

Hebrews 3:1-6

Before diving into the next section of this sermon to the Hebrews I want to very briefly recap on where we have been over the last five studies. We have seen that the Preacher has a worn out and worn down congregation. They are in need of encouragement. The Preacher's encouragement takes the form of a declaration of Christ, God's last, and first, word to Creation. He reminds the congregation that the Glorious Son, the instrument of Creation and the perfect expression of the being and glory of God, became the Suffering Son, for a while lower than the angels, being made perfect in his sufferings, culminating in his death on the Cross. Being made perfect, he is now seated at the right hand of God once more as the Triumphant Son. Furthermore, because he suffered in this way, entering into the full experience of human life, he is uniquely qualified to be our high priest, not standing aloof, but rather proud to call us his brothers and sisters. Over all this there has been a repeated reminder – none of these things can be learnt with our eyes, they come by hearing and believing the Gospel.

As we move into Hebrews 3 it appears at first that the Preacher is simply repeating himself. Having told us that Jesus is superior to the angels, though made for a while lower than them, he now tells the congregation that Jesus is superior to Moses. But there is a twist in these verses that sees a sudden, surprising change. Again, it seems Jesus stands centre-stage at the start of this section but by the end of the passage it is we who hold the spotlight.

This is not a complete surprise to those who have been paying attention. The section opens with a hint of what is to come when the Preacher addresses the congregation as "holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling." (3:1). This might sound like a florid, formal greeting, like, 'deeply beloved' but, in fact it is a theological statement and sets out the basics of what it means to be the church.

The Preacher starts by stating the church is one. It is a family of 'brothers and sisters'. Not a family of blood, or race, or even of those who like each other and share common interests and opinions, but a family of those who together belong to Jesus, who is not ashamed to call us his "brothers and sisters" (2:11). Notice that the image of the church used here is a family. We are prone to think of it as a club, (a 'voluntary organisation' to use the technical term). A club is something we chose to belong to, but we do not choose the church, we are chosen by God for the church. The church is not a club for those who are fond of religion, it is a community gathered together by God who then scatters us on a mission. Clubs have a membership of companionable, like-minded people; churches, like families, include people we would have nothing to do with if they weren't our relatives. Clubs have members, but if the cost of that membership gets too high, or too many demands are made on our time we drop out and seek a club with easier membership terms. The only way we can walk away from the family bonds of our 'brothers and sisters' is to leave home.

Secondly, the Preacher tells us that the church is holy. This is a difficult one. If we spend a day with one another we soon begin to see just how unholy we can be. There is not a sin in this world that doesn't find its way into the church. Greed, bigotry, lust, pride, anger, sloth are all represented among us. Yet the Preacher spoke to his 'holy brothers and sisters'. That is because he knows that holiness is not a natural, human trait but is the gift of God. The church is not holy because of the purity of its members but because it is made holy (2:11) by Jesus. He is at work in his church, strengthening it beyond its own capacity for a ministry of service and worship. In this sense holiness is not a description of the church's moral state. It is a sign of God's Grace, working through ordinary things to bring about extraordinary ends.

Thirdly, the Preacher tells us that the church is apostolic. But he is not thinking of the way we use that term, that is that the church in its ministry, teaching and mission stands in a great unbroken line that links the present back to the first apostles. We have already seen the Preacher reserves the title "Apostle" for Jesus alone. When he speaks of an apostolic church, he means that we belong to Jesus, our "apostle and high priest" (3:1). We are partners in a heavenly calling not just grounded in historical tradition, or even in the teachings of the first disciples, but in Jesus himself.

The Preacher tells us that this united, holy, apostolic church is responding to a 'heavenly calling'. That is, the mandate for the church's mission is not found here on earth but comes from the very life of God. This simple fact (heard, if not seen) creates a radical freedom for the church – we do not need to justify ourselves on any secular grounds. We are not here to fulfil a purpose imposed on us by the world, but in response to the will of God.

Sometimes churches can forget this. They have large numbers, strong budgets, professional music programs, well equipped buildings and the admiration of the communities and authorities. But they miss the point – there is no social justification for the church. We proclaim a word that is often not welcome, with a love that is easily scorned, to a world that is quick to be cynical, in the name of Christ, who was rejected and despised. Congregations with frail resources, meagre programs, struggling ministries, sagging buildings and not enough people to fill the old choir stalls may well understand more quickly that in the end the church has nothing going for it except for Jesus. We are an apostolic church when we live the life of Jesus, rolling up our sleeves and joining in, even if our muscles are not that strong. We are a united church when together we proclaim the Gospel, even if we stammer as we speak.

Having set out a short doctrine of the church, the Preacher goes on to use an illustration to explain what he means in more practical terms. He takes the picture of a house and uses it in a number of ways. Firstly, he reminds them that they are God's house. This would be a familiar image to those who knew their Old Testament and would naturally bring to mind Moses. The Preacher reminds the congregation that Jesus is greater than Abraham (John 8:53), Jacob (John 4:12), Solomon (Matthew 12:42), or David (Matthew 22:45). Hebrews 3:7-18 gives a much more detailed analysis of why and how Jesus is greater than Moses. All the Preacher wants to point out here is that Jesus is the head of this new house of God.

The Preacher also used the image of 'house' in an architectural sense – a construction that God through Jesus, is putting together. There quickly follows the image of the 'house' (or household) of faith – a living community. Moses was a servant in that household, while Jesus is the Son and heir over that household. 3:6 contains the

twist, mentioned earlier. If you or I were preaching to this worn down and discouraged congregation we might well seek to both encourage and challenge them by saying something like, "Moses was a servant in God's house, and so are we." But the Preacher's last look at the image of the house of God is startling. He tells them, "we are his house"! We are the household of faith, built by God through and for Jesus. We are the house in which Moses (and all those symbolised in Moses) is a servant. When Jesus says, "I will build my church", (eg Matthew 16:18), we are what he meant. We, like they, are the very house of God, governed, sheltered and protected by Jesus.

There is a final clause that we need to consider. The Preacher whose aim is to encourage not only the inner belief but also the outward life, adds a rider; if you want to enjoy the privileges of being God's house then you need to hold on. The Preacher returns to the well worn path of telling them if they hold on to the hope that is not seen (11:1) but which they have heard then their place in God's household is assured – nothing can take it from them, or us.

Amen.

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