

Introduction to the theme Hebrews 4 :15-16

¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to feel sympathy for our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin. ¹⁶ Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Last week we looked at entering God's rest... a place where all of us should find ourselves. Disobedience resulted in not being able to see the outworking of God's promises... Only Joshua and Caleb survived to enter the promised land. Everyone else didn't. Even Moses was not allowed to enter because of past disobedience. Today those who are deaf and do not hear the Word of God set their faces against God and refuse to see the glory of His creation, refuse to see His desire to communicate with mankind, refuse to see that God sent Jesus to show us the way, the truth and the life, refuse to see that a price was paid by Jesus to enable our sins to be forgiven. They walk in darkness because they have **either** not heard the Word of God **or** having heard it, have refused to accept its Truth. What is our role in spreading the Word of God? Surely, like Paul, as disciples of the Lord Jesus, we are here to open the eyes of all mankind and to turn everyone from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in Jesus. To do that, we need to be filled with the Holy Spirit and fed by the Word of God. God's desire is that none should perish, but everyone come to repentance. The Word of God is a two edged sword able to penetrate deeply into the heart and soul of everyone. Nothing is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account. That could be scary and remains scary for everyone who is confronted by this truth.

There have been great changes in the beliefs of the people of Britain. The evangelisation by the Celtic and Catholic saints in the sixth and seventh centuries converting all from paganism to faith in Jesus was a result of the power of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God changing hearts. Later in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there was a movement of men and women seeking a true close relationship with Jesus without the centuries of traditions that had led people astray – they were mocked by being called Puritans and non-conformists. Conformity with the traditions of the established church made rituals more important than submission to Jesus. Later Whitfield and Wesley preached in the eighteenth century the need to repent and avoid perishing. The Holy Spirit inspired their preaching and the people received the Good News with thanksgiving and faith in Jesus. The faith of so many Britons in Jesus and the understanding that all our future is to enter God's rest was a strength that historians rarely reveal. Faith in Godless materialism led to the humanist revolutions of parts of Europe, which brought death and misery to millions. Today materialist humanism is almost the default belief system of many, while other false religions have established footholds in our land. However, looking back in history, God always wins in the end, even when the people harden their hearts and refuse to hear his voice. We need to remain resolute and not be swayed by those without faith who seek to change our thinking on matters that they do not agree with. Satan always disagrees with God's thinking and questions the Word of God by asking "did God really say that?" We should be under no illusion that however well meaning those who have no faith in Jesus appear to be, they are not led by God and instead rely on their own ideas of what is right and wrong, influenced, knowingly or unknowingly, by the prince of this world wanting to lead everyone away from God. The young are especially vulnerable to ideas that are based on ideas that are opposed to God's ways. Jesus himself tells Paul - "to turn everyone from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God" The prince of this world is in control of this world, make no mistake about that, otherwise could he have offered it to Jesus, if only Jesus worshipped him? Jesus knows we are tempted by all the world offers us... Romans 1 : 20:21 ²⁰ For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.²¹ For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. **No one has any excuse, but only Holy Spirit convicts sinners who repent.**

¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to feel sympathy for our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin. ¹⁶ Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Hebrews 4: 14 – 5: 10 – Sunday 14th July St Andrew's – PH

4 ¹⁴ Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to feel sympathy for our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin. ¹⁶ Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

5 Every high priest is selected from among the people and is appointed to represent the people in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. ² He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness. ³ This is why he has to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of the people. ⁴ And no one takes this honour on himself, but he receives it when called by God, just as Aaron was. ⁵ In the same way, Christ did not take on himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him, 'You are my Son; today I have become your Father.' ⁶ And he says in another place, 'You are a priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek.' ⁷ During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. ⁸ Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered ⁹ and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him ¹⁰ and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek.

Last week we looked at rest and the Word of God – sharper than a two edged sword. Spurgeon wrote "A sword with two edges has no blunt side: it cuts both this way and that. The revelation of God given us in Holy Scripture is edge all over. It is alive in every part, and in every part keen to cut the conscience, and wound the heart. Depend upon it, there is not a superfluous verse in the Bible, nor a chapter which is useless. While it has an edge like a sword, it has also a point like a rapier, 'Piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit.' The difficulty with some men's hearts is to get at them. In fact, there is no spiritually penetrating the heart of any natural man except by this piercing instrument, the Word of God. But the rapier of revelation will go through anything."

