

Sermon for 17th November 2024 – Year B – 2 Before Advent

Preached at St John's Baillieston

Daniel 12:1-3; Hebrews 10:11-25; Mark 13:1-8

Sermon

The Epistle to the Hebrews is, in my opinion, one of the most complicated theological books in the bible, and not one to be dived into lightly. It's even more difficult to understand than St Paul's long letters to the Romans and Corinthians, which is certainly saying something.

Originally, Christians assumed the letter was indeed written by Paul, for who else could go into that much intricate detail about how Christ had made a perfect once-for-all-time sacrifice for everyone's sins and had become a great high priest forever, thus entirely replacing the old temple sacrificial system.

But scholars eventually decided that the Greek used in the letter was much finer quality than the rather rough Greek of the other letters attributed to Paul, and so they suggested it might have been written by one of Paul's well-educated students – still very much influenced by his theological ideas, but perhaps written by someone who thought they could do a better job of explaining it!

The letter to the Hebrews seems to have been written to a group of Jewish Christians – the eponymous Hebrews – who are possibly considering leaving the faith to return to the Jewish synagogue, perhaps to avoid persecution, or simply because things were not turning out the way they expected!

The writer is facing a perennial pastoral problem – his congregation is apparently giving up and leaving, perhaps tired and discouraged by trying to live the Christian life in a culture that fails to recognise its value, and in a world where evil and

cruelty, sickness and suffering seems to persist despite all the promises that these things would all flee away in the light of God's presence among us.

As a result, this early congregation, within a couple of decades of Jesus's death, have already started to question the value of being followers of Jesus. We read in verse 25 that some of them had stopped coming to church, and others had lost their passion for good deeds or showing love to one another, perhaps feeling that it was all just too hard and pointless; Maybe they felt that Jesus's life, death and resurrection had not really changed anything in the real world, so that it might be safer to return to the religious practices of the Jewish Law and await a more obviously king-like Messiah.

And so, the author of Hebrews wants to reassure his readers of the importance of what Jesus has done, and to ask them to keep trusting that the victory over evil has indeed been won, even if it is taking longer than they – and we – might have hoped to see it play out in the world.

The change that Jesus has brought, he argues, is that his sacrifice as the Son of God uniquely took away sins for all time, rather than being like a sticking plaster that keeps coming off in the shower and needs to be reapplied. And the way this works is that rather than having a whole bunch of religious rules to follow every day (which we would constantly fail at), believing and following Jesus results in our hearts and minds being transformed towards goodness and holiness, not all at once perhaps, but steadily and gradually over time. The more time we spend paying attention to God, the more we perceive his love, and the more we discover God's kingdom is already around and within us. Following Jesus should become effortless, simply because that's who we are.

The writer, then, is trying to argue that what Jesus has done is to change us on the inside, not immediately fix the outside world. The kingdom of God isn't going to be zapped into existence, but will grow organically from the changes in our own hearts and minds. And importantly, this growth is magnified enormously

when we come together as a community. For sure, God's love will transform the heart of any human being who encounters it, but community is the rich soil in which that love can most effectively flourish and grow.

This understanding of what Jesus has done, and is continuing to do, is as important now as it was in every century that has passed. More than ever, we seem to be faced with a world in which humans keep finding new ways to be cruel and selfish to one another. It's very natural for us to wonder why, if Jesus has already conquered death and evil, the world is still so full of banal cruelty, suffering, greed, oppression and war.

Some theologians point to verses 12 and 13 for an insight into why we're still waiting for humanity to get its act together and be the sort of people God gave us the potential to be. "When Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, 'he sat down at the right hand of God,' and since then has been waiting 'until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet.'" In other words, even though Jesus's death on the Cross was effective as a once-for-all sacrifice for human sin, it will still take time for all the enemies of love to be defeated. How much time, we aren't told.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus's senior disciples, Peter, James, John and Andrew also want to know when all these things are going to be accomplished, but Jesus has no answer for them either. He predicts wars and rumours of wars, nations rising up against nation and kingdom against kingdom, earthquakes and famines, and many false messiahs who promise much but only lead many people astray. And this, says Jesus, is only the beginning of the birth pangs.

So, God has never really given us an expectation that Jesus's death and resurrection two thousand years ago would result in the sudden and immediate end of evil. There's never been a timescale for that. Instead, we're invited to live our lives, in whatever context we find ourselves, with a true heart in full assurance of faith, our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience, holding

fast to our hope without wavering, and encouraging one another in community to love and good deeds.

My belief is that this is how things ultimately change towards goodness, mercy and justice – not by waiting for God to zap the evildoers from on high, but by that goodness, mercy and justice emerging among us, in our wee community, and within our own transformed, forgiven hearts.