

# St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

## COME TO WORSHIP

Rev. Catherine Buchan

Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> June 2010

Habakkuk 2:1-4

Hebrews 10:19-39

Last week we finished exploring the depths of the Old Testament with our writer who wants us to know that Jesus is better. We saw how his death is better, does more, does everything so that we can be changed and made fit to be brought into God's presence. And this week we get to the "so what". There is always a so what in the New Testament letters. The various writers may have had a lot of background theology they needed to give to explain why they wanted to urge this or that course of action on their readers, but in the end they always have a practical application. This letter to the Hebrews may be the longest of all the theological lead-ups and be heading to the briefest of 'so whats'. But if we've stuck with it so far we had better not miss the point now.

And here is the point. Therefore - come to worship! *That's it.*

Christ, who is greater than the angels, whose words have more authority than those of Moses, has become fully and perfectly human. He has become a great High Priest, who doesn't need to keep repeating himself and doing the same symbolic actions over and over because his death was not symbolic but real, the real death to do away with the effects of sin and wrongdoing, to enable his followers to be changed to be like him, holy and pure. Everything in the past was just a flat diagram of what has now been built in three dimensions, and so - come to worship. We should draw near to God, through Christ with a true heart in the full assurance of faith. We should hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering. We should consider how to stir each other up to love and good deeds. Faith, hope and love: that's what we bring to worship.

Faith, that the righteous shall live by faith, is the gift of insight which the prophet Habakkuk has sent us down the years. Faith, which is marked by a true heart. We have seen that when Jesus became one of us he became truly human, completely human, the most perfectly human person there ever has been. And when his new covenant opens to accept us, that complete, true humanity is given to us as well. Something happens to our hearts, something that we may be aware of, at times, or we may not notice: but something which others will see. We come with our whole being, inside and out sprinkled and cleansed - through baptism, and through Jesus' redeeming death for us.

Hope is what we have to hold on to. Without hope there are times when life seems not to be worth persevering with. These Christians who first read this letter had been put through some terrible times, but they had been able to be cheerful in them all because they had hope. Christian hope is not just wishful thinking. It is a determined calling to mind of all that God has done for us in Christ and all that he has promised to do for us in the future. Sometimes questions about it may arise in our minds, but we are to hold fast to our hope. This means that we don't try to find clever answers to any doubt, but that we decide to trust God, who has already fulfilled so many of his promises in the sending of Jesus.

And then love. We are to provoke one another to love and good deeds. Usually something that is provoking is annoying, uncomfortable. Are we really to make nuisances of ourselves? The best way to stir someone else up to love and good deeds is not by words, getting on at them, but by actions. Your acts of love, your good deeds done for others are most likely to spark the imagination, so that others say "I want to be like that. Let me see if I can be a bit more loving a bit less selfish." And one of the ways we stir each other up, in the church, is by meeting together. If people never see your face in worship, or rarely do, then how will they know what love you are showing, what good you are doing?

Does it seem just a little anti-climactic to wade through the deep theological waters of Hebrews and then find that the point of the letter is to encourage people to come to church? But think of it this way: imagine that you

see your spouse or your neighbour arriving back from the shops laden with exotic and luxurious foods that don't usually have place on your table: lashings of cream and legs of lamb or perhaps a whole sucking pig: cakes and fruits and sweets. And then you are amazed to see that the house is being cleaned to a very high standard, that furniture is being re-arranged and the table is being laid for hordes of diners. Then guests start appearing at the door. You hadn't realised, but there was a party being planned, and of course preparations had to be made so that the guests would have a good time.

All the intensive theology we have studied in this letter are like the preparations for the party. We need to know this stuff, we need to be aware of it so that when the party starts, when we come to worship, we know who we are worshipping and why. We can't give of our best in worship, nor receive of God's best if we have just turned up casually, as it were. Worship is our chance to respond to all that God has done for us in Christ: so the more we understand about what that is, the better we can respond and give God our worship.

The people who the letter to the Hebrews was written for were sometimes tempted to stay away from the gathering together in worship. Perhaps they thought that "I can worship God just as well on my own." I've heard that one many times before. They had good reason to stay away too: it seems that they had been through times of persecution, when their homes and possessions were plundered, when they lived with the real threat of imprisonment if they held fast to their hope and professed their faith and met together. What they were asked to do to save themselves from harassment was to speak against Jesus, to curse his name, to deliberately turn from him. Who would blame them, you might think. But that is not how this writer - or any who wrote the New Testament in these difficult times - thought.

Whether in hard times or in good times, Christians need each other, they need to be encouraged. Coming into a church service that is full of people just gives you a lift, doesn't it? Whenever there are fewer people gathered for worship than normal, the person who is going to bring in the Bible always comments on it to me, with a sad or worried expression. But when the church is full, almost invariably that person greets me with a smile. Anyone who walks into a service of worship is, by their very presence encouraging everyone else who is there. You are all a great encouragement - to each other and to me!

It's worth noting too, that to this writer, staying away from worship was tantamount to spitting in Christ's face. After all, when we have realised just what Jesus has done for us, just what a better present and future he has opened up to us, just how he has brought us now and for ever to be in God's presence; not to gather with his brothers and sisters in worship is simply rude. And once you know all that, then a decision not to respond, deliberately to stay away, to hide your faith from the world and deny your encouragement to others, is a decision to sin, which is to turn away from God.

I think our writer puts in that section, not so much to scare his readers - though in the first century they were less afraid to scare people than we are today - as to encourage them to strengthen any weakening backbones. He wanted them - and us - hold firm to our resolve.

We are not offered the overt persecution that these Christians had gone through and feared might come again. Elsewhere in the world, in the Middle East and Pakistan in particular, Christians do face that. They do see their homes looted, their families attacked and officialdom standing by and doing nothing. We should be faithful in prayer for such brothers and sisters.

We see something different. We see our Christian traditions, which used to be accepted in the nation, now often overturned or ignored. We see Sunday made common, morality made relative, greed exalted and humility scorned. We may be tempted to despair. We may sigh and say "It was different in the old days." The writer to the Hebrews has a quite different perspective. He reminded his readers that in their old days they had been cheerful in the face of persecution, because the bad times reminded them of their hope, reminded them that they had faith in something better which God had prepared and would bring to them. Now there's a challenge to us when we want to grow nostalgic about the past and repudiate the present. Remember, the worse it gets the more we can be reminded to look forward with hope. That is what it means to have faith.

Today we will remember the giving of the new covenant in flesh and blood as we take the bread and wine of communion together. As we do so, let us pray for each other, that we may remain faithful - full of faith - and hopeful and also full of love.

Amen.