

## LEARNING TO REST TODAY

*Hebrews 3:7-4:13*

Last week we heard the surprising fact that we are the ‘house of God’, built by God and ruled over by Jesus. I say surprising, but I recognise that, theologically, some of us are so long in the tooth that we feel we know this basic doctrine of the church already and the wonder of this truth no longer surprises or inspires. The problem, then and now, is true or not, surprising or not, we find it hard to believe in practice that we really are the house of God, given the realities of church life. Here at the coal-face of human struggle this ‘house-church’ often does not appear attractive or holy. Wherever you go churches are the same; people drift away (10:25) and falter, arms droop (12:12), worship seems stale and lifeless, conflict arises with maddening regularity and the church’s mission is constantly in crisis. The idea that the church is one, holy, apostolic, house seems nothing more than theological nicety.

CS Lewis uses this common perception of the church in his “Screwtape letters” (Lewis 16-17). He points out the inevitable disappointment that comes when we compare the real, flawed church with the perfect church of theology and imagination.

The Hebrew congregation have further reason to doubt the Preacher’s words. They were suffering from some form of crisis. We don’t know the details, but it had shaken their faith and weakened their resolve, (10:32-34). This congregation were disheartened. They were tired of the church, tired of church routine, tired of the struggle against the odds, tired of serving without reward or even recognition. They had expected, or at least hoped, that the joyful Christian life would be more than it turned out to be in reality.

To meet the needs of this disillusioned, despondent congregation, the Preacher returns to what should by now be a well worn track – in this life of faith, appearances can be deceptive. This has always been the case. The promises of God do not look like they sound. Think of the past and see the promise in the hands of sly Jacob or lustful David. Think of the promised land, a land that was to be flowing with milk and honey that turned out to be a place of blood, sweat and tears. Think of the promised Messiah, who turned out to be a baby wrapped in rags and whose life was marked out by rejection and seemed to end in pain and defeat. Indeed, the promises of God often do not look like they sound and so the question remains – should we trust what we see or what we hear?

As an immediate response to this disheartened weariness the Preacher preaches a short sermon-within-a-sermon. His text is Psalm 95:7-11 and his topic is a Sabbath rest. It’s worth noticing right at the start of this sermonette that the Preacher considers the words of the Psalm, however they might have come to us, as the living voice of the Holy Spirit (3:7a).

The text is appropriate, following as it does the reference to Moses in the previous section, but more importantly it centres on two important words:- 'today' and 'rest'. 'Today' (3:7) is now, so that every day is today, but it is also the opportune time – the 'kairos' moment. Now is the time to hear, now is the time to believe.

Using the term 'rest' the Preacher brings together three themes. First (4:3f), with images drawn from Genesis 2:1-3, the Preacher refers to the finished nature of Creation, God's declaration that it was 'good' and his rest from all his work. The second rest (4:9ff) looks to the end of all things, when God's plan is finally revealed, when pain and suffering are no more, death is defeated and Jesus is acknowledged as Lord. Thirdly we see 'rest' as a possibility now (4:11). At those times we experience the 'Sabbath rest' of God today, looking back to God's finished work with gratitude and anticipating his final work with hope. So, the Preacher tells us, when we live as God's people, confident in God's promises, 'today' becomes a 'Sabbath rest'.

Earlier we sang the hymn 'The church's one foundation' which sums up these 'rests'. Verse 1 speaks of our new creation, verse 4 of the end hope and verse 5 speaks of the 'rest' available in these middle times. Why was it important that the congregation understood this particular bit of theology? Because it reaches to the very heart of their problem. They had forgotten, or at least ignored, that the world, and all that could be seen, was from God and was going to God (remember Jesus, God's first and last word 1:1-4). What's more 'today' the world lived and breathed and had it's being in God (Acts 17:28). There is, in fact, a script, but the congregation had lost sight of it and were now trying, as it were, to ad-lib the ending. They wanted to make up a story that seemed better than the one God had given them. You see so long as things go well remaining faithful, sticking to God's script, is relatively simple. But what happens when things do not go so well? What happens when the weeds seem to grow faster than the corn (Matthew 13:24-30)? What happens when God's road takes them through the valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23:4)? They, and we, are all too quick to ad-lib the script, to exchange God's story for one that is happier, easier, more upbeat, safer, less demanding – or at least one we can see.

Exchanging God's story for another is a problem, both old and ever new. When Moses was detained longer than expected on Sinai the people grew tired of waiting and told Aaron to come up with a new story, "make gods for us..." (Exodus 32). When Jesus told the disciples that going to Jerusalem would result in pain and suffering, Peter wanted to re-write the script (Matthew 16:21-23).

So the Preacher knows that all congregations share this tendency to exchange the Gospel for a more attractive story. I would suggest that there are many alternative gospels, which are really no gospel at all (Galatians 1:7), to be heard in churches today; 'gospels' not founded in Jesus and opened up in Scripture. They are attempts to ad-lib the script rather than remain confident and loyal to God in the untidy, uncomfortable, middle time – this 'today', between the clear beginning and ending. The Preacher's concern is to ensure that the congregation continues to trust the God who promises, who is still alive and active. He calls them to stick to the plot, for the ending is sure.

The Preacher, in this sermon within a sermon, thinks of the unfolding story of creation and redemption as a long and sweeping epic play, involving many actors. To be sure, it is not a fixed script for the actors are morally free. We can improvise lines and even whole scenes, but the story-arch is set by God. The Preacher tells us that on the seventh day God rested – the basic outline of the plot was finished, complete and

perfect. Being faithful means sticking to the plot. We are told the plot and know how the play will end, but we are free to work our way through the play as we will.

The problem is the play is so long and complicated, full of twists and turns. It's easy to get lost, or so caught up in one particular scene that we forget where the play is going. Some actors get caught up in a tragic scene and can't continue. Others lose track of the plot and become disheartened and abandon the play mid-scene. Others simply can't find any meaning in the play and drift away. The cast is restless, often confused, and the only way to remain faithful is to keep reminding ourselves of the plot.

This is the preacher's aim both in this sermon within a sermon and in the whole sermon. That is why he has spent so much time speaking about Jesus, the author and finisher of this play (12:2). That is why he constantly tells the congregation to believe their ears not their eyes. And that is why he reminds them that God's rest remains open today. Those who hear and believe the Gospel have a foretaste of the perfect rest to come – "enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following another's bad example" (4:11).

Amen

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