This week we're looking at the role of Jesus as our great high priest. Given that there is no superfluous verse or chapter in the Bible, how is its rapier sharpness penetrating our hearts and biting into our consciences?

What revelation is there for us today? How does this passage speak to us today? How will it change the way we relate to Jesus? Think about these questions as they'll be repeated at the end.

Because the writer to the Hebrews is writing to Jews, you'd think that he's telling them stuff they already know about the high priest. The high priest in Jerusalem was supposed to be a descendant of Aaron, and often a descendant of Zadok the priest, who was high priest in the days of David and Solomon. Between AD 50 and 65, when this letter is written, the high priests were Ananias ben Nebedeus 46-52, Jonathan ben Ananus 52-56, Ishmael ben Fabus 56-62 (though Ananias was back from exile in AD 56 and is the high priest mentioned in Acts seeking the death of Paul). They were Sadducees, Levites but not descendants of Zadok, the just and righteous one. Sadducees didn't believe in angels, the afterlife nor the immortality of the soul... for them there would be no judgment nor any wrath of God after death. They only believed the Torah and ignored the rest of the Scriptures. Consequently they were only interested in the present and given that they carried out the sacrifices to satisfy the payment due for sinfulness, it would be for those alive not to suffer the wrath of God. Their morality was fluid as they sought power, riches and influence in Israel. They often cosied up with the Roman occupiers. As examples of what the high priest should be, we have to accept that they went through all the formalities... the form required under Law wearing the correct clothing, officiating at the ceremonies, having the correct ancestry and obeying what was decided was the letter of the Law. They did this without demonstrating much love for the people or understanding of the need for a true relationship with God. Nevertheless, none died going into the holy of holies once a year, despite being guilty of plenty of sinful behaviour – greed, envy, deception, pride, and duplicity. This begs the question as to whether the Ark of Covenant was still in the Temple or whether its power was lost when the curtain was torn in two on the death

and resurrection of Jesus. Josephus is pretty dismissive about them seeing them as political appointees by Herodian kings and operating as secular rulers in cahoots with the Romans and the kings. *Every high priest is selected from among the people and is appointed to represent the people in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.* That is what they were supposed to do but didn't do.

This is why this letter explains what the high priest should be as to what the readers or listeners knew them to be in real life. What does this say to us today? Do our church leaders all over the world match up to what the Bible says they should be like? The news will always point out the failings of some tele-evangelist or mega church leader, but what goes on behind the scenes and never comes to light is probably far worse, *(though nothing can probably match the Alexander III's papal orgy at the feast of chestnuts in 1501 where his alleged nephew Cesar Borgia shipped in 50 "honest naked prostitutes" for the cardinals', bishops', monks' and noblemen's all night activities who were then given prizes by the Pope for effort.)* The good faithful leaders who have led many to Christ, have healed the sick and encouraged their flocks don't hit the headlines. The church leaders as well as believers who stand up for Jesus will suffer – low on scale is ridicule and mockery, higher up the scale – loss of employment, loss of family, and even imprisonment and death. We have to acknowledge that leadership is a calling from God which comes with a list of qualifications that no written exam will be able to test. We need to go back to the Word of God to see the qualifications and then see whether the characters of church leaders match up. Do they, like Jesus, feel sympathy for our weaknesses yet are tempted and do not sin. We are all human and we all sin but we have the help of Holy Spirit to resist temptation. Why else would it be written that *"we do have a high priest (in Jesus) who is able to feel sympathy for our weaknesses, and who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin?"* This is what the high priests were supposed to be like, yet in the first century they weren't like this at all... they were arrogant self serving and downright dishonest and often unsympathetic towards the people they were supposed to intercede for. Their role was intercession to expiate sin, yet instead they sought to rule over the people and exploit them with the Temple taxes, money changing (no coin with a human image, like one with Caesar's head on it, was allowed to pay the Temple tax) and sale of sacrificial animals. They operated on a divide and rule principle – sometimes siding with the people, sometimes with the Herodian kings, sometimes with the Romans, wherever it seemed advantageous to them and their families. A band of robbers murdered the high priest Jonathan in the Temple in AD56 at the instigation of the Roman governor Felix who was thoroughly annoyed with him for his duplicity stirring up trouble.

