

## ANNOUNCEMENTS AND THE BENEDICTION

*Hebrews 13:1-25*

It is often suggested that chapter 13 of this book is an addition by someone other than the author of chapters 1-12. Although the style changes in this last chapter the theology does not. I'm inclined to say it is the same person, although in the end it is not that important. After all, the authority of Scripture does not rest in the men and women who penned the words but in God himself, who through many and various ways has spoken to us, (1:1) which is where we came in all those weeks ago.

I have portrayed this book as a sermon written in absentia and read out to the church. It makes sense that at the end of the sermon the Preacher would add a few comments that might be called 'the notices'.

When, some months back, we moved the notices from the beginning of the morning service to after the sermon I was asked why. I was told that it was a shame that, after an uplifting/challenging/encouraging sermon, we should be brought back down to earth with a bump by something so mundane as the notices. Whatever else I may say about the mistakenness of that view, I can, like a good evangelical, here point to Scriptural precedent. The Preacher finishes his sermon with the ringing declaration, "Our God is a consuming fire" (12:29) and then immediately turns to the "mundane" matters of everyday Christian and church life. But very quickly we notice that though the sermon is over, the preaching does not stop. Chapter 13 takes all the theology of the sermon and puts it to practical use.

The notices might look something like this:

- *Hospitality (13:1-2)*. Does it strike you as odd in any way that what is arguably the most Christ-centred book of all the New Testament, and therefore the whole Bible, should move straight from high Christology to comments about dinner parties? Perhaps it does, but perhaps it shouldn't. Whenever the church shares a meal together, or any other part of its common life, it is showing in practical ways the love for one another that is at the heart of the Christian life. There are those who think that some of our activities, like the Supper Club, or the walking group, or the occasional BBQ, picnic or party, as secondary, at best, or even a pointless exercise. 13:1-2 places such activities at the centre of our witness and outreach. It is an expression of our common life. This announcement goes further, for it implies that we do not just invite to dinner those who we know will invite us back. As Jesus said, "If you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you?" (Luke 6:33). We are not to show any sort of favouritism (James 2:1-13), and such a witness could well have a surprising results!
- *Ministry to the needy (13:3)*. These verses not only tell us that we have a duty towards others, but also how we are to discharge that duty. We are reminded

that we are not called to hand out gifts from a position of superiority. We are to share one another's burdens "as if you yourselves were suffering" (13:3). We do this not because we are naturally compassionate but as an imitation of Jesus, who entered so fully into our situation that he is able to feel sympathy for our weaknesses (4:15) and therefore supply the grace and mercy needed to help in times of need (4:16).

- *Sex and money (13:4-6)*. Now, here's something that doesn't come up in many notice sheets. Many would say this is not preaching,, it's meddling. What he says is fairly straightforward Christian teaching, but really, is this the place for it? Of course, this is often the way the world looks at preaching. Teach theology as much as you like, but don't make practical applications that impinge on personal choice. That is just what the Preacher, (or the secretary), is doing here and that is why it is included at this point. This is not an arbitrary comment, but is a direct application of what has just been preached. In 10:22 the Preacher declared that "we have had our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and our bodies washed in pure water." That is not just a theological nicety; it is a practical truth that requires a response. The Preacher is telling us that in two key areas of life, that of sex and money, we are to live out the consequences of our belief. In short, sexual laxity and greed are not just attacks on Christian morality; they are denials of the sanctifying work of Christ. Note carefully, it is in the context of these areas of life that the Preacher, loosely quoting from Deuteronomy 31:6, passes on that great promise of our God, "Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you." (13:5)
- *Worship and service (13:7-17)*. This appears more like a normal notice but there are some peculiarities. From what we can gather by reading these verses there seems to have been a problem in the church regarding the perennial issue of law and grace. No matter how much grace is taught (and it appears that church leaders were teaching the right thing, but were being ignored) people have a tendency to return to the gilded charger of the law. The Preacher does a quick recap of some key points from his sermon and images of Sinai and Zion, which we looked at last week, flicker in the congregation's mind. Paul, too, confronted the same problem in Galatia. He has to remind the church, "It is for freedom that Christ has set you free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery." (Galatians 5:1). I would suggest it is still the most common and most damaging problem facing the church today, at least in Britain.

There appears to be a second issue facing the congregation under this heading (13:11-14). It seems to have something to do with their public face. Mention of 'outside the camp' (13:11) leads the Preacher to say that the proper place to live out the implication of his sermon is not 'inside' the church but outside, in the world. In this we are following Jesus who, "suffered outside the camp - outside the city gate" (13:11-12). If he was so publicly exposed to abuse and persecution should we not also be prepared to follow him?

This notice begins and ends with an appeal to remember leaders. The Preacher reminds the congregation that first and foremost their leader is Jesus. He is the same yesterday, today and forever (13:8); so he can be relied on and followed at all times. In as much as their lives reflect the life of Jesus, other leaders are to be followed and imitated (13:7). This places tremendous

responsibilities on those called to leadership within this, or any fellowship. It is especially worth thinking about, at this time, as we consider who God is calling to leadership here, in the next few weeks, as we approach the AGM. We are invited not to look at age or gender, not theological understanding or 'spiritual maturity', (whatever that might mean), but simply this, do we see Jesus reflected in this person's life? Would we be happy to follow their lead, even if we didn't agree with them, because we know they in turn are following Jesus? The Preacher says that if you don't have this confidence in your leaders it's of no benefit to you, the church or them (13:17).

- Prayer requests (13:18-19). The notices conclude with requests for prayer, as is right and proper.

After the notices the service concludes with a benediction. As I'm thinking of doing a morning series on various Biblical benedictions later in the year I'm not going to go into much detail here. I do want to point out this evening, however, that this wonderful blessing in 13:20-21 is no afterthought. It is steeped in the Christology of the rest of the book and shows us quite clearly that good theology affects not only our daily lives but our prayer lives as well.

The whole book ends with a short personal note – what we might call a covering letter. The Preacher asks the congregation to listen attentively to his “word of exhortation” (13:22), which he rather amusingly calls, ‘brief’. (In fact Hebrews is the third longest letter in the New Testament.) The mention of Timothy (13:23), probably the same person as Paul's friend, puts the Preacher at least on the edge of Paul's circle.

The penultimate verse is often used to try to determine the geography of this letter. Was it written from Italy or to Italy? The problem is that like the English translation, the Greek is ambiguous and can mean: All the Christians here in Italy send your greetings *or* All your fellow Italians here send you greetings *or* There's a bunch of Italians here who say, Hi! Take your pick.

Whatever questions we may still have about this sermon, its accompanying notices and covering letter, one thing we can be sure of, and that is summed up in the last verse; “Grace be with you all.” Of course, this is in some ways a standard farewell, but in other ways it sums up the message the Preacher has proclaimed to his congregation. