

Draw Near to God in Faith, Hope and Love.

Heb 10:11-25 (NRSV)

11 And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. **12** But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, "he sat down at the right hand of God," **13** and since then has been waiting "until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet." **14** For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. **15** And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us, for after saying, **16** "This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds," **17** he also adds, "I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more." **18** Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin. **19** Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, **20** by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), **21** and since we have a great priest over the house of God, **22** let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. **23** Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. **24** And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, **25** not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

SERMON

The child's question: "Why did Jesus have to die?" is one that sends a shudder of fear to any parent, grandparent, or Sunday school teacher! What we say in reply reveals something about how *we* view the character of God. There are many different responses to this question, which we don't have time to explore today. But, one that I find to be particularly meaningful is summarized by Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall. He writes: "The Theology of the Cross is a statement *about* God, and what it says about God is *not* that God thinks humankind so wretched that it deserves death and hell, but that God thinks humankind and the whole creation so good, so beautiful, so precious in its intention and potentiality that its actualization, its fulfilment, its redemption is worth dying for."¹ That's a powerful and beautiful statement!

The New Testament writers were also trying to answer the same question to 1st century Jews and non-Jews using language and images that were culturally familiar. They all knew, of course, that ultimately it was the Romans who crucified Jesus. His radical teachings were perceived to be a threat to the religious and political stability of the region. But the bodily *resurrection* of Jesus demanded an explanation as to the added significance of his death. Some writers portray Jesus as paying the ransom price to liberate a slave in the marketplace. In contrast to that secular image, the author of Hebrews gives an explanation using religious symbolism.

¹ D. J. Hall, *The Cross in Our Context*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 24 (emphasis mine).

Today's passage may seem a little strange to our modern ears. It speaks of Jewish priestly ritual involving animal sacrifice that we simply cannot comprehend today. Perhaps, a connection can be made with this last Wednesday's Remembrance Day. As one songwriter put it: "freedom is never cheap just because it is free." We are aware of the soldiers who were wounded or died in two world wars, and in other conflicts over the last century. We reflect on the continuing impact that this makes on many families: widows, widowers, children with no parent, families and caregivers carrying the load of those with chronic health needs, both mental and physical, as a result of war. We wish it was different, we wish peacekeepers were not necessary, we wish war would cease and that violence would be no more. And we speak of those who have died as paying the *ultimate sacrifice* for our freedom. This echoes John 15:13—"Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." And perhaps *this* use of the word "sacrifice" is one to which we can more easily relate rather than the priestly sacrificial system that somehow brings about forgiveness and direct access to God.

With this in mind, let's briefly explore today's passage because it *is* a powerful message of hope and encouragement. The book of Hebrews is more like a sermon than a letter. We don't know who wrote it or to which Jewish Christian community it was addressed. But we do know that they were suffering under external pressure and some members were imprisoned. Many were discouraged, or doubted, and lacked hope. Some were no longer attending communal worship. One reason they were discouraged was because Christ had not yet returned, as promised. In a way, the cultural climate to which this sermon to the Hebrews was written is not so dissimilar from our own. Church attendance is waning, life can be hard, and after 2000 years Jesus has still not returned.

The writer responds to the situation with a lengthy and carefully argued rationale of who Jesus *is* and what his life, death, and resurrection *have* achieved. He also presents Jesus as more *human* than many other writers in the New Testament, and as one who *shares* in our sufferings. The passage we read today concludes the writer's central section (8:1-10:18) on the theme of Christ as both the final sacrifice and as our ultimate High Priest. It is a *summary* of points the author has already made. It then transitions to a new section which is *our* response to all that Jesus has done.

