huge disappointment, but Hebrews refers to Jesus what the psalm says both about God and about the ideal king. Angels are God's servants. Jesus is Christ the King.

### July 7<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 1 vv 10-12

We're now in Psalm 102. Verses which quite clearly apply to God in the psalm (indeed they are the ground of the psalmist's faith) are in Hebrews applied to Jesus. He is the One Who made Heaven and Earth. They will cease to be at the end of time, but Jesus will continue for ever. At the end of time, when the material world ceases to exist, Jesus will judge the living and the dead and the righteous will reign with Him eternally.

### July 8<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 1 vv 13&14

The psalm quoted here is Ps 110, a psalm very often referred to Jesus in the New Testament. It is about the king and high priest, roles which only Jesus epitomises and fulfils. The angels are God's servants and, we are told here, serve us!

Hebrews 1 vv 1-12 is the traditional Epistle reading for Christmas. I mentioned that I am preparing these notes at Ascensiontide. The east windows of our two churches depict the Christmas story and the Ascension. Between them, they compass the earthly life of Jesus and illuminate His eternal significance.

July 9<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 2 vv 1&2

The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews was concerned that the people he was writing to would fall from the faith. They were facing the possibility of persecution. Wouldn't it be easier to stay away from public worship and to keep quiet about their faith? Wouldn't it be easier to go along with what the world expected of them, conforming to the way everybody else lived, avoiding attracting the attention of the authorities or of mockers and scoffers?

Some people think that the God of the Old Testament was stern and quick to punish sinners, but they believe that Jesus is meek and mild, that He really won't mind much whether or not people practise the faith they profess or even if they abandon that faith when they get caught up in the affairs of this world.

Hebrews' answer is that the New Testament demands more than the Old ever did.

July 10<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 2 vv 3&4

Moses received God's Law (or Torah) on Mount Sinai. It was believed that the Law was mediated by angels. There were impressive signs of the presence of God. The earth shook. There were flames of fire. The trumpets sounded. The Law told the Israelites how they must live as the people of God and warned them of the consequences of failing to live up to what they were supposed to be.

But, says Hebrews, we are even more privileged than they were. We didn't receive the New Testament from angels; we received it from the Son of God Himself. In John's words, Jesus is the Word of God made flesh. God bore witness that Jesus is Who He is by signs and wonders. The Holy Ghost bears witness of Jesus. The words of Jesus, the Word of God, have been preserved in the Church and passed down to us. To ignore Jesus must have much more devastating consequences even than to ignore Torah.

July 11<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 2 v5

A lot of bad things happen to people in the Old Testament. They die in battle. They are struck down by plagues. They are the subjects of divine or human punishment. This is one reason we don't like reading the Old Testament and are somewhat reticent in telling its stories to children.

This is, however, the wrong approach. People use stories to make sense of life. Children and teenagers particularly need stories – fairy tales and folk stories, films, plays and computer games. If they are to be at all realistic, and therefore of use to us, these “myths” have to be honest about the way the world is and about how our imaginations work. I suspect that one of the reasons why adolescents and especially teenage boys regard Christianity as irrelevant is that we only tell them about the “nice” things in the Bible. A boy of 14, physically challenged by other boys at school, attracted to girls, facing up to the need to make his own way in life, needs more from the Church than to be told to *Consider the lilies of the field*. If we don't let them explore sex and violence in the context of Christian faith, they will explore them in far less salutary environments and not trouble about us at all.

However, and this is my main point today, all those battles and plagues, all that divine and human retribution, only affected people in this world. They might have died young, but they would have died anyway. The Old Testament predominately deals with what happens to you in this world. The New Testament, however, deals with you eternally. Disobey Torah and you might be stoned to death. Set your heart against Jesus, however, and you risk being lost eternally.

July 12<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 2 vv 6-8

We're in Psalm 8 now, that wonderful psalm which contemplates the immensity of the heavens, recognises the total insignificance of humanity and marvels that God loves us so much that He makes us the crown of creation. Psalm 8 refers to all human beings as so privileged and loved by God. Just as Adam sums up the human race, so Jesus epitomises what it is to be human. What applies to us, applies to Him in spades!

July 13<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 2 v9

According to Psalm 8, God has created an incredibly vast universe. By comparison, we humans are nothing. Yet God loves us and puts us in charge of Creation. We are just below the angels in the divine scheme. It is barely believable.

It is also incomplete. We have not yet attained to the height where we shall be like Him for we shall see Him as He is. We are alienated from God, we cannot come into our inheritance as His children, because of sin.

Jesus, however, is the human being as human beings were meant to be. He does not rebel against God. He is not a sinner. Jesus fulfils humanity's vocation. Exalted far above the angels, He takes human form and becomes one of us, a little lower than the angels. He lives the perfect human life on earth. He dies on the Cross and is exalted once more to heaven, where He lives eternally the perfect human life in union with the life of divine perfection.

July 14<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 2 vv 10-13

Having established the Deity of Christ, we have also to establish His humanity. He is one with us. He shares our sufferings, the consequences of human sin. He knows what we are going through. He does what we ought to do. He brings us to the place which God has prepared for us. He calls us *brethren* in the context of Psalm 22. This is the psalm which begins, *My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me?* and is such a wonderful prophecy of the Crucifixion. He, the psalmist or Jesus, praises God in the midst of the what? It depends which translation you are using. The Greek of Hebrews has the word used for church (ecclesia, εκκλησια). The Hebrew of the psalm has the word used for the congregation of Israel (qahal, קהל). We are one with Christ in His Death and Resurrection. We share with Him and He with us. We are the children of God, Christ's brothers and sisters, the people of God. This is the people of Israel, the Christian Church, potentially the whole human race, because *God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*



July 15<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 2 vv 14&15

Do you fear death? Some people seem to think that the prospect of death negates their entire life. How do you picture death? Some people say they are more afraid of dying than death itself. Unbelievers presumably think that there is nothing after death, though nothingness is pretty hard to imagine. Some people may fear judgment and punishment. Many people believe in reincarnation – that you come back as someone (or even something) else, perhaps as a reward or punishment for the way you have lived this life. I get the impression that death worries most those of middle years. The young don't expect it. Often the elderly become resigned to it or even welcome it. It is the midlife crisis when people realise that they are never going to do what they want in life and that one day, in the not too distant future, life will end. I realise these are generalisations, but certainly death is a fact of life and an important one. The thing is that, for Christians, death is not so very terrible. Jesus has died as one of us. He has overcome all the power of death, all the power of evil. He promised to come again to receive us to Himself. We know that death is nothing to be afraid of and we are not therefore bound by the fear of death.

Two speculations. Is the modern obsession with *health and safety* a result of people's loss of confidence in *the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life*? Do people choose Bluewater rather than Church on Sunday mornings because they think that this life is all they'll get?

July 16<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 2 vv 16&17

Jesus wasn't an angel. Their relationship with God is different from ours. Jesus is divine and Jesus is human. So Jesus is the basis of our relationship with God. He was born as a descendant of Abraham. He belonged to a specific nation in a particular time, as all genuine human beings do. He was a real, actual human being, not an ill-defined "humanity". Yet Abraham is the father of many nations. He is the father of all who have faith. So we are one race and people with all God's children in Christ. All we have to do is to believe.

