**

Psalm 8
Hebrews 1.1-4, 2.5-12
7th October 2018**

## A little lower than the angels

*Gracious God – may your Living Word come to us afresh this morning – so touch, we pray our minds and hearts with your grace and truth – through Christ our Lord and in the power of your Spirit. Amen*

As a teenager I had a Saturday job at our local library. I was called an ‘assistant’ but, all I ever did was put the returned books back on the shelves. I got to know the Dewey Decimal system, that’s the little coding tags on the spines of library books, and from time to time I sneaked off into a corner and for ten minutes disappeared from view as I dipped into a few of my favourite writers. And as far as fiction was concerned everything was arranged by author.

Well, that’s where the New Testament book of Hebrews, probably incorrectly classified as a letter, comes a cropper. Origen, one of the Early Church Fathers, puts it this way: Only God knows who wrote Hebrews. It’s an anonymous New Testament book and it reads much more like a sermon than it ever does a letter – a sermon in full flow!

What we do know is that the church that read or listened to Hebrews being preached was a church under pressure. Like much of the debate in the first century they were conflicted about how much of the Jewish tradition from the past should be incorporated into their new way of being. They were also being hounded by the state.

I listened to a commentator at last week’s political conference describe his party as being permanently either in crisis or complacency. Well the Church being addressed in Hebrews is probably in permanent crisis. On the one hand it is having a crisis of belief about ‘who is Jesus’ and on the other it is having a physical crisis of persecution as people are actually suffering because of their faith.

Into this arena with so many questions and so much need our anonymous speaker preaches the sermon of their life!

In this respect this book, addressed to Hebrew Christians, begins by looking back. ‘Long ago’, says our writer. ‘Long ago, God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways through the prophets.’

I just love that famous quote from L.P.Hartley, ‘The past is a foreign country, they do things differently there…’

Yet so often it’s the past which explains the present. And the writer of Hebrews acknowledges that. ‘The story so far’ is important. The story of Abraham and Moses, Elijah and Isaiah. In the Jewish Scriptures those books of history are valued. Stories which form identity. Tales with a meaning. Narratives which teach a lesson.

And all of us have a past and it moulds us, fashioning the people we are today.

Yet maybe that foreign country we call The Past can take us captive and rob us of the freedom and adventure of living in the present.

To embrace today is not to deny or devalue yesterday.

So the writer of the Hebrews says, yes, the past was all about the story of the prophets, but – verse 2 – in these last days God has spoken through his Son.

Ah – so the spotlight shifts, and it has moved now to Jesus. And really for the rest of this book, or sermon, the light will rest there, on the Lord Jesus Christ.

In those far off days of the first century, before the rise of the cult of celebrity and X Factor, people instead pondered the nature of God and how God’s essence might be known. And the Greeks came up with the idea that God was perfect wisdom and that in some way he makes himself known through something called The Logos, his Word.

It was inevitably shrouded in a mystery that could hardly be recognised and a sort of poetry that could hardly be understood. Maybe we might have glimpsed God at the temple, through the oracles or during a sacrifice. Or maybe not. God would remain stoical and remote, otherworldly and out of reach.

But that’s not the God of the Hebrews preacher. What does this sermon say? In these last days God has spoken to us by his Son, who is the reflection of his glory and bears the exact imprint of his being.

Maybe that just passes us by this morning, but I think it amazed those first hearers. Decode it and it means God somehow showed us his true self in the life of Jesus Christ.

I really shouldn’t be mentioning it but it’s just 78 days till Christmas! And it’s at this forthcoming festival that we celebrate the wonderful truth of incarnation, that audacious idea that, in a way we might understand and appreciate, God came amongst us – or as Charles Wesley wrote in Hark the Herald Angels Sing: Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see, hail the incarnate deity.

It’s still one of the most important faith questions around: who is this Jesus?

That aspect of theology is called ‘Christology’ – the study of who Jesus is.

I once used the word Christology in a sermon when doing a guest preach at a little country chapel. Someone came up to me at the coffee time afterwards, and I think as a kindly rebuke said to me that in all her fifty years attending that church she’d never once heard the word Christology uttered from the pulpit before.

Well, I felt duly reprimanded for showing off but it’s a great word for Scrabble at least – however, I suspect she’d heard lots of sermons about Jesus. Lots of sermons about how when we value Jesus’ teaching we are following God’s way and as we value Jesus’ life of love we are discovering God’s nature.

The writer of the Hebrews is talking Christology when they preach: Jesus is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of his being.

It’s why we are called ‘Christians’.

Now in the second part of today’s lectionary reading from Hebrews in chapter 2 verse 6 the writer quotes from Psalm 8, our Old Testament Lesson read to us by Jo earlier.

What is Man that you are mindful of him, yet you made him a little lower than the angels…..

We might be familiar with this poetry and probably we’ve thought it is always quoted to describe us, the human race and the place we hold in the scheme of things and the rich responsibility God gives us as stewards of creation.

Yet here in Hebrews the commentators suggest a slightly different interpretation. In chapter two might it not be directing us to Jesus – the Son of Man. The one who, for a time, was made a little lower than the angels. The one born that starry night at Bethlehem. The one who was there at the beginning of creation now cradled in a manger, the baby who held Mary’s hand with the five little fingers of God.

Cesar Cruz, the Mexican poet and activist is credited with saying that: Art should comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable. And it’s often said that sermons should do the same.

So, what was the Disturbing part of the sermon in Hebrews we’ve been looking at this morning?

Well, that is surely the call to reorder the place occupied by the past in the theology of the early church. God, says the preacher, is a God who wants to reveal more and more about himself. He spoke through the prophets but now he speaks even more through the life and message of Jesus. So, change the spotlight and shift the focus.

And the comfort? Where is that in Hebrews 1 and 2?

Well, if Jesus is the challenge here he is also the comfort.

Hebrews paints for us a portrait of the suffering Jesus, the crucified Christ. Here’s verse 9 of chapter 2: but we see Jesus, made for a while a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honour because of the suffering of death.

Or how about verse 10: Jesus is the pioneer of our salvation – a salvation made through suffering.

This is the Jesus whose message of justice was rejected by the authorities, whose call to love the marginalised was thrown out by the powerful. This is the Jesus who didn’t win XFactor or make a fortune. This is the Jesus who walked the long road to Jerusalem, died upon a cross and in doing so lit a flame that has burned ever since.

So, you readers of Hebrews, a church that is being battered by theological debate and hounded by state persecution – you have it tough. Your discipleship isn’t easy. You are suffering – and in that take heart and draw comfort that the Pioneer of our Faith, Jesus, who also suffered and, through the Holy Spirit, he is with you now – even during your suffering he shares your pain and offers his strength, helping support your burdens.

Read like this, Hebrews is really a call to go on loving. To go on serving. To go on hoping and fighting for justice.

It’s a call not to give up. Even though loving makes us vulnerable. Even though loving calls for the long view. Even though loving is often about losing rather than gaining. Yet loving is the right way even if it’s the hardest way. Loving, says our Hebrews preacher this morning, is the Jesus way.

Our lives are probably very different from those who first heard these words and yet we too need to listen to words that disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed.

We too need to value the central place of Jesus in our faith and constantly recommit ourselves to his way of love – drawing strength from not only his words but his life, as we make our own pilgrimage through the days that lay ahead.

May it be so, in the name of The Father, Son and Spirit. Amen.

 *Ian Green, Amersham, 4th October 2018*