

Sunday 22nd September – Hebrews 8:1-13 ‘God’s great new promise’

Once upon a time, in a land far, far away, there lived an old priest. A devout old priest, much loved by the people, and also by his fellow priests, who had chosen him to be High Priest that year. Today was a very special day for this priest, because it was the Day of Atonement, the most important day of worship in the Jewish year – and, as high priest for this year, this would be his *one* opportunity to make the ultimate sacrifice, the blood that cleansed the whole people from their sin.

The day was bright and warm, and began with Shacharit, morning prayer, as usual. The priest then made his way to the temple – he could sense the awe of the crowds. It was all about to happen; but first, the right attire. He had practised everything, but now it was time to do it for real. It began with ritual washing – bathing himself fully. Then putting on the linen undergarments, the special linen tunic, tied with a linen sash. Then the robe, the ephod, and the breastpiece, with the Urim and Thummim, the ancient sacred objects, placed in it. Finally, the linen turban with the gold plate, the sacred emblem on its front.

Now he was ready! Next the anointing oil – on the altar seven times, on the utensils and the basin stand. Once everything was clean and prepared, then came the sacrifices. First, a bull for himself and his family. A priest cannot sacrifice for others unless he himself is clean. The blood of this bull, along with burning coals and two handfuls of fragrance, then need to be carried by him behind the curtain into the awesome Holy of Holies. So, one last thing to remember – attach the sash around his waist to a piece of strong twine so if he is overwhelmed by the presence of the Lord, or even dies, the other priests can pull him out and not die by entering the Most Holy Place.

So, he takes the coals and the incense, trusting that the smoke will conceal the atonement cover above the tablets of the covenant law. He sprinkles the blood of the bull on the front of the atonement cover with his finger, then seven more times before the atonement cover.

Now that he and his family is purified from their sin, he does the same with a goat, to atone for the sins of the whole people. Once he has completed the ritual in the Holy of Holies, and assuming he lives to tell the tale, then he does it again publicly at the altar, sprinkling it with the goat’s blood seven times.

The priest pauses for a moment and contemplates the enormity of what lies before him. He has replayed it in his mind hundreds of times – but he knows that his work is still not done. For there is a second goat, who must not die – and now he must lay his hands on the head of the live goat and confess the sins of the people. All their sins, he must leave nothing out, all the ways they have let God down and failed to live as the Lord longs for them to live. And then he gives the goat to a specially appointed person who will take that goat and drive it into the wilderness. The symbolism is simple, but immensely humbling and powerful – the Lord has laid on the goat the wickedness of them all – and now, as a sign of their forgiveness and the people’s repentance, it is to go as far from them as possible, ‘as far as the east is from the west, so far has the Lord removed our transgressions from us.’ The old priest remembers a line from his favourite Psalm, and whispers a quiet hallelujah.

When all this is completed, he will remove the clothing, wash himself again, put his normal priestly vestments back on, and now burn the meat of the dead animals on the public altar, in view of the crowds – one more sacrifice to make atonement for himself and for the people. What a day lies ahead! He wonders, as many must have done before him, whether today they will see what Aaron, the first priest and brother of Moses, saw – the glory of the Lord appearing to the people, fire coming out from the presence of the Lord and consuming the burnt offering...

Oh, to have seen that day, when the whole people of God shouted for joy and fell face down! But to do his job well would be enough. After all, they had celebrated this sacred festival for hundreds of years, and next year someone else would have the privilege of making the sacrifices for the Day of Atonement. Year after year, bull by bull, goat by goat. An eternal ritual, a sign of their covenant relationship with their Lord. So far has he removed our transgressions from us....

That, my friends, is what it took for God's people to be cleansed from their sin. It's not the only ritual or sacrifice, either – the book of Leviticus is full of thank offerings and wave offerings, sin offerings and guilt offerings. Particular rituals for particular seasons or situations. They are the signs of the covenant that God made with Moses, the accompaniment to the law that He gave them.

I wonder what you thought as you listened to that today? I know what I thought – thank you for Jesus! Thank you for grace! Thank you for your new covenant, your great new promise!

If ever you needed a reason why all this heavy theology in Hebrews matters, it's this. Most of us who are not Jews have no idea what is required by the sacrificial system. Indeed, even modern Jews have little sense of it, as temple worship has not happened for nearly 2,000 years. But this is what the writer is referring to when they talk throughout the letter, including in our passage today, about priests and sacrifices.

And the main point, as the writer begins today, **the main point is that we now have a perfect priest, a heavenly priest, whose priesthood is permanent**, who doesn't need to offer sacrifices for himself because he's perfect, and who can therefore be the one priest we need forever. Not only that, this priest, as it says just before our passage (7:25), lives to intercede for us. He's constantly praying to his Father for the Father to bless us, strengthen us and to make us whole.

Once you start reading the bit of the Old Testament we always avoid, the long lists of sacrificial rituals in Leviticus, you start to understand how amazing this is. All this activity, day after day, year after year, century after century, now completed in Christ. Next time (albeit that's 4 weeks' time as we've got a 3-week break for Harvest), we'll think about how Jesus is not only the perfect priest, he's the perfect sacrifice, once for all. No more bulls, no more goats, no more lambs or rams or doves or pigeons for that matter. One perfect sacrifice, covering our sins forever – enacted by God himself, in the form of his Son. (And that's why it's fair, by the way – God isn't punishing another being, he's doing it himself – that's why the divinity of Jesus matters.)

But **today, let's bask in the joy of being free in Christ!** Freed from the rituals of religion to enjoy relationship with the Son, who dwells with God, as we will too, forever. Free to enjoy the new covenant, the better covenant that God has made with his people. And that's the point: God's covenant – his solemn, binding unbreakable promise to love and bless his people – still stands; but now it's new, or you might say *renewed*. 'The days are coming,' God promised through Jeremiah about 600BC, 'when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel' (v1) – and in Jesus, those days have arrived!

And what will it look like? Well, the telltale sign will not be the external practices of law and ritual – instead 'I will put my laws in their minds, and write them on their hearts.' It will be a renovation of the heart – open heart surgery you might say. External rituals can never make our hearts clean – they can only symbolise what's going on inside, what God intends to do in our hearts. God himself has to enter our hearts to make them clean. That's why, when we come to Jesus, we need the Spirit – the presence of Christ right *here*, in our hearts. When Jesus does that, then this great prophecy comes true. The old practices of formal religion become obsolete. And yes, there's nothing wrong with a bit of ritual – we are habit-forming creatures, and symbols can be powerful. But, as the text says, they are the shadow of the reality, they exist only to point to the inner reality, the thing that casts the shadow. To approach God, we don't need the shadow, we need the Son.

And **Jesus has already done all that needs to be done.** We just have to receive it, to live as if it's true every day, and to invite him to keep transforming us day-by-day, from the inside out, right here in our hearts. And don't get me wrong, it's not easy – that process is slow, and often painful. But is the path of true freedom. I've told you what the alternative is, if you want to be right with God. Do you want to go back to that? It was the old way – but the new way is better.

As I close, God is calling all of us to know him. Not just know about him – but truly to *know* him. This is God's great promise, fulfilled perfectly in and through Jesus. Will you receive it? Will you be free? Amen.