July 17<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 2 v18

There are two sources of comfort in this verse. First of all, it is not a sin to be tempted. Jesus was tempted as we are, but He is not a sinner. Some Christians worry that they must be terrible sinners because they are tempted so much. However temptation is not sin. Don't worry. It's only when you give in to temptation that it becomes sin.

Secondly, Jesus knows what it is to be human from personal experience. He understands. When we pray, He knows how we feel. He shares our joy and our anxiety. When we are tempted, He understands. When we sin, He sympathises. Jesus is a true friend, Who truly understands us. He understands us and He does help us. So take everything to the Lord in prayer.

July 18<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 3 vv 1-6

The logic of Hebrews often seems quite convoluted, but it is well worth disentangling. Moses was special. He had a specially close relationship with God and God used him uniquely in the Old Testament to receive His Word and to proclaim God's Word to His people. Moses is described in Numbers 12 v7 as faithful in all God's house – which might mean the tabernacle, the symbol of heaven, God's dwelling place, or God's household, His people, the chosen people. However Jesus is infinitely more wonderful even than Moses. Moses was faithful in God's house. Jesus builds the house. He is God the Son creating Heaven and earth, the dwelling place of God. He is God's image in Whom all human beings are created. He is the first-born of the Resurrection, Who creates the Church by His Death & Resurrection and by the sending of the Holy Spirit. So we pay even more attention than to Jesus than to Moses.

July 19<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 3 vv 7-14

Lovers of Mattins will recognise the quotation from Psalm 95, the Venite. God set the Israelites free from slavery in Egypt and brought them into the wilderness, but almost all that generation died there. They consistently rebelled against God and remained in the desert. Only Joshua and Caleb made it to the Promised Land. This is a warning to us not to trifle with our faith. We could lose our heavenly home.

July 20<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 3 vv 15-19

The New Testament is urgent. Jesus tells us to watch. He warns us that the Son of Man comes like a thief in the night. It could be that this very night God will require your soul of you. Nobody knows when the end shall come. We are to be ready, like faithful servants who are found faithfully doing their work whenever the Lord may return. It is always *Today*, the time to hear His Voice. To hear God's voice is to respond. Otherwise there will come a time when it is no longer *Today*. You will have had the opportunity to hear His Voice and you will have wasted it. It will be too late to decide that, after all, you would like to enter the Promised Land.

July 21<sup>st</sup>

Hebrews 4 vv 1-6

The Sabbath matters a great deal to the Jewish people. It is the day God rested from the work of creation. It is the day He has given to all His people for refreshment, for worship and recreation. The Sabbath, therefore, is a foretaste of heaven. The Exodus story is also a story of a people moving towards their promised rest. They are called by the Word of God to be a kingdom of priests, God's own people. God leads them through the desert to the Promised Land. However they do not have faith in the Word. They don't trust God and, therefore, all but Caleb and Joshua die in the wilderness.

We are heading towards our Promised Land, our eternal Sabbath. We are a kingdom of priests, God's own people, called and constituted by the Word of God. By His Spirit, God is leading us to Heaven. But, like the ancient Israelites, if we fail to receive His Word with faith and if we fail to trust the Holy Spirit sufficiently to follow where He is leading, we shall never make it.

July 22<sup>nd</sup>

Hebrews 4 vv 7-11

*There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God.*

I find those words very comforting! When the faithless generation of former slaves had all died in the desert, Joshua led their descendants through the Jordan into the Promised Land. Joshua is the Hebrew form of the name Jesus. So the parallel is even more obvious between the Israelites and us. Long after Joshua but long before Jesus, however, the

psalmist gave us the Venite, Psalm 95. This clearly implies that Joshua bringing the Israelites into Canaan does not fulfil God's purposes, His promises of rest to His people. *There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God.* This is here interpreted as the promise of Heaven, which is fulfilled in Jesus, but can only be received with faith. Faithfulness means following Jesus through the desert of this life with all its hardships and temptations.

July 23<sup>rd</sup>

Hebrews 4 vv 12&13

Evangelicals love these verses as a reference to the Bible and its power. It can't be as simple as that, however. There was no New Testament when Hebrews was written and the Old Testament wasn't considered as a single volume. Rather it was the Law, the Prophets and the Writings – in that order of importance. The Christian Bible was yet to come into existence when Hebrews was written!

My fancy is to interpret the Word here as Jesus, but we have to be cautious. It is only in the books ascribed to John that Jesus is specifically called the Word (or Logos, Λογος). I doubt if Jesus was so specifically in the mind of the writer to the Hebrews at this point.

When we think about the Word of God here, I think we should think of the Word of God in its most general sense, the Word Which indeed appears in writing in our Christian Bibles and Who is indeed incarnate in Jesus Christ and Who is certainly as all pervasive and all powerful as these verse indicate.

July 24<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 4 vv 14-16

Most of us have lived through a whole series of prayer book revisions, experimental services and authorised rites. One of these which never won my love was Rite B Holy Communion in the ASB. One thing it had going for it, however, was that it used these verses as the introduction to the Confession. We can come to God, everyone of us, because Jesus is our high priest. We can come to Jesus because He completely understands us. In Jesus we have all the resources we need to live Christian lives – forgiveness of our sin, grace to live with Him in His risen life on earth and in heaven.

July 25<sup>th</sup> (St James):

Hebrews 5 vv 1&2

In the Old Testament God called human beings (Aaron and his descendants) to be high priests. They were separated to offer holy worship to God, but, of course, they remained human, susceptible to temptation and sin. It turns out that they were only a “type” of priesthood. The true high priest is Jesus, consecrated for holy service, yet human and open to temptation, though without sin. In Jesus we have all the resources we need to live Christian lives – forgiveness of our sin, grace to live with Him in His risen life on earth and in heaven.

Grant, O merciful God, that as thine holy Apostle Saint James, leaving his father and all that he had, without delay was obedient to the calling of thy Son Jesus Christ, and followed him; so we, forsaking all worldly and carnal affections, may be ever more ready to follow thy holy commandments; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

July 26<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 5 v3

The priests of Aaron’s line were all sinners. They, therefore, had to offer sacrifices for their own sin as well as for the sins of the people. They were not holy until they were consecrated and sanctified. Jesus is fully human and tempted as we are, but He is without sin. His consecration and sanctification are perfect. He is of Himself holy. He therefore enters into the presence of God as of right – bringing with Him all His brothers and sisters, those who believe in Him and are baptised into Him.

July 27<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 5 vv 4-6

Candidates for priesthood did not volunteer, still less put themselves forward for this great honour. God chose Aaron and his descendants. God chooses human beings to be Christians. From within the universal priesthood of the Church, God chooses men to be bishops, priests and deacons. God chose Jesus and His choice is indicated in two psalms already quoted above, 2 & 110. Interestingly, these are psalms about the choice of a king as well as the choice of a priest. Jesus fulfils every vocation.

July 28<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 5 vv 7-9

*The highest place that heaven affords is his, is his by right,  
The King of kings, and Lord of lords, and heaven's eternal Light;*  
This is so true of Jesus. Of course it is. Yet His is the *Head that once  
was crowned with thorns.*

The place at God's Right belongs to Jesus both by right of inheritance as the Son of God and because He has earned it through His, Incarnation and Crucifixion. We think Gethsemane and Calvary and we know how much God loves and therefore how confident we can be of our eternal salvation in Him.

