

## JESUS: THE LAST WORD, AND THE FIRST

*Hebrews 1:1-4*

I've always been intrigued by Hebrews. One of the first serious Bible studies I undertook was on this book, but I very rarely preach from it. I think that it is because it is far from being an easy book. It is full of allusions to the Old Testament and to first century Judaism which makes some parts almost impenetrable. I always get the feeling I was missing something. So why pick on it now? Firstly, my interest has not abated over the years and secondly I was recently reading a commentary on Hebrews which made me realise just how relevant this book is to us today. I am very much indebted to Tom Long for his commentary which has helped me give some shape to nearly forty years of wandering.

As I say, Hebrews is both strange and fascinating. It contains some of the best known Biblical passages yet many people know virtually nothing about the book, as a whole. That's not so surprising as there is a lot about this book we simply do not know. For example, we don't know who wrote it. (About the only thing we know about the author is that it wasn't Paul.) Similarly we don't know who it was written to. Early in Christian history someone, (not the author), added the title, "To the Hebrews", but as far as we can see that was just a guess based on the amount of Old Testament allusions in the book. Then again we don't know when it was written. Our best guess is somewhere between 60 and 100 AD. So, in commending this book to you I'm saying, "here, read this. I don't know who wrote it, or who he had in mind, but I do know it was written sometime between 1960 & 2000."

However, there are some things we can know. First, we can see that this book is not a letter such as Paul and others wrote. Nor is it a gospel or a vision like John's Revelation. It is, in fact, a sermon. It carries all the marks of sermons preached throughout the Church in those early years and is based on the sermons that were preached in the synagogues. As Tom Long says, "Hebrews appears to be an example of a sermon that is rabbinical in design, Christian in content, and heroic in length."

Although we do not know much about the Preacher we can tell something about the congregation, (or congregations) who were the original hearers of this sermon and the scene we discover seems extraordinarily up to date and relevant. His congregation is exhausted. They are tired – tired of serving the world, tired of worship, tired of Bible studies, tired of being peculiar and whispered about, tired of being mocked and marginalised, tired of the spiritual struggle, tired of trying to keep their prayer life going, tired even of Jesus. Their hands droop and their knees are weak (12:12), attendance is down at church (10:25), and they are losing confidence. The threat to this congregation is not that they are charging off in the wrong direction, they do not have enough energy to charge off anywhere. The threat is that, worn down and worn out, they will simply give up and drift away.

We may recognise some of that description. Some of it may be too familiar and we see ourselves reflected in this ancient congregation. But while the problems may be familiar, the Preacher's response may surprise us. He does not appeal to group dynamics, nor the latest program for church growth. He does not talk about management techniques, reorganisation or mission structure. He does not talk about making worship more relevant or finding new ways of serving the community. The Preacher's response is to preach, and what's more, to preach Christ. His approach is to the problems of spiritual weariness is to preach in quite complex theological terms about the nature and meaning of Jesus. He is not content to just skim the surface, either, but dives into the depths.

As strategies for countering spiritual tiredness go, the Preacher's approach flies in the face of all serious theological and pastoral thinking and practice. Congregations, we are told, don't like theology. Well, like it or not, that's what they are going to get. The Preacher will lead his people into hidden paces, where the deep truths of our faith work on our minds, hearts and lives and generate surprise, wonder, gratitude, and finally, obedience. As a preacher I want to think he is right, and whatever the world, or anyone else, may say, Jesus is still the answer. And if you want to say "Amen" to that you need to be ready for the journey, we'll be making over the coming weeks.

When we turn to the opening words of this sermon we see the Preacher starts as he means to go on. This is not a theological or philosophical essay or lecture, it is unmistakably a sermon.

These opening words tell us something vitally important – that God speaks. God is not just a creator or even a sustainer of the universe, like an absentee landlord. He communicates with us. What is more, he does so regularly. The Preacher tells us that God has spoken in the past by various ways and means, giving part of the story here in this way and part there by some other means. God's self-revelation is not limited. God's voice is heard in the lightning and thunder on Sinai and in Elijah's 'still small voice'. The Psalmist tells us that he sees God in the sun and the moon and the stars which God has made. All around is evidence that God speaks, God causes the sun to rise, God shakes the foundations, God breaks the chains, God labours in the world. All these things show that God is not only active in the world, he communicates with it – what the Preacher calls "speech".

We can call it "communication" because the Preacher points out that not only is there is a speaker, but there are also listeners – "our ancestors". This is not God putting a message in a bottle and hoping someone will find it, nor is it a placard beside the road to be observed or ignored at will. It is a message personally addressed – it establishes and maintains a relationship.

Having made it clear that God is in communication with his people, the Preacher moves straight to his second and (as we shall see as we travel through this book), his main points.

The Preacher introduces this point with a favourite Preacher's tool – "You have heard it said...but I say to you..." (Matthew 5:21ff). "In the past God spoke by various ways and means...but now..." The words grab our attention. But what? Has God stopped speaking? Has he changed his message? "But in these last days God has spoken to us by His Son." This son, of course, is Jesus, the one supremely qualified to pass on God's word as we shall see in a moment. But first notice how the Preacher has set the

scene for most of the rest of the sermon, in these opening words. It is the Preacher's contention that Jesus is superior in every way to all that may follow. We may go in the depth of our understanding, but will never surpass God's self-revelation in Jesus. Jesus is God's last word. "These last days", the Preacher refers to is a technical term and though we may debate the details of its meaning, one thing is certain, Jesus makes a decisive turning point in history. He is the breaking-in of God's kingdom. He is not simply the next chapter, making a bit clearer what God has already done and said, nor preparing the way for future revelation. Here is something new, something trail-blazing, something superior in every way.

Having got to this point the Preacher does the only thing he can – he breaks into song. Whether he wrote the short hymn found in 1:2b-4 or was quoting a song already known to the congregation is beside the point. Sometimes the only proper response to God is worship.

This song is not only a moment of praise, it is highly relevant to the Preacher's sermon. It starts by telling us that Jesus is the heir of all things. That is everything is his. He is the culmination of history. He is the centre of God's plan of salvation. He is, as we have seen, God's last word. But then we are told that God's last word is also God's first word, for Jesus is also the word by which the universe was created. Jesus is the beginning and the end. The world started in Jesus and it will end in him. In our troubled times this is a timely word. Does the one who ends up with the most toys or the most troops really win? Does history flicker out with a whimper? Do the rich keep getting richer and do the violent always triumph? The Preacher assures us that this is not so. The world does not belong to the oppressor, the tyrant or the war-lord – it belongs to Jesus. This world will not disintegrate into violence, chaos and futility – it is Jesus' inheritance.

The Preacher also assures us of the validity of this Last and First Word. We need to know that what we see in Jesus is indeed trust-worthy. As John the Baptist asked Jesus, "Are you the one, or should we seek another?" The Preacher underlines Jesus' own words when he said, "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9) If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus for he "is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being." (1:3).

We are also told once more that not only does the created order start and end with Jesus, he also keeps it going in-between times – he is the sustainer, the powerful Word of God who, having come into this world and spoken God's last word, brings salvation and purification, from sin has now taken up once more his rightful place, seated at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. Paul tells us the time is yet to come when Jesus' kingdom-rule will be acknowledged by all (Philippians 2:9-11), but the Preacher tells us that acknowledged or not, Jesus is Lord.

Amen

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