

Sunday 1st September – Hebrews 1:1-2:1 ‘The Radiance of God’s Glory’

I wonder if you’ve ever been tempted to think: is Jesus really all that? Or even if he is, is he just the best available option of what there is available? The Book of Hebrews is our answer: it was written to show that Jesus really is all that – he’s the best, he’s the whole ball game, the alpha and the omega, the fulfilment, the *culmination* of everything that salvation history was leading up to, the perfection of God’s plan.

It’s written to Jews [] who had become followers of Jesus, but in the late first century AD were facing severe pressure to go back to their old faith. They were suffering for the name of Jesus – and many of them were wondering – is Jesus really worth it? After all, they might be thinking, in our old faith we believed we were the chosen people. We had the law, we had Moses and the prophets. Isn’t following Jesus just like an upgrade, like fitting a turbo to our car or surround sound to our TV – but the original was OK, wasn’t it? And even if we still believe in Jesus, couldn’t we just say we didn’t for an easier life with family and friends?

And the writer’s aim is to say – no, Jesus is more than just an upgrade, in fact he’s so far above an upgrade, he’s Everest not Snowdon, he’s a Ferrari Daytona, not just a Ford Escort with a turbo. He’s the Way the Truth and the Life (as someone once said) – **so stick with him, don’t give up.**

And, over 13 chapters, the writer goes on to show why Jesus is so much better than everything and every one else. He’s the perfect priest – i.e. the mediator between God and people – *and* the perfect sacrifice – once for all, for everybody. He’s the fulfilment of prophecy *and* the ultimate guarantor of all God’s great promises. He’s greater than Moses, the giver of the law, *and* greater than all other heavenly beings, including angels. Even more amazingly, he’s what all the great people of faith over the history of the bible looked forward to, without fully realising what they were waiting for. Imagine that: all those quiet heroes were waiting for Jesus! They would have followed him today, if they’d had the chance – and they’re the cloud of witnesses cheering us on now.

It’s not an easy book, and the following couple of months are going to stretch us a bit. To really get into Hebrews, we’ll be learning a bit about the Jewish faith and about bits of the Old Testament like Leviticus that most of us gave up on when we started reading the bible from page 1 (we’ve all done it – and generally Genesis is fine but nearly everyone gives up sometime between the second half of Exodus and the first half of Leviticus!) The book itself is also written in almost classical Greek not common Greek, so if you’re a linguist it’s the hardest book in the New Testament to work with. But the effort is worth it – because like the person in Jesus’ parable who looks for that treasure in the field, when you find the treasure, it’s pure gold, and worth everything you have to possess it.

Most importantly of all, **every page reminds us how great Jesus is, and how secure our salvation is.** He’s not just the best brand in the spiritual supermarket, he *is* the supermarket – he’s all we need, and the reason why the author goes into such detail regarding the Old Testament is to show just how much better following Jesus is – how completely he fulfils all the Old Testament’s religious requirements, all its promises, all its theology of who God is and how God saves his people. We might not get quite as much out of this letter as someone born and raised a Jew – but even for us Gentiles, it’s powerful stuff.

So this is the journey we’ll be taking this Autumn. But first, let’s address the obvious question: who wrote it? And the answer is, we don’t know. The fact that we don’t know is why Hebrews didn’t appear in the first collections of Christian teaching which eventually became our bibles. The decision was taken early on that only those with first-hand experience of Jesus, or who collected their material from those who knew Jesus personally, possessed the authority to write what became the New Testament. The fact that they didn’t know who the author was therefore a problem. And lots of names have been thrown into the hat – Paul (though the big problem with that is why he wrote anonymously, because he never did that), Stephen (because he knew the Old Testament so well, though he almost certainly died too young to write this) Silas or Apollos as key disciples of Paul, or intriguingly Priscilla, the most famous female early church leader, who wrote anonymously because she was a woman. The truth is we don’t know – but the reason, after nearly

200 years of debate, that it's in the bible is that it's just so good. There's a depth to the theology which is unparalleled in the whole bible, apart perhaps from Romans. In the end, it just had to be in there!

And it sets its stall out right from the beginning – these are the first words of the letter: 'In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.' **The 1-word summary of Hebrews is 'better'. Everything about Jesus is better – and however good the faith of God's people is before Jesus, when the Son appears – God himself in human form – everything changes.** And the writer is clear that the Son doesn't just arrive in OAD – he was there at the beginning of time (and St Paul and St John both agree about this) and he is now the heir of all things. That might sound a bit lame to our ears, but the point is, Jesus inherits everything – so those who join Jesus' family inherit everything. If you follow Jesus, you inherit everything. I don't know whether you ever inherited something in this life, or are likely to – but in the spiritual life I can offer you this cast-iron guarantee: **those who follow Jesus inherit everything.**

Why? Because of what the writer goes on to say next. Verse 3 is one of the great verses of the bible. In fact, if you were to ask me for a list of ten verses to learn off by heart, this would be one of them: 'The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.'

Just take a moment to let that sink in. What do we mean when we say that Jesus is God's Son? It's more than just that God made the Virgin Mary pregnant. **Jesus is the exact representation of God. If you want to know exactly what God is like, look at Jesus. He is the radiance of God's glory.** And this means, as the text goes on to say, that his word is powerful, his ability to purify us from the stain of our sins is complete and he now sits right next to God the Father in heaven. In ancient courts, the executive power of the king was exercised through the person who sat next to him on his right – and this is where Jesus sits. Jesus is exercising the sovereign rule of God Almighty now, on behalf of his people, for the growth of his kingdom.

I could stop there – that's plenty for us to reflect on today. But the particular theme of the rest of chapter 1 is to make the first (if you like) obvious conclusion of Jesus' utter supremacy: and that is, Jesus is superior to angels. Now, there's a lot of interest in angels again nowadays. And there's nothing wrong with that in principle, as long as angels sit in their proper place. And the writer makes that proper place clear in v14: 'Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?'

The word angel means 'messenger' and they are there to do God's bidding. But look who they do God's bidding for: they 'serve those who inherit salvation' – i.e. God's people i.e. us! **Angels don't save us, they serve us.** We don't pray to angels, but, if we pray, God might send an angel to help us in some way. We don't need to obsess about this – we'll see later that angels can sometimes take unexpected forms. And most of us will never see one. But we can take comfort from knowing that angels are quietly at work in this world doing God's bidding, for our benefit.

But the point is, **we don't pray to them or rely on them – we pray to Jesus and rely on Jesus** – he's way bigger and more powerful. And Jesus might send an angel to help us, in his good wisdom. But it's Jesus we look to. Jesus is all we need.

As I draw this first reflection to a close, the writer concludes our text with a simple encouragement: 'We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away.' **The book of Hebrews will reward our attention. If we pay close attention it will expand our minds, lift our hearts and strengthen our spirits.** If we've been tempted to give up, or dampen our spiritual passion for an easier life – which might be our way of drifting away – Hebrews will give us new hope and new courage. God has spoken to us through his Son – that's as true now as it was 2,000 years ago. And this Son is the radiance of God's glory, sustaining not just us but all things through his word. He is the fulfilment of all God's promises. He is all we need to live. Let's pay careful attention – and may the Lord fill us to overflowing, that we might live faithfully and fruitfully in the name of his glorious Son. Amen.