Now, because it is written to Jewish Christians, the writer uses language and imagery of which *they* are very familiar—even if it sounds very foreign to us. In Heb 9:22 is the well-known Jewish phrase "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin." In other words: no cost or sacrifice, then no forgiveness. And so day-after-day the priest had a tedious routine of preparing and offering sacrifices that, by their very repetition, were ultimately ineffective. The *High Priest* is the one who on the Annual Day of Atonement enters through the curtain into the Holy of Holies within the Temple—into the very presence of God—to offer sacrifice on behalf of all the people. The author of Hebrews then says Jesus is both the great High priest and the scapegoat; the unblemished offering that Jesus makes *is himself*. This is the *final* sacrifice—no more sacrifices are necessary and the curtain is torn in two. Priests as unique mediators before God are therefore *no longer needed*, says the author of Hebrews. Where there is forgiveness there is no longer any need for sacrifice—which makes any

minister's job *so* much easier! The writer then reminds the reader: "*We are being* made holy", with the emphasis being on a *continuing process* of a finished work.

Presumably, the original audience found this message enormously comforting. And we should also be reassured by this message today—especially if we are plagued with doubt and perpetual guilt. When we, as Christians, look for assurance that we have been truly forgiven, we don't look—or we shouldn't look—at anything *we* do, or anything that the *church* does, at anything that the Christian ministers, clergy, priests, or whoever, *do*. Rather we look back to the event outside Jerusalem on that dark Good Friday afternoon and thank God for what was accomplished fully and finally on our behalf. This is important because Holy Communion is not a re-enacting of that sacrifice. When we have Holy Communion we are claiming, and announcing, that *that* a single, unrepeatable event has taken place and a new covenant has been made.

That's why the writer emphasizes Jeremiah 31 and proclaims with confidence that the Holy Spirit also affirms this truth to us: "This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds, I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more." Jeremiah's message is not a call to reform, to *return* to the old ways given to Moses at Mount Sinai, but to accept the new covenantal relationship with an ever-faithful God, a relationship that is God-centered, intimate, and with forgiveness that frees us to move forward.

Under the new covenant, *all* children can enter the holy of holies—not just the high priest. And so Jesus the final high priest has made a "new and living way" into the very presence of God, and *invites us to come with him*. Jesus is that *living* way and we are pilgrims or "people of the way". Through the waters of baptism we rise with the resurrected Christ to a new freedom that enables us to move on in our lives, empowered by the Spirit.

Too often Christians still live in bondage, not really believing in the heart of hearts that they are truly forgiven, that God genuinely loves *them*, and that he has completely forgotten their past. They don't feel in their core being the liberation Jesus wants them—and died for them—to experience; to have life in all its fullness. If that is you today, hear the words of affirmation of the forgiveness of sins once again. "I tell you by the authority of Jesus the Messiah, you are forgiven."

That being the case, what is the appropriate response? The author says, "because of what Jesus has done, *let us draw near to God in worship*." In the Jewish system everyone was continually reminded "you are not good enough, you have to keep *away*—only the High priest can approach God." Now it is the opposite, we are all encouraged to draw near in to the very presence of God. So how do we get ready for authentic worship?

First, we come with a true and sincere heart, and with complete assurance of *faith*; free from all that is passed. We come reassured of God's acceptance.

Second, we come, as a community, as brothers and sisters who are reaching out to each other—we are a family. We come as a community who *love* and encourage each other, stirring one another up to the hard work of Christian living. We come to God when we worship with our deeds of compassion and mercy. All that we do is our worship—it’s our response to what God has graciously provided for us.

Third, we come confessing our steadfast *hope* that Christ *will* indeed return and put *all* wrongs to right. We come with expectant hearts, eagerly awaiting the completion of God’s work. Worship is, in fact, the participation in the ‘here and now’, and is a foretaste, of the final victory of God. Often we wonder if this really is the case after a church service that seems so boring! But that is what sincere worship meant to be. “The time is coming,” said Paul, “when every knee should bow in heaven and on Earth, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:10-11). For now, the knees that are bending and of the tongues that are confessing are our own. Let our worship therefore be *joyful*, keeping one eye on that great day that is approaching.

In conclusion: no longer live in bondage or fear, rather draw near to God in faith, hope and love, and celebrate Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. Amen.