

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

NOT THE WRAPPINGS AND THE TRAPPINGS

Rev. Catherine Buchan

Sunday 18th April 2010

Psalm 2

Hebrews 1:1-5; 14:2:4

It was Christmas time and wee Molly was excited. She was four years old, so old enough to know that some of the parcels with the wonderful paper on them might be for her. Her parents were excited too. They had watched and listened to her and had bought her just the doll that they were sure she would like. They couldn't wait to see her face light up and to watch her play with her new toy.

Well, Christmas morning came and the parcels were duly unwrapped. When Molly saw that one of the biggest ones was for her she was so excited. She stroked the beautiful bright paper, and unfastened it very carefully. Inside was a box. Again she carefully opened it and inside that was the doll. Molly liked the doll. She took it out and cuddled it and her parents were happy.

But later in the day they noticed that the doll was lying face down in the middle of the floor, abandoned. Where was Molly? She was camped out behind the sofa, with her old dolls. The new doll's box had become a lovely home for them and the beautiful bright wrapping paper was spread around to make a garden. Molly was blissfully happy.

If you have ever been around young children at Christmas or on their birthdays you will know that Molly is typical. Your toddler doesn't have the same way of understanding what is important, what is valuable, what they are supposed to do with a present! In a toddler it's cute.

But what we know as the letter to the Hebrews was written to Christians who seemed to find it hard to leave that toddler stage behind and grow up in their faith. In the next several weeks we are going to be looking at some of what Hebrews has to say to us about what is important in our faith and how we can grow as Christians.

We call the book the letter or epistle to the Hebrews. But it isn't really a letter. It has no greeting or farewell like the other letters in the Bible. It reads more like a long sermon. We know that it is not an abstract piece of writing, however. It was written to people addressing their situation. But who it was written for and by whom, we really don't know.

For a long time it was thought to be written by Paul, but it's not really his style. Some say it might be by Barnabas or by Luke, but we don't know for sure. And who was it written to? It is called a letter to the Hebrews because of the way in which it refers to the Old Testament, Jewish ways of worship so much. The assumption was made that therefore it was written to people who had these things in their background - Jews who had turned to follow Jesus. The thought was that this treatise was written to Hebrew Christians who were finding the trappings of the past too entrancing. But it is just as likely that it was written for Gentile Christians who having come to follow Jesus discovered that his gospel had arisen out of this other religion with codes and systems and attractive trappings....

So we don't know by whom or to whom it was written and we don't even really know when - before the destruction of the temple (70 A.D.) - since it talks about sacrificial ritual - maybe. But there were Jewish sects which went on writing and interpreting the sacrificial rituals long after the temple was destroyed, and in any case our writer does seem often to take his rituals in a spiritual way. So maybe not.

So much we don't know. But it doesn't matter, because the central and important message of this treatise - perhaps we should go on calling it a letter - is that there are a lot of things which are not important - certainly not in comparison with Jesus.

The writer begins right away in telling us just why Jesus is the most important of all. He contrasts the past, when God spoke through prophets, with the present, when God has spoken through his Son. And what a Son! He is the exact imprint of God. When a child resembles a parent, or acts in a way that reminds you of the parent, or develops interest which are similar to the parents' you might say that he is "a chip of the old block." Jesus is that in every regard to God. The Greek of the letter says that Jesus is the "character" of the being of God. Character. We use the word to express personality. We also use it to talk about the characters in the alphabet. The original use was to talk about the hard metal original from which Greek coins were minted. Each coin would bear the exact imprint of the original. Jesus is that sort of character of God. He is like God, exactly like God, in every respect. And it is through him, the heir of all things, that God has chosen to speak to us.

He sits at God's right hand, superior to everyone and everything! Superior by far to the angels.

Why the angels in particular? Well, there was a generally held belief that the Law which was given to Moses was given him by angels, and that was part of what made it special. One of the bits of wrapping paper, one of the attractive trappings which was distracting the readers of the message was fixation on angels.

This is surprisingly modern. There is today again an interest in angels as beings in their own right. There are those who will tell you that they find it hard to believe in God (because, perhaps God is complex) but that they do believe in guardian angels. There are whole books written about them. But the writer of this letter would wonder why. Why bother with angels when you can bother with Jesus? That would be his question. And so, beginning with Psalm 2, he takes us through a variety of quotations from the Old Testament, mainly from the Psalms, to show that angels never were anything like as great as Jesus. The implication is that they are not so worth bothering about, and their message is certainly not as important as the Gospel which Jesus came to bring.

In the end, where in our reading we came in again, he concludes that angels are just servants, sent to serve for our sake - we are the ones who are to inherit salvation.

And so, for what will be the first of many times, we, the readers are told that we must PAY ATTENTION! If the message of the Law, given by angels to Moses, was worth paying attention to, how much more is Christ. His is not just a verbal message, given by Jesus and passed on by his followers. It is also attested by the Holy Spirit.

Throughout Hebrews there is this undercurrent of warning, which we find at the beginning of chapter two. We should pay attention, or else. Or else what? Well, that will be told us in greater detail later, but surely the worst or else for people who have heard the good news, have accepted it, have known the salvation of Christ and the Holy Spirit at work in their lives and in the world would be to drift away from all of that.

The toddler who plays with the box and the paper is cute. But the parents who laugh at her will still hope that she will tire of that and end up playing with the gift which they took time to choose for her and spent their hard-earned cash on to please her. They hope that as she gets used to her new toy she won't just play with it for a day then turn aside to other things - though with children that is always a risk - but will discover more and more about what she can do with her new gift.

So as Christians, the writer to the Hebrews is concerned that we his readers shouldn't discover the wonderful riches of the gospel just for a while and then be enticed away to other things, whether things new or things old. We shouldn't allow our knowledge of God's love for us, shown in the death and resurrection of Jesus make a difference to us only for a while, before drifting back into our old way of life. Nor should we be content to know only the basics about our faith. Later on we will hear our writer urging us to keep on learning more and more.

But today, at the beginning of the letter, the call to us is to pay greater attention to Jesus. To pay attention on a Sunday in church. But also to pay attention at other times. We have something that the first century Christians didn't have: we have access to the Scriptures in the language that we speak every day, in our own homes. Many of you, I know, read the Bible every day. If you don't, why not? Don't you want to pay attention to Jesus?

Maybe you are afraid you won't understand it? Well, don't start with Obadiah! But there are Bible reading notes and commentaries which would help and if you want some recommendations or samples to try, just let me know. I would be delighted to help!

We are called on to pay attention. When we watch T.V. or listen to the radio, when we read the papers, are we uncritically accepting of all that comes our way? Do we let it just wash over us and absorb whatever viewpoint we hear? Or do we pay attention to Jesus and bring his viewpoint to bear on the world that we live in?

Pay attention, says Hebrews. Jesus is the greatest, Jesus is the character of God. If we really believe that, then we must see that he deserves to have our full attention.

Amen.