

THE HIGH PRIESTHOOD OF JESUS – ADVANCED COURSE (5): THE WORSHIP OF THE NEW COVENANT

Hebrews 10:19-39

Every sermon implies a, “So what?” That is true of this sermon–within-a-sermon that began back at 7:1. As he reaches the end of this sermon the Preacher raises the question, “If these things are true, how should we then live?”

His answer; get ready for worship. Because of Jesus’ high priestly ministry it is now possible for us to truly worship. We have been given access to the Holy of Holies, brought into communion with the merciful and generous God. In the old days only the high priest could pass the curtain, and that only once a year. Now, all God’s children have open access, through the “new and living way” (10:20). We are invited to follow Jesus into God’s presence.

The question becomes, how shall we get ready to worship? What is real worship, anyway? The Preacher gives us a number of pointers. Firstly, we come to worship as a community. The Preacher’s opening words, (10:19), “brothers and sisters”, suggest that we go together into the Holies of Holies. We are no longer strangers and outcasts, relegated to the outer room – we are family, we belong to Jesus, and to one another. We are welcome in the ‘front room’ of God’s house. This is the preacher’s first point. Before anything else we are family.

Secondly, we come to worship as those who are baptised and forgiven (10:22). We come to worship as those reassured of God’s acceptance, both inwardly and outwardly cleansed, and “drawing near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith” (10:22). Whatever we may feel about the rest of our lives, our half-hearted commitments, broken lives and the everyday care and woes that make up so many lives, when we come to worship we are touched by God’s presence and cured (“sprinkled clean”) by God’s grace.

Thirdly, we come to worship holding on to the promises of God. God has promised that a day is coming when war will be ended, when justice shall flow like a river, when death and pain will be no more. But we must live in a world where “we do not yet see” these things (see 2:8). Therefore we must live by hope. We must “hold unswervingly to the hope we profess” (10:23). This “holding fast” is more than just believing in a doctrine or an idea, we are holding onto the one who gives us hope, to Jesus, the faithful one.

Fourthly, when we come to worship we come not just with prayers and songs but also with deeds of compassion and mercy. We have a tendency to “leave undone those things we ought to have done”. The Preacher knows this and so says that we need to actively encourage one another “towards love and good deeds” (10:24). We are

apt to think of church discipline in negative terms, correcting something gone wrong. Here the Preacher sees it in positive terms, pushing one another along the right path.

Finally, in this section, we are told that coming to worship means gathering with other Christians (10:25). This is a reiteration of the first point, but the Preacher adds a bit more detail. By linking gathering together with 'the Day', that is the final and great 'Day of the Lord' the Preacher adds a new dimension to worship. The theological term is "eschatological". Worship is an eschatological event – that is, it is a participation here and now in the eternal praises of God. A time is coming, writes Paul, when "every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" (Philippians 2 :10-11). When we bend the knee and confess that Jesus is Lord now we are looking to the approaching Day and adding our worship to the vast and eternal throng praising God in the heavens. As Edward Perronet puts it, "O that with yonder sacred throng/ we at his feet may fall/ join in the everlasting song/ and crown him Lord of all."

This truth is all too easy to lose sight of. We forget that our little, local congregation, is a part of the great company of saints, all gathered together into God's presence. The preacher notes this and points out that, frankly, attendance at worship has not been what it could be. Some, he notes, seems to be in the habit of finding other things to do when they should be gathering together. We can understand this. The disincentives to corporate worship are many. It somehow seems purer to worship God all alone on a deserted hill-side or under the beauty of a starry night sky than in the midst of the rag-tag assembly that shows up for church.

Also, we just get tired. It's not only that the sermon rambles on for a tad too long or that the pace of the sermon can sometimes lag. There is a deeper fatigue, a sense that nothing of real significance happens here. The local video shop has better drama, television has more interesting stories, the local table tennis club has friendlier people, the park has a nicer view, and sleeping in on a Sunday morning provides a better Sabbath rest. What's more, nobody on the hillside or under the starry skies is going to ask us to do something for next week's service, or pray for people we don't know in countries we can't find on a map.