July 29<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 5 vv 10&11

The city of Jerusalem existed long before the Israelites made the Promised Land their home. It was already a city state in the time of Abraham. The ruler of Jerusalem was both priest and king. Melchisedech was priest and king in Abraham's days. In Israelite history, the two roles were kept well apart. To be priest and king would concentrate too much power in one pair of hands. Power corrupts. A corrupt and absolute ruler is a terror. Jesus, however, the incorruptible, reunites and perfects, He epitomises, the roles of high priest and king and creates a royal priesthood out of all those baptised in His Name.

July 30<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 5 vv 12-14

It is already a frustration for the writers of the New Testament that Christians will not grow up. They like the version of the faith they learnt as children. They want to recapture the rapture they felt when they first believed. They have become complacent in what they think and the way they do things. They don't want to be challenged. Anything which requires thought might put off converts or weak believers or children. There are always reasons for not moving on or growing up.

It won't do, however, God is infinite – infinite mystery, infinite love. If we love Him, we can only grow into Him, lose ourselves in Him. If we hold back, it is because we don't love.

July 31<sup>st</sup>

Hebrews 6 vv 1-8

Once you've got the basics, you can move on. You don't have to keep on going over them. Some people desire fresh experiences (Baptisms even) in the hope of recovering their first rapture on becoming Christians. Some people want to argue about what exactly is meant by these basics. Some people are just reluctant to let go and commit themselves wholly to God wherever He is leading them.

It is so dishonouring to Jesus and to what He has done for us if we fall away or backslide that it is hard to see how we can ever come back. Indeed we may wonder whether those who drop out every truly belonged. St John says the same thing (I John 2 v19): *They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us.* This is a warning to us not to trifle with our faith. We could lose our heavenly home.

August 1<sup>st</sup> (Lammas)

Hebrews 6 vv 8&9

Lammas is the beginning of harvest in England. Traditionally the Eucharist was celebrated with a loaf made from the first grain of the year – Loaf Mass. We offer the beginning of the Harvest to God in order to consecrate the whole crop to Him. We offer Him the first and best of ourselves as we consecrate our whole lives to Him.

*Like Israel, Lord we  
give~  
Our earliest fruits to  
thee,  
And pray that, long as  
we shall live,  
We may thy children  
be.*

*Thine is our youthful  
prime,  
And life and all its  
powers:  
Be with us in our  
morning time,  
And bless our evening  
hours.*

*In wisdom let us grow,  
As years and strength  
are given,  
That we may serve thy  
Church below,  
And join thy saints in  
heaven*

August 2<sup>nd</sup>

Hebrews 6 vv 10-12

Whoever these Hebrews are, to whom this letter is written, they have started off well in the faith. They have supported the work of God's Church and the writer of the epistle is confident that God will not forget them. On the other hand, however, there is the risk that people will fall away. Maybe their first love has grown cold. Maybe Church life for

the Hebrews is disappointing. Perhaps it is the threat of persecution. Whatever the reason, the epistle is saying your faith is too important to let it lapse.

August 3<sup>rd</sup>

Hebrews 6 vv 13-18

Abraham is famous for his faith. God promised him an inheritance. Abraham acted on that promise and left behind the safety and security of his home in Haran and became a nomad in the land of Canaan. On what grounds could Abraham put his faith in a promise and reorder his whole life to conform to the Word of God? The answer is that the promise is God's and you can absolutely trust God. This is why these Hebrews can face up to persecution, put up with disappointment, ignore their own personal feelings and follow Jesus wherever He is leading them. There would be no point in reading this unless what is true for them is equally true for us.

August 4<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 6 vv 19 & 20

*We have an anchor that keeps the soul  
Steadfast and sure while the billows roll;  
Fastened to the rock which cannot move,  
Grounded firm and deep in the Saviour's love.*

The best hymns are based firmly on Scripture. The veil is the veil which separates the Holy of Holies in the Temple from the rest of the world. It is the place where the high priest offers the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement for the sins of all the people. Jesus is the High Priest Who enters the presence of God and offers Himself once and for all as a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. Because Jesus' sacrifice is of eternal and universal effectiveness we have a sure and certain hope which empowers us to live faithfully in accordance with the Word of God.

August 5<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 7 vv 1-3

Back to Melchisedech. He was the high priest and king in Jerusalem in the time of Abraham (cf Genesis 14). Here he is taken as a "type" of Christ. The name Melchisedech (מֶלְכִּי־צֶדֶק) means King of Righteousness and Salem (שָׁלוֹם, Shalom, Jerusalem) means peace. So He (Jesus) is King of Righteousness and King of Peace. The fact that



we are not given a genealogy for Melchisedech – we are not told about his forbears or descendants – points to the eternal nature of Jesus, Who, as God, has neither progenitors nor successors.

August 6<sup>th</sup> (The Transfiguration)

Hebrews 7 vv 4-10

One of the marks of a priest was that he received tithes. Another was that he pronounced God's blessing. Melchisedech, therefore, acted as priest to Abraham. Jewish high priests were supposed to be descendants of Moses' brother Aaron. They were of the tribe of Levi. Jesus was of the tribe of Judah. So it would seem extraordinary to Jewish people that He was any kind of priest – let alone the great and eternal High Priest. But the Messiah (according to Psalm 110 as interpreted in the NT) is a priest after the order of Melchisedech. Now Abraham was Levi's great grandfather. So, Hebrews argues, Levi's family acknowledges the priesthood of Melchisedech when Abraham pays him tithes. This Melchisedech, therefore, is greater than Abraham and the priests who are Abraham's descendants. His priesthood is eternal because it is a "type" of the priesthood of Christ. Christ, therefore, is much more wonderful than the whole line of human high priests, magnificent though they were, and to know Christ is to experience and transformative relationship – to be *changed from glory into glory*.

Christ's glory was revealed in another way when He was transfigured on the holy mountain. The effect on believers is, however, the same and so we pray.

Father in heaven, whose Son Jesus Christ was wonderfully transfigured before chosen witnesses upon the holy mountain, and spoke of the exodus he would accomplish at Jerusalem: give us strength so to hear his voice and bear our cross that in the world to come we may see him as he is; who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever. Amen.

August 7<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 7 vv 11-18

The writer insists that, marvellous as it is, the Old Testament is unsatisfactory. If the Torah and the prescribed sacrifices were able to perfect the people of God, the world would be a very different place. There would be no more need for sacrifices if sacrifices could deal with sin for good. We need a New Testament, a new High Priest, a perfect sacrifice of eternal validity. We have all these in Jesus and only in Him.

August 8<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 7 vv 19-24

Jesus is the fulfilment of all the Law's demands. He is the eternal priest, the perfect sacrifice. He is consecrated in this office by God's own appointment. He is the Lord's anointed. Other priests had to offer sacrifice for their own sins as well as for those of the people. They had to offer sacrifices repeatedly because the OT sacrifices were not eternally effective. The OT priests, of course, died and had to be replaced by others. But Jesus lives for ever. He is a priest for ever, by God's appointment, after the order of Melchisedech. His sacrifice is *a full, perfect and sufficient, sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world.*

August 9<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 7 vv 25-28

Jesus can save us. He lives for ever at God's Right Hand and prays for us. His offering is perfect because He is free of sin. His offering is sufficient for us. It covers all our insufficiencies. Because of Jesus, we can *offer and present unto thee, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable<sup>1</sup>, holy, and lively sacrifice unto thee.* Only by so doing can we experience perfect freedom.

