

Hebrews 2 5-18 Don't turn back!

1/ I want to speak about the background into which this letter was written

2/ Pick out the key information the writer was desperate to impart

3/ Suggest that though written to Jewish Christians, the message is as relevant to us today

1/ Setting the scene

This letter is written before the sacking of the Temple in AD 70 to Jewish followers of Christ who were drifting back to their old Jewish faith.

They may have been suffering physical persecution, certainly cut off from the establishment they have grown up in and possibly disowned by friends and family and the local Priest. As we see in Muslim cultures today, it is very dangerous to follow Jesus.

These followers would have found out about Jesus from those who had been eye witnesses to his ministry. But now they are having doubts, perhaps asking why Jesus hasn't returned.

It's ok to have doubts and when we do we need to take them to God, to search scripture and wrestle with people we respect.

Jesus spoke to doubt many times. In Matthew 11v2-6, John the Baptist is in prison and sends his disciples to ask his cousin Jesus, are you the Messiah we've been expecting or should we look for someone else?

Jesus told them' **Go back to John and tell him what you have heard and seen, the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cured, the deaf hear and the dead are raised to life and the good news is being preached to the poor.'**

In John 20 v 29 we see Thomas doubting that Jesus has risen and Jesus says, '**You believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who believe without seeing me'**.

[Incidentally we are talking about Jesus rising from the dead , being able to walk through walls, but he is not a ghost, his resurrection is both literal and physical.

The audience of Hebrews would be steeped in the traditions and stories of the Jewish faith contained within the Torah.

This involved the Priests being the intermediary between them and God.

The Priests would undertake physical sacrifices of a creature (according to what they could afford) on their behalf to atone for their sins.

God spoke to his people in different ways... Isaiah in visions, Jacob in a dream and Abraham and Moses personally and God used Angels to communicate BUT no-one could see his face

Now the Jewish converts had heard about God coming and living with his people, that the curtain was torn in two from top to bottom so that the barrier to their direct access to God was removed, that Jesus had become the ultimate sacrifice for their sins, that God cared about the poor not just the elite.

The Messiah they were expecting had come not as a warrior King but a suffering servant.

Let's stop to reflect what a radical departure this is from the Tora.

The Disciples had spread the good news which we refer to as the gospels and the stories of marvellous Healings and teaching.

BUT converts didn't have the complete bible to study, although most of the gospel writings and Paul's letters to the churches were written around the same time.

But doubts had crept in, it is said in sporting circles that when the coach leaves the team flounders;

false teachers were raising the importance of Angels as the only intermediaries to God and these new Christians were questioning what they had heard. Their own experience of Jesus was second-hand, and anyway wasn't Jesus supposed to come back, where is He?

Jesus resurrection proved that he had conquered the fear of death and by association Satan, and God had placed the world under his footstool.... *And yet the world was still a wicked place, the Romans were still persecuting them, had anything really changed?*

2/ These are BIG questions that we are still asking today, so let's see what the author says in our passage.

Paul was writing to the churches to combat false teachings and confirming many of the points in our passage today.

My pithy favourite is Colossians 1:15 **Christ is the visible image of the invisible God.** This theme is contained in chapter 1 of Hebrews.

What does our passage tell us?

Ch1 v4 tells us that although in the Tora God used angels to bring messages to his chosen people, Jesus is above these angels.

Chapter 2 starts with a warning not to drift away from the message of salvation that Jesus gave and passed on by those who heard him speak. *Salvation is the deliverance from sin and its consequences.*

The Jewish converts must have been thinking that if Jesus is above the Angels, why doesn't he look more exalted than them?

V6 references back to Psalm 8 v 4 that we read today, **What are mere mortals that you should care about them'** reminds us that God cares about the people he has created and the author is using the link back to the Tora for his audience.

V8 reminds us that God entrusted his creation to us.

Hebrews 2 v9 tells us **Jesus was given a position a little lower than the Angels and because he suffered death for us ,he is now crowned with glory and honour.**

What is going on here? Jesus is God and is the word. God spoke the word and world was created and thus he was above the Angels.

Jesus comes to be with mankind and is fully human with all the feeling, emotions and frailties of a human (whilst not giving up his divinity) and thus for his time on earth is in a position a little lower than the angels until his death when his position is fully restored.