The only problem with that, says the Preacher, is that while you are contemplating the beauty of nature and the night sky the faithful are being gathered up into a mystery beyond our seeing and have become part of the great choir of angels singing eternal praise to God (see 12:22-23). Things are not what they seem. What looks like leisure turns out to drain our resources while that which looks like hard work recharges us beyond our understanding.

But then, having described true worship, the Preacher takes on a somewhat sterner mood. 10:26-39 are a series of warnings, together with encouragements. After nearly four chapters describing how the priestly ministry of Jesus cleanses us from sin and brings us free and forgiven into the very presence of God, trouble starts to brew on the horizon.

10:26 brings a grim warning, "If we deliberately keep on sinning, no sacrifice for sin is left." These are terrifying words, especially as we know that no Christian is perfect and even the most faithful still to some degree 'keep on sinning'. To understand these words we must understand a few other things first. Firstly, sin here has a very specific focus. This is not that general sense of sinfulness that Paul describes in Romans 7:24f, when Paul says, "Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me of this body of

death?" The Preacher would join with Paul in proclaiming, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord" (see 9:14,28;10:10). In this passage the Preacher is referring back to that sin he spoke about in 6:1-12 (see 10:29). It is the clear, firm, informed and deliberate rejection of the gospel by those who have lived in its joy, who have felt its power and know in their hearts the promises and grace of God.

For those who turn away from grace there is only the "fearful expectation of judgement" (10:27). But we must be careful not to hear these words through the mouthpiece of hell fire sermons. In Hebrews God's judgement is positive, not negative. It is a sign of God's love for the world in which he will allow nothing harmful to stand. This is not a peevish God who gets mad at sinners. God's judgement sets things right, repairs the broken creation. It is a wonderful thing to rest in the hand of the living, saving, judge of all the earth – unless, of course, we decide to join the forces of death. For such it is a dreadful thing (10:31).

The sin the Preacher speaks of is like one who knows "death has been swallowed up in victory" (1 Corinthians 15:54) yet chooses to set up home in a death camp. It is like knowing when and where the next earthquake will take place and yet buy a house on the fault line. It's like leaving home in the heavenly Jerusalem to take up residence as a slave in Sodom. This sin has tragic proportions, and equally tragic consequences. Judgement is woven into the fabric of the choice.

Secondly, as we saw when we were looking at 6:18, the Preacher is not making a theological point so much as a pastoral one. Abandoning the Gospel and the church is not simply a hypothetical possibility, it is a practical reality. The Preacher's congregation are like a group of tired rock-climbers making their way up a dangerous cliff. They are being pulled to safety by the rope of faith. As they near the top some are deciding they can go no further. They are tired and look like they might let go. No wonder the Preacher shouts, "If you let go there's no saving you!"

To make sure they and we, understand the seriousness of their situation the Preacher underlines it by referring back to a point he made in 2:1-4 and makes another comparison between the old and new covenants. If the old covenant had to be taken so seriously, how much more so the new (10:28-29).

And thirdly, again just as in 6:1-12, the Preacher's aim is to encourage, not frighten, his congregation. He wants them to keep their eyes fixed on Jesus. In doing this he reminds them of their own recent history. This had included a period of persecution. We do not know the details of this, but it was most certainly real. Then, the congregation had responded with joy and compassion. The imprisonment of some of their members had not lead to despair, but the starting up of a prison ministry. The loss of possessions did not prompt the cry, "We've lost everything." But, "We possess a treasure the world cannot take" (10:34).

This is the type of faith the congregation needs to hold on to. The Preacher knows that the congregation is tired, discouraged and in danger of losing sight of the target. There is a danger that they will simply be run ragged, rather than run the race set before them. The Preacher reminds them of what they cannot see; they are running in the supreme contest of humanity, the end of the race is near. And the victor's prize of the 'promised eternal inheritance' awaits (10:36 see 9:15).

The Preacher ends with a shout of encouragement from the prophets to spur them on (10:37-38), like spectators watching the end of a race. This gives the link to the next section of this epic sermon – but more of that in the New Year.

Amen

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