

HEARING TESTIMONY IN A HIGHER COURT

Hebrews 2: 1-4

You might think that having spent the first chapter of his sermon extolling the wonders of the Son, the instrument of creation, the perfect expression of the being and glory of God, that the Preacher would now turn to the Gospel truth that this same Son, through the Incarnation and particularly through his sufferings and death, became our salvation. It's what many preachers would do. There is that natural movement, hinted at in chapter one, that he was rich beyond our imagining becoming poor for our sakes and then, having accomplished the work of salvation is welcomed back into Glory.

However, the Preacher does not immediately do this. Having reached the high point of 1:4 and having expanded and expounded it in 1:5-14 the Preacher suddenly does something unexpected – it breaks off to make an ethical point. This Preacher does this on a number of occasions throughout this sermon. In the middle of expounding deep theological truths he suddenly starts talking about practical issues like worship, marriage, hospitality and charity. This swapping back and forth has confused many in the past who want to know what the Preacher is doing. Is this theology or ethics? Of course, there is no reason to look for a problem here – theology & ethics can, indeed should, be intertwined. Also, what we are looking at here is the transcript of a sermon and very few sermons have only one point.

There is a pressing reason why the Preacher takes this particular diversion, at this point, to suddenly changes the song from 'All hail the power of Jesus name' to 'Take time to be holy'. These four verses are a warning! This sermon is about to head into some very dangerous territory. The Preacher is about to lead this weary, ailing congregation along the road that Jesus travelled as the pioneer of our faith. This story, the Preacher is about to retell, will set challenges before them that they must be ready for. The Preacher is like the guide we met recently in Mexico City who not only told us about the sights worth seeing but the places to be wary of. "Keep your camera out of sight, your hand on your wallet and stay close to me." The congregation happily sings, "Tell me the stories of Jesus, I love to hear" without stopping to think what those stories might imply. The Preacher tells them that it is a dangerous thing to tell the Jesus story – it makes demands, changes lives, and challenges faith. 2:1ff is a guide's warning: "Stay together, listen carefully and hold onto the faith."

So what makes the Jesus story so dangerous that the Preacher feels the need to warn the congregation before he goes on? It is easy for us to forget that central to that story is the cross. We are prone to shroud the cross in harmless sentiment and turn it into a piece of costume jewellery, forgetting what a cross meant to first century Christians – not just pain and death, but failure, foolishness and a stumbling block to faith. The cross was, and still is, a barrier to the Gospel, an embarrassment. It's a

deterrent to upbeat religion and the power of positive thinking. People wanted and still want to hear about Jesus, but a Jesus who was sweet, attractive and brightly lit – like the Easter Bunny or Father Christmas – not a bowed and bloodied victim who cried out in death, “My God, my God, why have you forgotten me.”

It boiled down to a simple question: If Jesus is really the Christ, what is the meaning and purpose of his suffering? Or, in less theological language, what earthly good is a suffering saviour?

We all know life is difficult. Anyone who has ever fought an addiction, wept over a troubled child, discovered a malignant tumour, cried out for justice, wondered where the next meal is coming from, faced the end of a loving relationship, spent a cold night under a motorway bridge, coped with disability or stood in grief at a graveside knows that life is not all we might want it to be. We are all aware that, as the Psalms put it, “Our days may last seventy or eighty years, yet the best of them are but trouble and sorrow.” (Psalm 90:10) And finally all striving ends in the embrace of the feared enemy, death. The question is, what is so different about the life and death of Jesus? To all appearances his life was also full of pain, short and ended in death.

Anyone can see the suffering, dying Jesus – it was a public event visible to the whole world. But his cross seems no more than just another moment of injustice in a history full of injustice. Innocent people suffer and die all the time, there are stories like this in the newspapers most days. We can walk down the corridors of any hospital or nursing home, through the streets of any city or across far too many battlefields, and we can see, smell, touch, the suffering. It’s the hope we cannot see.

Again, anyone can see the shame of Jesus’ death, what we cannot see is how Jesus’ death brings life. How does his death bring any closer God’s promise to “wipe away every tear from their eyes” or that “death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will pass away.” (Revelation 21:4)? These things are beyond the range of our eyes – we cannot see them. But, and this is a major point in the Preacher’s sermon, they are not beyond the range of our ears. “Pay careful attention,” he says, “to what you have heard.” (2:1) We cannot see the victorious Son seated at the right hand of God but we can hear his word to us. In all the places where the Gospel is proclaimed, where sound theology is taught, where worship is open-hearted and where Christian lives are faithfully lived out, the voice of God is heard. And like a great fog-horn, it sounds a message of salvation when the eye cannot pierce the mists.

But the Preacher has a problem – just saying it doesn’t make it so. Every preacher knows it’s no use just saying to a congregation, “Behave yourself. Live your faith.” It doesn’t even help to wrap it up in religious language and say, “God wants you to behave yourself.” To be honest, most congregations already know that – knowing is not the problem. The problem lies deeper, in the will. Life had been eating away at this congregations confidence; the daily grind had weakened their faith, just as metal is fatigued by constant small movements or rock is worn away by dripping water. They know what the Gospel is, they just have trouble trusting it. How can they believe what is preached, that Jesus is Lord, when everything they see in the world around them seems to deny it?

In response to this, the Preacher, as it were, changes hats. He is no longer the preacher, he becomes a defence lawyer and calls a number of witnesses in quick

succession. First he calls the Old Testament law. He is already pointed out that God has spoken by various ways and means in past times. "Look at God's record," the lawyer now claims, "If he was faithful then, in words and ministry by mere angels, (it was common first century belief that angels were intermediaries in the giving of the law), so how much more when that word now comes by the Son."

How do we know that the Old Testament law was valid? Because, as 2:3 puts it, every time God's people failed to obey it they paid the price and "received a just penalty". The image here is not of an electric fence that hemmed people in and gave them a jolt of punishment every time they tried to cross it, (which is how many, including many Christians, see the Old Testament). The point the Preacher is making is that the law was like sound, loving, parental wisdom which children may disregard if they choose, but which carries its own consequences if ignored.

But the Preacher-Lawyer has a second witness for the defence. Jesus himself is a witness to the truth of his own teaching. What is more, his witness about himself is corroborated by others, first-hand witnesses to this word of God. Note the Preacher does not call them apostles, that is a title reserved for Jesus himself, (3:1). Again, emphasising the importance of believing what we have heard, not what we can see, the Preacher's highest title of followers of Jesus is "hearers".

The final witness is the most impressive. Why should they believe what they have heard? Because God himself has validated it. By signs, wonders and various miracles God put his seal upon this final word.

So preacher confirms that the Gospel is not just a set of ideas, or even a way of living. It is the word of God, validated by the Old Testament, by the life and ministry of Jesus and by God himself. Furthermore, it continues to be validated by manifestations of the Spirit. People are reconciled to God and to one another; forgiveness is experienced; the gifts of teaching, healing, discernment, wisdom and prophecy are realized in the community; the Scriptures speak afresh; the chains of oppression are broken. All of these gifts of God, received in and for worship, fellowship and services, bear witness to the trustworthiness of the gospel. They serve to assure any congregation, no matter what they may be able to see, that the Gospel they have heard is true and not just whistling in the dark.

Amen

Kevin Dare
Beeston Baptist Church
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