¹⁶ *Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*

Today we have Jesus who took on the sins of all mankind on the cross and is able to intercede with the Father on our behalf. We can always depend on Jesus. Faith in Jesus is essential to enable us to go through whatever the world throws at us. We know what Jesus is like because of the Gospels. His character is what the character of a high priest should be. *He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray. He is able to feel sympathy for our weaknesses, because he has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin.*

So besides the history lesson what does this passage reveal to us today? It reveals that Scripture is God breathed so that we may understand what Jesus is like and what he has gone through. Jesus was fully human yet behaved as God on earth would behave with men and women who he knows are fallen, often ignorant, who go astray and need to be gently taught the truth, the way and the life. Adam and Eve walked with God in the garden and Enoch walked with God. We don't know what they talked about, but they were free of sin and all the worldly selfish concerns we have. The same relationship the angels and departed saints in heaven have with God. Jesus demonstrated in his life what a high priest should be like. Verse 7 *"..he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. ⁸ Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered"*. Jesus is an example to us all to be obedient to all that God commands.

Jesus became the source of eternal salvation for mankind because he is perfect. We know we're never going to be perfect.

What will we do in response? Is our aim in life to become more Christlike, so that we reflect Jesus to the world? Is that too high an aim? In our fallen state we will always fall short. Trying on our own to haul ourselves up by our bootstraps isn't going to work. So how can we change the way our natures, our characters which have been shaped by our parentage and the world around us so that we become more Christ like? You all know the answer I'm sure. Through the working of the Holy Spirit in us. We've had Dunamis teaching on the two states of the Holy Spirit inside the Christian believer's mind. The first state is that He dwells in us, and that gives us assurance of salvation and the love of Christ. That can be helpful in our worship, praise and prayer. The fruit of the Spirit enables us to behave with *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control*. The second state is when Holy Spirit operates through us in gifts which have power to change lives – *Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. ⁸To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, ⁹to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, ¹⁰to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.* Later it says "*Now eagerly desire the greater gifts*".

Is that where we are going? Are we eagerly desiring any of these gifts or are we content with where we are? Do we desire to see healing that will change lives? Do we desire to receive knowledge that will change lives? Do we desire to see miracles? Paul writes to the Corinthians with the expectation that these gifts will be distributed among the believers. Sadly because this is not apparent in many fellowships, so much so that some have assumed that these words were for just the Corinthians in the first century and not for today. But how can the Word of God be the rapier of revelation if what it reveals is not relevant to the present and future rather than just the past? The Bible isn't merely a history book of the chosen people and their interaction with the Creator: it's an instruction manual for the chosen people of God. We know that all the gifts of the Holy Spirit are happening somewhere on earth to the glory of God, and it can happen here if we earnestly desire these gifts.

Before you think I've forgotten to mention Melchizidek, that is for Jonathan to speak to you about in a fortnight.

What revelation is there for us today? – What is new for you out of this passage? How many times have you read before and asked yourself this question? I looked for more background material on the priesthood. In Littlebourne we went through the whole book of Mark and the book of Acts over the past couple of years. The high priests mentioned are portrayed with honesty by Mark and Luke as men who sought to appear Godly but had hardened hearts that wouldn't listen to God's voice spoken to them by Jesus and the apostles including Paul who knew them personally. As we look at the state of Christianity today, what has changed? The light is being overshadowed by darkness and we must keep our lights burning by standing up for Jesus.

How does this passage speak to us today? - Jesus assures us that he understands all we are going through, and some of us are suffering more than others. He assures us that he was tempted just like we are tempted and yet resisted temptation. When filled with the Holy Spirit, it is so much easier to resist temptation because "what would Jesus do?" is in our consciousness, in our mind, in our thoughts.

How will it change the way we relate to Jesus? - In the coming weeks, let's focus on God's Word inspired by Holy Spirit and earnestly ask Holy Spirit to fill us afresh and to anoint us with what we as weak vessels are able to cope with so that what we do is done to His glory. Do we see ourselves as we worship here, as the bride of Christ? Is our fellowship the light in the world and part of the kingdom of God on earth? Glory be to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Come Holy Spirit, we welcome you in this place.