

29th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Fr Peter Groves

Hebrews 4

Mark 10

“Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.”

Hebrews 4.14

The text we call the Letter to the Hebrews is something of an oddity in the New Testament. To begin with, we don't know who wrote it. It's not that we doubt its authorship as we do with some texts - Hebrews doesn't even make a claim to an author, it just begins seemingly without introduction, *In many and various ways God spoke to our forebears of old through the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us through a Son.* There is no preamble at all, and certainly no ancient form of 'Dear church in Corinth' such as we find in Paul. We also don't know to whom it was written. It's called Hebrews, but who are they? All the world's Jews? How could one write a letter to them? In fact, the name

Hebrews was probably given to the text in the second century because its subject matter is so much concerned with the classical theology of the Hebrew Bible.

We call Hebrews a letter, but it is actually the most important example of early Christian homiletics. In other words, it is a sermon, a devotional argument intended to teach its hearers and readers the truth about Jesus Christ. And from the beginning it is clear that this truth about Jesus Christ is also the truth about God. In contrast with angels and other heavenly beings, Jesus is the Son in whom God has now spoken his decisive word, and through whom he has brought to completion the old system of temple sacrifice and united all people to himself by the sacrifice of Christ, the great high priest.

Essential to a Biblical understanding of sacrifice is the concept of “offering”. In ancient Judaism this idea was played out in many different ways: in cereal and grain

offerings for the harvest, for example, but also in the offering of the first born which we see enacted in Jesus' presentation in the temple. Sacrifice is about creation, about dependence, about who God is. And sacrifice is also about doing right and wrong: doing right by God but also, coping with doing wrong in sin and guilt offerings. In these sacrifices the Israelites present to God the most valuable gift of all, the gift of life, to demonstrate their trust in the divine mercy which will overlook their sins, will pass over their transgressions, so they may continue in his steadfast love.

Principal among the sacrificial offerings made under the old covenant was that on the Day of Atonement, the one day of the year in which the Holy of Holies – the place where the Lord himself was held to dwell – could be entered, and entered only by one person, the High Priest. The culmination of sacrificial offering is, according to Hebrews, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, whereby the new and greater high priest –

Christ himself – has entered once for all into the sanctuary and made the one offering, single and complete, which fulfils the goal of the entire sacrificial system. Jesus, the great high priest, has passed into the heavens, he has entered the celestial holy of holies - not the physical space of the temple, but the eternal presence of the divine. At last humanity – united in Christ with the life of God himself – is enabled to offer itself in perfect love, for it is the perfect love of the Son of God which is being given, offered or sacrificed.

The sons of Zebedee, in our gospel reading, have failed to notice that this is the purpose of Jesus' ministry in Mark's gospel. James and John ask to sit, one at the right and one at the left when Christ comes into his glory. Little do they realise that his glorious throne will be an instrument of death, and his coronation will be a crucifixion. Those at the right and the left hand sides are the two criminals executed with him. The ambition of the apostles is utterly misplaced. As if to hammer

home the point, Mark concludes that little story with a well known saying of Jesus: the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

That giving, that sacrifice, is what we celebrate in the holy sacrifice of the mass, not recreating the offering of Christ to the Father, as if we were turning on a tap at will, but being drawn into, participating in, that perfect offering as Christ unites us to himself. Offering remains the key. What it means for Christ to be a priest is for him to offer himself to the Father. What it means for the Son of God to be divine is to be perfectly given or offered to the Father in love, in the eternal communion which we call the Holy Trinity. If we want to be godly, if we want to be Christ like, we will be sacrificial, we will offer ourselves, we will give.

We tend to assume that sacrifice is about taking on hardship, giving things up for the sake of self denial.

But of course the root of the English word sacrifice is rather different: it doesn't mean give up, but make holy. A sacrificial life is one which is lived in imitation of Christ, the one who sets us apart, makes us holy, by uniting our lives to his in baptism. Our response, our discipleship, is not to sit still but to follow, to be doers and not just hearers, to be those who give more than those who have.

And our giving has to be practical. The awful English embarrassment in talking about money is something I suffer from just as much as any of you, but we all know that it is our responsibility to support the life and the ministry of the church by sacrificial giving. Not giving to punish ourselves, but giving – of talents, time and resources – to make holy, to offer the gifts of God for the work of God in his world and for his people. If you have never made a gift day donation before, this week presents the opportunity. If you haven't signed up for regular planned giving, we'd like you to do so. It costs

about four hundred pounds a day for this church simply to stand still in its mission and ministry. We have no independent wealth, we have no historic endowment. And so, every so often we need to be just a bit less embarrassed and English. Every so often we need to ask our reserved English selves a vulgar question: how much might we reasonably give? And knowing our tendencies to be English, when we have the answer we should double that amount. If you are a student, you might be able to afford ten pounds rather than five. If you are a stockbroker you might be able to give ten thousand rather than five thousand. We have rather more students than stockbrokers, but I wouldn't have it any other way.

Offering is essential to Christian life. What it means to imitate Christ is to give ourselves in love to God and his purposes, to love our neighbour as ourselves and to work – in all sorts of ways, some energetic and some less so – to work for his kingdom in the world. The church is

an instrument of that kingdom, the body of Christ on earth. If it is to grow in obedience to Our Lord's command, it needs to overflow with his generous love. Because the love of God is given to everybody. Even to English people.