August 10<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 8 vv 1-6

Solomon's Temple was modelled on the tabernacle which Moses made in the wilderness to be (in a sense) the dwelling place of God. This tabernacle was modelled on the vision of Heaven God gave Moses and so the way it is designed reflects the eternal truths of humanity's relationship with God. Hebrews can therefore use what we know of the

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<sup>1</sup> The word is *logikos* (λογικος) which is the adjective from *Logos* (Λογος), John's word for Jesus, the eternal Word. We are to be like Him!

Tabernacle and the Temple to explain what God was doing in Jesus Christ – providing for the forgiveness of the sin which alienates us from God so that we can dwell in God's presence eternally. The perfect high priest enters the true holy of holies to offer the undefiled sacrifice to effect the eternal atonement.

August 11<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 8 vv 7-13

The Jews, especially the Pharisees, had come to see their relationship with God in terms of obedience to all those commands in the Law. They had to tick all the boxes in order to up their approval ratings. Unfortunately, it is possible to tick all the boxes and still miss the point. So we read of health authorities and social services departments with wonderful approval ratings, because they have ticked all the boxes, allowing the people in their care to die unnecessarily. *And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity (love), it profiteth me nothing.* What the OT promises and the NT fulfils is that the old external law will effectively be replaced by a new internal law. Because Jesus has died on the Cross and effected our atonement with God, God's Holy Spirit can dwell in us and enable us to fulfil God's perfect law of love (charity). But we have to have the faith to cooperate with Him!

August 12<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 9 vv 1&2

Basically, we need to think of three chambers – though it has become rather more complicated by the time of Herod's Temple illustrated on the front cover of these notes. Outside the tabernacle or tent is the place where all the people gather. The next area is the sanctuary where the priests and Levites minister every day. There are offerings of light and bread which we imitate in our sanctuary lamp and daily Eucharists.

August 13<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 9 vv 3&4

Finally comes the Holy of Holies – within the veil. This is thought of as the dwelling place of God, but there is emphatically no idol or image or any representation of Him Who is beyond our imagination. Only the high priest enters the Holy of Holies. He only enters once a year with the atoning sacrifice on the Day of the Atonement. This is the only occasion on which the Holy Name יהוה is pronounced.

In the Holy of Holies there is the golden censor for the most sacred rites. There is a pot which contained a sample of the manna with which God had fed the people on their pilgrimage through the Wilderness. There were the stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments were written. Aaron's rod had budded when there was a dispute about the ministry. Other people hadn't seen why they shouldn't be priests too. God told them to put a rod for each tribe in the Holy of Holies. Aaron was shown to be the true high priest because his rod alone burst into blossom and produced almonds. So all this is highly symbolic of God's relationship with His people.

August 14<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 9 v5

The mercy seat is the throne of God. The golden cherubim represent beings described in both Ezekiel and Revelation as bearers of the throne of God. But there is no image or likeness of God on the throne. God is. God is beyond our comprehension. We cannot relate to Him except that He relates to us. He relates to us in Jesus Christ. The empty mercy seat symbolises both His distance and His nearness. He is transcendent and imminent, more than we can begin to conceive of, yet closer than hands and feet. Marvel.

August 15<sup>th</sup> (the Blessed Virgin Mary)

Hebrews 9 vv 6&7

Think of the awe. The priests minister daily in the sanctuary. But to enter into the place which *symbolises* the presence of God can only be done once a year and that by the high priest and even he cannot enter into the divine presence without a blood sacrifice. Now think of Mary. The power of the Most High overshadows her and she conceives the Son of God in her womb. In a sense Mary becomes the dwelling place of God, the holy of holies. How God loves our humanity and how He condescends to reach down to us and to reach us up to Himself.

Almighty God, who looked upon the lowliness of the Blessed Virgin Mary and chose her to be the mother of your only Son: grant that we who are redeemed by his blood may share with her in the glory of your eternal kingdom; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

August 16<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 9 vv 8-12

The Old Testament itself recognises the absurdity of imagining that God could dwell in a temple made by human hands. He fills heaven and earth and heaven and earth are contained in Him. *In him we live and move and have our being.* All these things that people did - building shrines, lighting lamps, burning incense, offering sacrifices, dressing up the priests - were all attempts to point to the ultimate Reality of God and how He relates to humanity. But they could do no more than point the way. Jesus is the Way.

August 17<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 9 vv 13 & 14

On the News tonight was the terrible story of a young soldier who had fought in Afghanistan and come home safely, only to be killed in a punch up in England while out celebrating his return. It hit the News because it is so wrong. Here was a young man prepared to sacrifice his life for his country dying in a way in which he did not deserve and which was apparently pointless.

Sacrifice is about the value of life. You don't kill casually in the OT – animals or people. When you kill a food animal, it is in a sense a sacrifice. That is why you pour out the blood on the ground. It signifies returning the life to God.

Sacrifice is about giving something up. You offer something to God because you love Him. You offer your best to Him because He is the best. You can afford to offer things to God because you trust Him not to let you down. There are all kinds of sacrifice in the OT. They may be about winning God's favour or celebrating God's favour. Even today some people try to bargain with God, making an offering or promising to do so, if God grants them what they want.

Nevertheless I suspect we find the concept of sacrifice hard to grasp. So we may have difficulty understanding why the offering of bulls and goats would be effective in sealing our relationship with God. That being so, it is hard to appreciate the infinitely greater significance of Christ's Sacrifice. I suggest we need to think about it.

August 18<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 9 v15

Perhaps this is one of the reasons we need to read the Bible more. We are always in danger of being imprisoned by the culture we live in. It is hard to think differently from the way other people think. We can't decide every issue for ourselves. We want to belong. That gives us two reasons for not thinking for ourselves, for not thinking outside our cultural framework. Reading the Bible connects us with the cultures of ancient Israel and the C1 Eastern Mediterranean under Roman rule. Our prayer books reflect the cultures which produced them – Ancient, Mediaeval, Reformation, Modern, Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant. The hymns we sing are steeped in the ideas and feelings of the people who wrote them. Reading the Bible and participating in the worship of the Church broadens our appreciation of the diversity of culture and helps us to think outside the box of the culture we live in. Public worship therefore alienates people who are too narrow minded to realise that there is more than what the C21 West offers. I am not impressed by those organisers of public worship who think they ought to reduce the alienation of the narrow minded by omitting from worship (or changing) those parts of the Bible, traditional prayers and hymns which do not exactly gel with C21 susceptibilities. We ought not to be dumbing down, but raising up.

Admittedly, immersion in the culture of Bible and Church sometimes results in our living in a Christian ghetto. People who are truly open to the Holy Spirit seek the Truth wherever it is to be found and, in the Light of Christ, relate their contemporary experience of the world we inhabit to what they learn from the Bible and Christian tradition. We need to use our biblically and liturgically<sup>2</sup> inspired imaginations to see how this great truth of 9 v15 relates to life in C21 Britain. Through His sacrificial Death, Jesus has overthrown the whole order of sacrifices for sins committed in this world, the whole scheme designed as a damage limitation exercise to protect people from earthly punishments, the consequences of their actions. He has created a new order – a new Law of Love inspired in human hearts by the Holy Spirit, an eternal Atonement with God, life in all its fulness. He has made it possible for us to dwell eternally in the presence of God.

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<sup>2</sup> Liturgy is the service of the Church.

August 19<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 9 vv 16&17

It is quite bewildering the way the images change. We are now in the area of wills and testamentary dispositions. Obviously wills and testaments in this context only come into force when the testator dies. This is one reason why Jesus has to die. We cannot inherit what He wills us until He dies.