In v10 it says that it is only right (some versions say fitting) that it should be this way. *Why would it be right ?*

Because God desires to bring MANY to him who were excluded by his sins.**He desires for us to be brothers and sisters of Jesus (God)** it says in v11 and 12, which is a reference back to Psalm 22 v 22 reminding the readers that Jesus is fulfilling the Tora. It is Psalm 22 that describes the suffering Jesus endured and from which he speaks on the cross, **My God My God why have you forsaken me?**

V11 says

'So now Jesus and the ones he makes *holy* have the same *Father*'

So this is the very core of Christianity. We are to be like Jesus, what shows we have the family likeness? That we are Holy, displaying the characteristics that Paul relates when describing the gifts of the Spirit.

V 13 and 14 are key as to why it had to happen this way....

'Because God's children are human beings-made of flesh and blood-the son also became flesh and blood. For only as a human being could he die and only by dying

could he break the power of the devil, who had the power of death. Only in this way could he set free all who have lived their lives as slaves to the fear of dying’.

V17 says that Jesus becomes the *High Priest* for us. From now on, no-one should be accessing the Father except through Jesus.

V18 is also key

‘Since he himself has gone through suffering and testing, he is able to help us when we are being tested’.

So to an audience suffering persecution, and wondering whether Jesus is after all the way, our passage summarises the very essence of our Faith and promises that Jesus will be with them in their trials (not that he will take them all away) until the day when he returns.

3/What does this mean to us today?

1/ This passage is as relevant to us now as it was in circa AD 60. God made us inherently spiritual beings. We hunger for meaning and purpose. We try to find that in

Performance (job, marriage, friends)

Possessions (car, house, trophy partner)

Places (experiences, travel holidays)

So as people search for religion, they are creating their own mix, probably just like the culture Paul experienced on his travels, where he encountered followers of Roman and Greek Gods created to serve specific needs of mankind, love, health, prosperity, success in war, with people *‘trying all bets’*.

We met two girls last night who had been to a Taylor Swift concert, how was it I asked? They said it was the nearest thing to a religious experience they had ever encountered. I would so loved to have unpacked what that meant to them but they came to their tube stop and left.

We met a lovely healthcare worker who came to our house recently. Ohh she said, I would like to stay here, it feels so peaceful. We said thank-you, there is a lot of prayer here. She said yes I believe in God, I come from a Hindu background but I believe all religions lead us to God.

We don’t have time to unpack what other religions believe, please ask me back to speak about that one time, but it is clear that that is not true, but it is true that God is reaching out to gather as many people into his family and that he loves all of his creation.

The other two monotheistic faiths, Islam and Jews do not recognise Jesus as the son of God and that he died to atone for our sins and opened the way for us to interact directly

with God. The act of Substitution is celebrated by us in taking communion and we know that was Jesus intention as he passed the cup and said this is my blood that is poured out for many...

Persecution continues. Many of you may pray for Wang Yi who received a 9 year prison sentence in China in 2018 for running a Christian church. He must reflect that it would be so much simpler to deny Jesus and ask to be released. There are many Muslims who are disowned by their families, worse killed by them for converting to follow Jesus. Followers in Iran are interred in shipping containers which are cold at night and boiling in the day for worshipping Jesus. There are more Christians being persecuted than ever before.

It is just such an audience that the author of Hebrews was writing to.

We heard in Ch2 v18 that Jesus is able to help us when tested. When some French monks were abducted by Muslim terrorists, they argued as to who should be killed first. One said me because I am the oldest, another that they had a more advanced theological qualification... Two were taken away and killed and the others placed in holes in the ground. They were rescued by the French special forces and when they spoke amongst themselves, they discussed *don't you wish you were back in the holes* because they had such a powerful experience of the presence of Jesus there.

So I, we, need to be really clear what scripture tells us about *who Jesus is, why he came on earth as a man and the gift of substitution he gave us* so that we can be called *brothers and sisters of Jesus*, be called *Holy* and know that *death on earth is not the end*.

If someone asks you what I spoke about today, please tell them

Christ is the visible image of the Invisible God (1 Colossians v15) and say that's awesome isn't it, because otherwise these words can lose their power through the familiarity of them?