

PIONEER AND PRIEST

Hebrews 2:10-18

Last week we saw that the Preacher of this sermon wanted his listeners to understand that Jesus' life and death had a purpose, and that the purpose was redemptive. That is in his death, Jesus "tasted death for everyone" (2:9). We know that everyone dies; we all "taste death" for ourselves, but Jesus is different. But what does this mean for us? How does Jesus "taste death for everyone"? That is the question faced in this next section.

They didn't have films in the Preacher's time, but if they had I'm sure he would have used examples from Hollywood to illustrate this next point. Here we might think about Frodo in Mordor, or John Wayne on the beaches of Iwo Jimor, or even the Lt Gorman in Aliens, the Preacher uses a number of images that would have been familiar from stories and myths of his own time. The problem is he throws these examples together making it difficult to sort them out and so 2:10-18 is a batch of mixed metaphors.

Untangling these metaphors we find three main images. First, the hero. He is the one who goes into the heart of the enemy's realm to do battle. He is the 'pioneer' (2:10). This word has many meanings in Greek. In my collection of bibles I found pioneer, leader, author, captain, founder, originator and prince. Probable the phrase that best sums these up is 'champion of salvation' – an image used by Paul in a number places – leading a triumphal procession.

Added to this the Preacher speaks of Jesus the liberator, breaking the power of evil on behalf of others (2:14f). He did not simply contend with evil on his own behalf – it was that he might "free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death."

The third image is that of high priest. This may seem an odd metaphor to place next to two military (or at least combative) images, but the preacher had already hinted at Jesus the priest in 1:3, "providing purification for sins".

The way these images are mixed together is an important lesson to us. We all opt to put things into compartments and think of Jesus in our particular, favourite way. The Preacher conjures up a strange image – the commando-priest. We cannot think of who Jesus is without remembering what he has done, and why he did it. Jesus is the heavenly priest who dons the battle dress and camouflage of a marine commando and breaks through the barbed-wire into the death-camp of human suffering, striking a decisive blow at the camp commandant and liberating the captives.

This mixture of images is used by the Preacher to explain how come the Glorious Son became the Suffering Son – or, to keep using our image, to explain what Jesus was doing behind enemy lines, in a private's uniform (i.e. "lower than the angels").

2:10 begins this explanation by saying it was 'fitting' that the Son should be made perfect through suffering. 'Fitting' is another word with a wide use. Generally it means proper, appropriate, the right tool for the job. But it seems odd beyond belief that the Glorious Son should suffer and die. After all, this son is divine and divine means 'not human'. Being human is being weak, transient, and vulnerable. These are not divine characteristics – how they can be considered 'fitting'. It is only as we listen to the Gospel do we begin to discover that the incongruous, even unthinkable, becomes necessary. The foolishness of the incarnate Son, crucified, dead and buried, becomes the wisdom of God.

If we accept that it was 'fitting' for the Glorious Son to become the Suffering Son we may still have a problem with the Preacher's declared reason. He tells us that this happened so that the Son might be made 'perfect' (2:10). How does suffering make the Son perfect? Wasn't he perfect before he suffered? Now, jumping ahead to 4:15, we know that the Preacher believes Jesus to be without sin, so he is not suggesting that the Son had some moral imperfection that needed to be put right. The word 'perfect' should be read alongside 'fitting'. By his sufferings Jesus not only becomes not only a fitting tool for salvation, he becomes the perfect tool. Through his sufferings Jesus becomes God's perfect answer. As the liberator (redeemer) he rescues us from death by being completely submerged in both the life of God, (his divine nature), and the life of mankind, (his human nature). Suffering makes him, the only fit tool; into the perfect tool.

The most immediate impact of the perfection through suffering is explained in 2:18. because he suffered, Jesus is able to help those who suffer. We see this happens because suffering has shown him the depths of mercy and faithfulness (2:17). It is not that God was not merciful and faithful before, (the Old Testament shows plainly that he was), but it is one thing to remain faithful when someone else is suffering, it is quite another when you yourself suffer, as the book of Job teaches. Jesus shows himself perfect in this, too.

Now God, in Jesus, not only sees our suffering, he shares it – Jesus has become a brother (2:11) to everyone who has ever known pain. This is at the heart of the Christian Gospel.

God's love is not condescending – as ours often is. When the Triumphant Son sees a homeless woman crawling into a cardboard box to keep from freezing in the night; when the Lord of all sees a man robbed of dignity and purpose by schizophrenia; when the divine heir of all things sees a mother weeping over the death of her child or a man battling the last savage assault of cancer or the swollen body of a child slowly starving to death, he does not see a charity case, a pitiful victim or a hopeless cause. He sees a brother, or a sister, and he is not ashamed to call them such (2:11). Because Jesus experienced rejection, pain, injustice, suffering and death he feels what we feel. As one theologian has put it, "God's love does not protect us against suffering, but it protects us in all suffering" (Hans Kung).

The middle verses of our passage this evening emphasize and elaborate on the idea of Jesus' solidarity with us by returning to a by now familiar pattern; that of the Glorious Son becoming the Suffering Son becoming the Triumphant Son. The Preacher does this by quoting three Old Testament verses. The first quote is Psalm 22:22 (2:12). It gives a reason for the Incarnation - why the Glorious Son should step into our world

in this way – to make God known. It was not enough for the Son to remind aloof. He wanted to know something we were unable to see.

The second quote (2:13a) is from Isaiah 8:17 and speaks of the Suffering Son's attitude – that of trust. While the third quote (2:13b) is from Isaiah 8:18 and is the Triumphant Son looking forward to victory. These quotes cover the whole story of salvation.

The Preacher then focuses in on the second quote – for this is the one that is his central concern, this question of trust. In putting his trust in his father, Jesus became human so that he might infiltrate the death-camp that is human existence. This is the image Jesus the Liberator doing battle with the camp commandant, that is, the devil (2:14). Death was the devil's way of exerting power over us, holding us "in slavery by our fear of death" (2:15). But Jesus, who had become as much a slave as we were becoming as much a slave as we were by becoming fully human, refused to submit to the slave-master. He put his trust in God, right to the very end. His scars are a testimony to his perfect credentials to be our high priest.

Jesus bears the scars of the cross, the scars of human suffering and death, and "he was tested by what he suffered" (2:18). For all of us who must still face suffering, for all of us who must still trudge to the cemetery in sorrow, we are not without comfort and help, for the great high priest who sits on the throne of glory has been there, too. He bears the scars of his testing, and he "is able to help those who are tested" (2:18).

Amen

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