August 20<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 9 vv 18-20

The word translated here “testament” is *diatheke* (διαθηκη). It usually means *will* in the sense of *testament* in normal Greek usage. In the Bible, however, it is much more usually used to translate the word for a covenant. The Old Covenant (or Testament, διαθηκη) was ratified at Mount Sinai with a good deal of animal sacrifice and the sprinkling of blood both on the people and on the book. God’s covenant is that He will be their God and they will be His people. As His people, they are required to obey His Law (Torah). As their God, He will richly bless them.

For the New Testament (or Covenant) the Sacrifice is Jesus and it is His Blood which consecrates the relationship between God and His people. The fact that this seems strange to us shows that we have got so used to the words at the Eucharist that we no longer think about them.

Drink this, all of you; this is my blood of the new covenant (“testament” in 1662), which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.

These words are even more startling when you remember that the Torah forbids the drinking even of animal blood!

August 21<sup>st</sup>

Hebrews 9 vv 21&22

*Without shedding of blood there is no remission.*

These are words beloved of old time evangelical preachers, though they seem very strange to modern people, especially those not brought up with the Bible. Blood symbolises life and life is of tremendous value. All life belongs to God. It is for this reason that blood consecrates and that the Blood of Jesus consecrates you and me.

August 22nd

Hebrews 9 vv 23&24

God is infinitely beyond us. He is infinitely greater. He is infinitely more pure. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under His table. We can only know God because He makes Himself known to us. We can only come into His presence because He breaks down the barrier between the human and the divine and because He summons us.

To help the Israelites to understand, God gave Moses the tabernacle as a model of eternal and heavenly reality. He gave Moses the sacrificial system to show people something of what it means to effect the Atonement and to dwell in God's eternal presence. Everything is purified by blood. It is the offering of life which sanctifies. Yet all these are what the hymn calls *types and shadows*. They are effective in this world and not all that effective even here. Their main purpose is to point to Jesus Who sanctifies heaven and earth by the shedding of His Blood once and for all in the eternally valid sacrifice.

*Therefore we, before him bending,  
This great sacrament revere:  
Types and shadows have their ending,  
For the newer rite is here;  
Faith, our outward sense befriending,  
Makes our inward vision clear.*

So we apprehend these great truths in Holy Communion.

August 23<sup>rd</sup>

Hebrews 9 vv 25-28

The point has already been made that the old high priests had to offer sacrifices every year. Because the sacrifice of Jesus is perfect, it is offered once and for all. Christ's self-offering is eternally effective. Every human being dies and will face the Judgment. The human Christ dies, but His Death is a sacrifice for all the sins of the world, pure and eternally effective because He is pure, without sin. Therefore, as we are judged, so we are forgiven because Christ is the propitiation for our sins. We look to meet Him because He appears the second time without sin for our salvation. In other words, we, in Him, are without sin and are safe in the presence of God.



August 24<sup>th</sup> (St Bartholomew)

Hebrews 10 v1

The Law (Torah) has a shadow of good things to come. A shadow is the same shape as the thing it is a shadow of. But it is two dimensional, not three. It is colourless, tasteless and noiseless. A shadow is an authentic shape, but not much more. Torah is the Law of Love and the Old Testament has the same shape as the New Testament. As it is generally misinterpreted, however, it is lifeless, tasteless, noiseless and two dimensional. It has no depth. Sometimes my mother is looking out for me when I come in at breakfast time. She might see my shadow first on the wall. My shadow indicates that I am coming, but it is not me. The Old Testament presages the New, but it is Jesus Who brings light and life; it is Jesus Who sets free the Holy Spirit in our lives. How often, however, do Christian people misinterpret the New Testament as though it were the Old, rendering it lifeless and two dimensional?

O Almighty and everlasting God who didst give to thine Apostle Bartholomew grace truly to believe and to preach thy Word; Grant, we beseech thee, unto thy Church, to love that Word which he believed, and both to preach and receive the same; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

August 25<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 10 vv 2-4

One of the functions of the Law is to remind us of sin and its seriousness. Our consciences may not be well informed. We may crush our consciences. We can convince ourselves that black is white and *vice versa*. We can easily develop a strong sense of self-justification. We may seek to impose a merciless justice on other people, while overindulging our own weaknesses. The Law recalibrates our moral compass. Its threats of punishment and demands for sacrifice remind us of the seriousness of sin and how it ruins lives, by alienating us from God and from other people and by the way it hardens us against seeing the self-destructive consequences of leading selfish lives.

August 26<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 10 vv 5&6

Hebrews now quotes at some length from Psalm 40. The psalmist recognises that what God really wants is not all those sacrifices offered in the Temple under the terms of the Old Covenant. What God wants is people who do justly and love mercy. The psalmist offers himself as a living sacrifice. This is what God truly requires of his people.

August 27<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 10 vv 7-9

What God really requires, then, is not the sacrifice of all those animals in the Temple, but that human beings, His people, should offer themselves as living sacrifices by always walking in accordance with His perfect Law of love. God wants people who are honest and generous, peaceful, just and merciful. The only person Who lives such a perfect human life of unqualified love of God and neighbour is Jesus. So Jesus is that perfect living sacrifice. Love to its fullest extent, however, is the offering up of life in death. So the perfect human life concludes with a perfect human death in love for God and for all humanity.

August 28<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 10 vv 10-13

So Jesus lives a perfect human life and He dies a perfect human death. He earns the right to be where He is by right of being the Son of God anyway. He sits at the Right Hand of God. Time will end. He will return to judge the living and the dead. All who believe in Him will have their sins forgiven and dwell in Him with God in all eternity. Those who rebel remain alienated from God and the consequence is that they cut themselves off from eternal life.

August 29<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 10 vv 14-18

The Holy Ghost is our witness of the truth of these things. This is the Spirit Who inspired the Scriptures which bear witness to Jesus. This is the Spirit Who teaches us to call God Father and Jesus Lord. This is the Holy Spirit Who creates the fellowship of the Church and makes the Sacraments real. This Spirit is both a foretaste and a guarantor, an earnest, of our life in the age to come.

August 30<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 10 vv 19-23

The practical consequence of all these wonderful things is that we cannot be afraid to come into the presence of God, but we ought to be terrified to leave it. We are set free from sin, free to live the life of the Risen Christ, free to live in the Holy Spirit. We do not need to fear sin or its punishment or setbacks in this life or death itself. God's grace is here with us and in us. So we have no excuse for failing to remain faithful.

August 31<sup>st</sup>

Hebrews 10 vv 24&25

There is a mutuality in the Church. We are members one of another. We are responsible for one another. We are not to give up meeting with other Christians, especially for worship, because we are busy or lazy, fed up with our Church or fearful of what people might say or do. We are to encourage one another to be good Christians, build up one another, encourage one another to love God and to love other people, support one another.

Someone used to say that a church was like a fire burning on a grate. All together, the coals keep one another burning, producing warmth and light, heat capable of doing useful work like powering a steam engine, warming a room or heating the bath water. A coal which falls out on to the hearth, however, generally goes out. Cold and grey, it is lifeless and useless.

