

It is always exciting to have a reading from Hebrews, as it has some challenging passages, quite at odds with those found elsewhere in the New Testament. I have often heard it referred to as an epistle, even sometimes the Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews, but it neither an epistle, nor is it by Paul. By the mid-second century, the biblical scholars in the Alexandrian centre of Christianity had placed Hebrews among the letters of Paul, where it remains, although they recognised that it was so different in language and style that some special account of its authorship was required; thus Clement thought that Luke had translated a Pauline letter written in Hebrew; hardly possible, since Paul would have been most unlikely to have written in Hebrew, and the presence of plays on words in Greek show that it is not a translation. Origen held that it was written by an unknown disciple of Paul's (in other words, like all his other letters; Romans 16; 8 even has a greeting by the actual writer of Romans) but there are mentions that the author of Hebrews knew of previous missionary activity and he is therefore after Paul, but was not aware of any of his letters. A less than favourable comparison in Hebrews of the traditional priestly sacrifices by the priesthood in Jerusalem with the once-for-all, supreme sacrifice of Christ has some commentators concluding that Hebrews must have been written before the destruction of the Temple by the Roman authorities in AD 70, which ended priestly sacrifice, thus predating the Gospels. Even if this is not particularly likely, the writer makes no use of any Gospel material, and relies solely on the oral and fragmentary written sources circulating in the very early church.

This, then, is an anonymous treatise detailing a theological argument for the finality of salvation achieved by Christ, interspersed with repeated exhortations to those whose faith and practice are weakening not to abandon that salvation. The ten chapters leading up to our passage of this morning emphasise three main points;- the superiority of Christ to the angels, the superiority of Christ's priesthood to the levitical priesthood and, as mentioned, the superiority of Christ's sacrifice offered in the heavenly sanctuary to the many animal sacrifices offered on earth by the levitical priests. The intended readers had been subjected to persecution, imprisonment and loss of property as a result of their faith and some were now in danger of falling back, but they must persevere so as not to be lost, but remain among those who have faith and so are saved.

Faith, then is the key, but instead of defining faith comprehensively, the author describes those aspects of it which bear upon the argument, namely 'the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen'. Since the whole book is aimed at Jewish Christians, well versed in the interactions of God in the history of the chosen race, much of the argument

comes from Old Testament events, that the faith of their Hebrew ancestors received approval from God. By faith, they acknowledged that the world was created by the word of God; what is seen was made from things not visible. (Interestingly, that is still true, even of modern scientific explanations for the creation of the universe).

In fact, there was no definition of faith until, perhaps, St Augustine in the 5th century, who spoke of faith in more than one sense, sometimes regarding it as nothing more than intellectual assent to the truth, but also a sort of evangelical or justifying faith including the elements of self-surrender and love, the guiding principle of good works. In general, the scholarly thought of the early church struggled with the tension between faith derived from reason and that derived from love. This last form is the only one which leads to justification, or sanctification, since it involves an infusion of grace. This form of faith becomes active for good and becomes the means by which man is placed in the right relation with God

Interestingly, the compilers of the Anglican lectionary, the laid down readings for each day, left out the most important verse in our Hebrews reading for today. You will have noticed that verses 4 to 7 were omitted, presumably because these verses contain examples of faith from further Old Testament figures, such as Cain and Abel, the enigmatic Enoch and Noah, but left in the more well-known passages regarding Abraham and Sarah, where the ancient Abraham (about 99 years old) accepts with faith the promise of a son to his half-sister and wife, Sarah, barren and equally old - unlike Abraham, she laughed when she heard that she was to have a child, (well, you would, wouldn't you?) so when she gave birth to a son, she named him Isaac, 'laughter'. One of these omitted verses, verse 6 states "And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him." There it is, then. Irrespective of whatever doubts might assail us by a reasoned, intellectual, personal debate about the existence and nature of God, we must seek our faith in love and grace.

Unlike Paul, who was concerned with the Jew who boasted of the righteousness of the law, the author of Hebrews was struggling against falling from faith into despair, rather than the people falling from faith into good works. He exhorts his readers to an attitude of faith which will enable them to rise from the seen to the unseen, from the present to the future, from the temporal to the eternal and which will enable them to be patient in the midst of their sufferings.

Immediately before the passage chosen as our epistle, the end of Chapter 10 quotes Habakkuk, one of the last twelve books of the minor prophets. For yet “in a very little while, the one who is coming will come and will not delay;” This theme of the immediacy of the return of the risen Lord, the expectation of an imminent need for preparation of the second coming is echoed in our Gospel too. Luke, writes from a more Gentile viewpoint and for a more Gentile rather than a Jewish reading public, unlike the writer of the book of Hebrews. Although the gospel is anonymous and the evidence pertaining to its author is inconclusive many considerations support the early Christian tradition that the author was the physician Luke, a gentile convert and friend of the apostle Paul, and was written perhaps in the last third of the first century when he would have been quite elderly by then. He had not been an eyewitness to the life of Jesus, but he used great care in collecting information for his book from a variety of informed sources. Jesus uses the analogy of the wedding feast to relate to the Messianic banquet. In Old Testament oracles of damnation to the nations of Israel and Judah, who have turned away from God, the nations were likened to two adulterous sisters, married to God, but now divorced from him in punishment for their apostasy. The image of the heavenly wedding banquet is an analogy of salvation to the faithful, a reversal of this estrangement for God during the exile and their enslavement by foreign powers ever since. But preparedness is all important.

The arguments used here are for our encouragement; to cast all our cares upon God, which is the right way to ease their burden. An eager, anxious pursuit of the things of this world, even necessary things, perhaps, ill-becomes the disciples of Christ. Fears must not prevail; we must not frighten ourselves with thoughts of evil to come, thus inflicting needless cares how to avoid it. If we value the beauty of holiness, we must not crave the luxuries of life and it behoves each of us to discern whether we belong to this holy flock. Christ is our Master, and we are his servants; not only working servants, but waiting servants. We must be as men of old who waited for their lord, who sat up while he stayed out late, to be ready to receive him. In this, Christ alluded to his own ascension to heaven, his coming to call his people to him by death, and his return to judge the world. As we are uncertain as to the time of his coming to us, we should therefore be always ready. If we thus take care of our houses, let us be equally wise for our souls. Therefore be ready also; as ready as the good man of the house would be, if he knew at what hour the thief would come.

Such is the message of the passage. Clearly there was no expectation of a second coming likely to be delayed for thousands of years when this and similar New Testament references

to the second coming was written, but a fair inference would be that, since it is not given to any of us to know the exact hour of our death, we must be prepared at all times to meet our maker, in a state of repentance and forgiveness, love and grace.