September 1<sup>st</sup>

Hebrews 10 vv 26&27

We believe in a God Who forgives, the God Who *desireth not the death of a sinner*. Ours is a religion that gives people second chances. So these verses strike us as harsh. If you backslide in your faith, does there come a point where there is no longer any hope of redemption? Some people in the early Church thought so. Rather bizarrely, some people put off Baptism till they were dying so that they would have no time left to backslide and forfeit the chance of forgiveness. More understandably, there was a commonly held view that Christians who committed really serious sins after Baptism – like murder, adultery or apostasy (giving up your faith or changing your religion) – could not be forgiven. This led to huge problems after times of persecution. Some people died martyrs' deaths rather than commit apostasy. Others risked everything for their faithfulness to Christ. But what about those who denied Christ when threatened with persecution but wanted to come back to Church when the persecution was over. Could or should they be forgiven? Eventually the Church decided that penitent apostates ought to be allowed back to Church. But does this trivialise the seriousness of sin and the immensity of God's Love in redeeming us through the shedding of Christ's Blood on the Cross?

September 2<sup>nd</sup>

Hebrews 10 vv 28&29

The common view is that the God of the Old Testament is harsh and unforgiving, whereas the God of the New Testament is meek and mild. Not so! He is the same God. Both in the OT & the NT God is just and merciful. If you think about it, you can't have mercy without justice or justice without mercy. Justice and mercy are aspects of love. It is neither good nor loving to treat people unjustly. Neither can it be just to treat them unmercifully.

The Old and New Testaments give many different pictures of God. His infinity is such that we cannot comprehend Him. What we are given in the Bible are aspects and emphases of which we seek to make sense as Spirit filled members of the believing community. Our surest guide is Jesus Who brings justice and mercy together in the mystery of the Cross.

September 3<sup>rd</sup>

Hebrews 10 vv 30&31

*It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*

This is an aspect of faith, an emphasis, which I fear we have forgotten. We have so emphasised God's willingness to forgive that we tend to assume that He will always just let people off. It doesn't much matter, we think, what people believe or how they behave. God is too nice to punish them or even to withhold His blessings from them. God is so merciful that it doesn't matter whether we are merciful or not. God's humility in Christ is such that He will not mind much if we effectively despise Him but our neglect of holy things. If there is a Heaven, everybody will get there except (perhaps) Hitler and one or two more like him. Salvation is not priceless. It is effectively without value. On 18<sup>th</sup> August I suggested that there are dangers in looking at everything from a C21 point of view, of excising from the Bible and liturgy (or glossing over) those points of view which we find hard to deal with. We could easily omit to read these verses of Hebrews 10. We could arrogantly insist that the writer was wrong. We could lazily claim that they must apply to a situation in the community to which the author was writing 2,000 years ago, but that are not therefore relevant to us. Or we could stand back from dumbing down and allow ourselves to be challenged.

September 4<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 10 vv 32&33

When I was at King's London I remember hearing a story about a former leader of a college Christian Union who was now supposed to be an atheist. Some of us were shocked that so prominent a Christian could turn out to be an apostate. Had he committed the unforgivable sin? Certainly he had let us down and provided ammunition for detractors of religion.

On the other hand, there were some Christians I knew who thought that the naïve evangelical faith characteristic of so many college Christian Unions necessarily would fail when confronted with the challenges of the real world. It seemed like some of them were almost gloating, which, too, I found shocking.

It is true, however, that, like these Hebrews, some people seem to make a very good start in the faith. They come to every service. They support all the church's programme. They stand for PCC. Maybe they are even bold enough to speak about their new commitment to friends and family. Then things go cold. The excitement of first love dissipates in the routine of every day church membership. Other worshippers don't seem to share your enthusiasm. Your romance with the Church is a disappointment. Maybe you get into quarrels with people who were supposed to be brothers and sisters in Christ. The Rector turns out to have feet of clay. Your family don't support you. Your friends think you're a bit odd because you go to Church. There are just too many demands on you. So you fall away.

It's a bit like a marriage, I guess. There is the excitement of falling in love, but things can't carry on as they were in the first few months. Married life becomes routine. There are all kinds of pressures. At this point, immature people may well look for a new partner with whom to enjoy the excitement of a fresh romance. Wise people, however, count their blessings. They remember why they loved this person and they discover that they still do and that, therefore, they will commit to this marriage through thick and thin. Hebrews says it ought to be the same if we find that our love for Christ and His Church grows cold.

September 5<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 10 vv 34-36

Hebrews doesn't read much like a letter and you might wonder why it is classed as an epistle. This personal note however does demonstrate that it is a real letter written from an actual situation, not just a treatise on Theology and its theoretical application!

The Hebrews have exhibited compassion with the writer who has been "in bonds". Compassion is essential to the nature of the Church. We are one with one another. We are members one of another. All Christians everywhere belong to Christ and to one another. We therefore share one another's triumphs and pains. It is the character of a Christian to belong, to experience and to show compassion.

Having belonged, therefore, indeed having made sacrifices for the privilege of belonging, how can we allow ourselves to fall away? The aged Polycarp stood before the proconsul threatened with a martyr's death unless he renounced Christ. This was his reply. "Fourscore and six years have I served Him, and he has done me no harm. How then can I curse my King that saved me?" Polycarp is what a Christian ought to be.

September 6<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 10 vv 37-39

It is right to remain faithful because God is faithful. Jesus promised to return and to receive His people to Himself. We can trust that promise and that is why we ought to remain faithful. We do not have to be afraid, only to trust. Christ will return.

September 7<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 11 v1

*Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.*

I think this verse from Hebrews is quite well known as a definition of faith. Belief is not an inferior kind of knowledge. Faith isn't a matter of believing what is improbable. Faith is confidence in God. It is acting on the basis that you can trust God. It is living your life based on the absolute faithfulness of God. He won't let you down. It really is best to act according to His commandments even when the world suggests otherwise. His promises are sure. Prayer is answered.

September 8<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 11 vv 2&3

Most of this chapter will be taken up with a list of faithful people who have founded their lives on the faithfulness of God and not been disappointed, although in fact all those Old Testament saints did not experience the fulness of God's self revelation in Jesus Christ which is our privilege.

The author starts the chapter, however, by reminding us that it is through faith that we know that God created heaven and earth out of nothing. Wow! *What God hath wrought!* Now the point of prayer is that we are in communion with the God Who created and runs the universe. Prayer is always answered though not in the sense that we can succeed in persuading God to do what He would not otherwise have done. That would be absurd. Our love is imperfect and so is our understanding. God loves perfectly and understands fully. So, if we could change God's mind by our prayer requests, we would only be making things worse. What prayer does is to align our will to His Will, to ally our love with His Love and so we participate in His eternal plan for the salvation of all that is.

By all means naïvely pray for everything from the trivial (a parking space or a dry day for the barbecue) to the serious (a cure for someone who is dangerously ill or the right choice for a senior appointment in the Church or justice for the Church in Harare). I pray for all those things. But pray for them in the Spirit, the Spirit of cooperating with God's Will in faith that He always acts for the best.

It is also because God is the Creator of Heaven and earth that we can trust Him that it is always best to obey His commandments – even when they are counterintuitive: *Turn the other cheek; Bless those who revile you; Walk the second mile; Take up your cross.* When we obey God's commandments, we are simply following the Maker's instructions. When we substitute our human "wisdom" for the Word of God, we are simply courting disaster. We are working against the grain of the universe and, as every carpenter knows, when you chisel against the grain, you spoil the wood and chance cutting yourself.

September 9<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 11 v4

If we take Adam to stand as the representative of the whole human race, the Genesis story is that humanity rejects God's fatherhood. In consequence, we become fratricidal. Rejecting God's Law of love in our rebellion against Him, we turn against one another – other people made in His image. Like Adam, all human beings have a chance. Cain was careless in his approach to God and then resented the consequences. Abel was faithful to God and, in a way, became the first martyr. Because Abel had faith, he was a just man and his blood still cried out for justice after he had been murdered. Read the story in Genesis 4 if you want to see how Abel received justice, but justice for Cain was already tempered with God's mercy.

September 10<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 11 vv 5&6

*Enoch walked with God.*

We had a bit of a laugh at the children's service when I was talking about the importance of "walking with God". "What about a man with no legs?" asked one of the mothers. Walking with God, however, means keeping His commandments and living with Him in a faithful relationship of prayer. Before they were ever called *Christians* the followers of Jesus were called *the people of the way*. In fact Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

According to Genesis 5, Enoch walked with God in his life on earth and, therefore (I believe), in his translation to heaven – the Way, the Truth and the Life!

But Enoch only walked with God, because he had faith. He believed that God is (which is what many people mean by faith, simply believing in the existence of God) and that *he is the rewarder of them that diligently seek him* (which is much the stronger and more important meaning of faith. You can believe that God exists and behave as though the existence of God made no difference. Or you can believe that God exists and that He makes all the difference.



### September 11<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 11 v7

You notice how the epistle keeps on about *things not seen*. Sometimes he means *things not seen* like God or angels. Sometimes he means *things not seen* because they haven't happened yet like the Flood. Some people are only prepared to believe in what they can see and touch, but of course that rules out the most important things like love. Faith is very often believing in what you can't see, believing to the point of acting on your belief. All these people in this chapter believed in God and their stories establish that a life based on faith is not disappointed. Conversely, of course, a life without faith is pointless and doomed.

### September 12<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 11 vv 8&9

*Abraham believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness.*

Abraham is taken as the great example of faith in the New Testament. Because Abraham was justified by faith (rather than self-justified by obedience to the Law) we know that God deals with us in the same way. God does not love us because we are good. He just loves us. In order to experience the blessings of His love, what we have to do is not to earn His favour by our good works, but to put our faith in Him. So Abraham is the father not only of the Jews, but of all the faithful. Abraham had faith in God and he acted on his faith. He believed the promises of God and did extraordinary things.

### September 13<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 11 v10

I think there is more than a hint here that the reward of Abraham's faithfulness was more than a stake in Canaan. In fact Abraham only ever owned a cemetery in the Promised Land. Abraham's true inheritance (like ours) is what is unseen, the New Jerusalem, a city which hath real foundations, *whose builder and maker is God*.

### September 14<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 11 vv 11&12

The child of the promise is Isaac and his name means laughter. There was laughter in the good sense, rejoicing when Isaac was born. But Sarah also laughed scornfully at first when she was told she would have a child in her old age. True faith isn't unwavering certainty. It is remaining faithful through the doubts and uncertainties.

September 15<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 11 vv 13-16

*Strangers and pilgrims on earth.*

This is another favourite quotation from Hebrews. The Old Testament saints did receive many blessings during their lives on earth. They died in faith. But there is more to come, more which is beyond our human imagining - our eternal life in the presence and love of God. This is our goal as members of the New Testament community. It is also the true goal of the Old Testament saints.

Given, then, that we are *strangers and pilgrims on earth*, how ought we to live? What really matters in our lives – earthly things or heavenly?

September 16<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 11 vv 17-19

The Binding of Isaac is one of the most terrible stories in the Bible. God tells Abraham to sacrifice his son and Abraham is prepared to go ahead and do it. Appalling. But it is exactly what God does for us. He sacrifices His Son. God certainly shares the worst that can happen to us and therefore fully understands our deepest needs. Think about the faith of Abraham. Did he believe that God would raise Isaac from the dead? Or did he think there might have been another son or some other way of fulfilling the promise. Of course Isaac is a “type” of Christ in being bound and laid on the altar. He is also a “type” of Christ in being received back as from the dead.

September 17<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 11 vv 20-22

Once upon a time, children in this country (even in my lifetime) were taught all these bible stories – Jacob and Esau, Joseph, etc. Nowadays I am not so sure that they are. What with dumbing down and political correctness, the Bible isn't taught like it used to be taught in schools or homes or even in the Church. Yet what sense can people be expected to make of passages like this if they don't know the stories referred to? We have a responsibility to tell the story of our faith. Hebrews asserts that these are not just stories. They are not isolated incidents. They are part of what scholars call Salvation History. God's plan unfolds in the events chronicled in the Old Testament. These stories lead up to Jesus and the salvation of the whole human race. Isaac and Joseph may not have seen the big picture but they played their essential parts in faith.

September 18<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 11 v23

Were Moses' parents afraid of the king's commandment to destroy the boy babies? You might say that they were afraid of pharaoh in that they tried to hide the child. But if they had been truly afraid they would not even have risked hiding the baby Moses. They would have done as they were told and killed him.

So they were afraid, but not so afraid that they failed to act faithfully. No good person would kill any baby. The faithful don't murder children – even when an oppressive state orders them to do so. Herod's soldiers in Bethlehem at the first Epiphany? Decent Germans holding office under the Nazis? There have been far too many periods in human history when people have been ordered by ruthless, powerful men to do what conscience teaches is wrong. The penalty for refusing might well have been to suffer the same fate. Pray for those young boys in Africa today who are forced to join militias and brutalised into committing acts of brutality. Pray for decent people fearful of refusing to do wrong, but struggling to remain faithful.

Moses, of course, was a special child with a special roll in Salvation History. Faithful people had a special reason for protecting him – whether they knew it or not.

September 19<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 11 vv 24-27

Like his parents, Moses stood up for what was right even though he risked pharaoh's wrath. It would have been brave and foolhardy not to run away from Egypt, but, a true coward would never have stood up for the Israelite being beaten by an Egyptian anyway. Real faith is faith which remains faithful in the face of fear and doubt. Notice the stress on faith in *him who is invisible*. What Moses could see and touch was the temporal reality of Egyptian power. What Moses based his life on was the eternal reality of God.

*Esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt.*  
This is a mysterious phrase. I think it means that God the Son is always present with His people, sharing their striving and bringing victory through suffering.

September 20<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 11 vv 28&29

The Egyptians were the most powerful people around. They were wealthy. Their troops were well armed. They ran a tightly controlled society. The Hebrews were helpless slaves with very little going for them. Except that God heard their prayers and honoured His promise. What Moses needed in order to work out God's purpose was faith.

September 21<sup>st</sup> (St Matthew)

Hebrews 11 v30

Again Jericho must have looked impregnable. Perhaps the oldest city on earth, it stood behind its walls in the way of the Israelite advance into Canaan. How could this bunch of nomads take Jericho? Well, of course, it was God Who made it possible. What the Israelites needed was faith.

A thousand years later, Matthew was confronted with the choice. Did he stick to his unfulfilled but secure life, relying on his wealth and position as a tax collector, or did he leave behind everything the world considers worthwhile and follow Christ faithfully into an uncertain but spiritually rich future?

O Almighty God, who by thy blessed Son didst call Matthew from the receipt of custom to be an Apostle and Evangelist; Grant us grace to forsake all covetous desires, and inordinate love of riches, and to follow the same thy Son Jesus Christ, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. Amen.

September 22<sup>nd</sup>

Hebrews 11 v31

You wouldn't necessarily assume that a harlot would provide an example of faith. What Rahab did was to recognise what God was doing in bring His people into the Promised Land and she helped them against the City of Jericho which was her home. We ought not to be surprised, however. Jesus was a friend of harlots. There is room in God's Kingdom for everyone. "Sinners" sometimes show great love and compassion. The task of the Church is not to condemn (cf John 3 v17) but to bring everybody to Christ through Baptism in faith with repentance.

September 23<sup>rd</sup>

Hebrews 11 v32

Gideon accepted God's commission to become a commander only after doubting both himself and God. General Barak was afraid to lead the army without Deborah's support. Samson was strong physically, but weak and foolish when it came to the opposite sex. Jephthah was an illegitimate son who saved his weaker brothers but was seriously confused about religion. He did sacrifice his child. David was Israel's greatest king, but also an adulterer and a rotten father and political schemer. These were all deeply flawed human beings but, because they had faith, they were able to play important parts in Salvation History. Because they had faith God was able to use them, weak as they were. The lesson surely is obvious to us weak, flawed human beings!

September 24<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 11 vv 33-38

*Of whom the world was not worthy.*

Hebrews now gallops through the rest of the Old Testament (plus the odd extra-biblical legend) to show just how many examples there are of ordinary people achieving extraordinary things because they had faith. They did all these wonderful things in and for an unworthy world. So, by the grace of God, they each played their part in Salvation History. We are to draw our strength from their example and fellowship, because we are one with them in Christ.

They have come from tribulation,  
And have washed their robes in Blood,  
Washed them in the Blood of Jesus;  
Tried they were and firm they stood:  
Mocked, imprisoned, stoned, tormented,  
Sawn asunder, slain with sword,  
They have conquered death and Satan,  
By the might of Christ the Lord.

September 25<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 11 vv 39&40

Hebrews' readers would have been brought up on tales of these OT saints as examples of God's most faithful people. It is astounding, surely, that they have not attained the promise. The promise receives its consummation in Jesus. We have Jesus as they did not. One day, heaven and earth will pass away and He will return. Then they will share with us in the unimaginable life, love, joy and peace He brings.

September 26<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 12 vv 1-13

We are surrounded by witnesses, the saints of the Old and New Testaments. We have not only their examples but also their fellowship in Christ. The proper preface for saints' days in *Common Worship* puts it like this:

And now we give you thanks that your glory is revealed in all the saints. In their lives you have given us an example of faithfulness to Christ. In their holiness we find encouragement and hope. In our communion with them we share the unity of your kingdom.

Infinitely more important even than the saints, there is Jesus. We try to please Him because we love Him in response to His love for us. We have Him as our example. We have His Spirit dwelling in us and with us to enable us to fulfil our vocation as Christ's people. We are not promised that it will be easy or that God will solve all our problems for us. Taking the consequences of our actions matures us. Facing up to adversity strengthens our character. There is no reason to expect to be any more coddled than Christians in other parts of the world. Indeed we might wonder whether we belonged to the same family if we didn't share their hardships as well as their victories.

September 27<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 12 vv 14-29

This section is terrible in every sense of the word. We are called to a wonderfully high standard. In the OT God said *You shall be holy as I am holy*. In the Gospel Jesus said, *Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect*. Holiness is being separated for God, separated from the world and from every aspect of sin. If we are holy, we follow peace with all men. I take this to mean the people in the world around us as well as fellow members of the Church. But the Church has to be specially holy, harmonious and free from vice. We have to be very careful *lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled*. Think about it.

Holiness is requisite. It's not an option for Christians to be casually taken up or dropped. Esau was casual with what was precious and lost everything. The sealing of the Old Testament on Mount Sinai was an awe-inspiring theophany – a revelation of God with fire and blackness

and the sound of the trumpets. There were serious consequences for those who trifled with God, for those who were casual in their observance of His perfect Law of Love. We, however, have an infinitely more marvellous theophany. Our God is made manifest in Jesus' Death on the Cross. Abel's blood proclaimed Cain's sin. Christ's Blood declares our forgiveness. The miracle of the Church and her consummation in the heavenly Jerusalem is founded on the Cross. Given this we cannot conceivably be casual in our love for God, for the Church and for the world.

*For our God is a consuming fire.*

September 28<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 13 vv 1-8

What is the outworking of our love? We can say we love God and our fellow human beings, but what does it mean? Is love a feeling? I think it must be. I think we must feel that we love God, that we want to be with our fellow Christians, that we feel compassion for people in need. It isn't sufficient, however, to say that you love God or neighbour. Neither is feeling sufficient. If we truly love as Christ commanded us to love, that will be obvious in the way we behave. Our congregations will be characterised by their mutual love. We won't forget other Christians in other places, especially the persecuted. We'll be hospitable. (The reference is to Abraham in Genesis 18 when he entertained three travellers who turned out to be angels (messengers) of God and who, because they were three speaking as one, would later be seen as pointing to the mystery of the Trinity). Our personal and family lives will be virtuous. We won't be greedy for or anxious about material things because we'll trust God for our lives on earth. We'll support the leaders of our churches because their life is bound up with that of the eternal Christ, as indeed, the lives of all Christians ought to be. These are just some of the ways in which genuine Christian love will be manifested.

September 29<sup>th</sup> (Michaelmas)

Hebrews 13 vv 9-17

I'm inclined to interpret these verses in the light of the Eucharist. Christians don't need to worry about the ceremonial aspects of the OT Torah or its sacrificial system – the food laws, etc. They don't have to participate in the rituals of the Jerusalem Temple. They do not need to

attend synagogue. And they certainly ought not to take part in pagan worship.

Christ died outside all that. He fulfilled all the Law's demands and therefore they have no further need of fulfilment by us. The old order - Jewish and pagan alike - is passing away. We have an eternal city in Heaven. When we participate in the Eucharist: we have communion with Christ and with our fellow Christians (present in the same building, elsewhere on earth, and already in heaven); we proclaim His Death; we enjoy a foretaste of the heavenly banquet. The pastoral and missionary authority of the clergy and their role as a focus for Christian unity is inextricably bound up with the fact that they preside at the Eucharist. I've been dying to quote this hymn which I think really sums up the thinking of Hebrews.

Alleluia! King eternal,  
Thee the Lord of Lords we own,  
Alleluia! Born of Mary,  
Earth thy footstool, heaven thy throne:  
Thou within the veil hast entered,  
Robed in flesh, our great High Priest;  
Thou on earth both priest and Victim,  
In the Eucharistic feast.

O everlasting God, who hast ordained and constituted the services of Angels and men in a wonderful order; Mercifully grant, that, as thy holy Angels always do thee service in heaven, so by thy appointment they may succour and defend us on earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

### September 30<sup>th</sup>

Hebrews 13 vv 18-25

Again, we don't know who the author of Hebrews is, but these personal touches show that it is a genuine letter. The writer asks the prayers of the recipients. The Church is a fellowship of prayer and it is a wonderful thing to pray for one another. What follows the request for prayer is what has become the Easter Blessing. God blesses us. His ministers pronounce His Blessing. The whole Church pronounces His Blessing, proclaiming what He has done for the whole creation in the Life, Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. There's no point in reading this, if we don't allow it to transform our lives. Share Christian greetings. Share God's grace and let it change you and change the world!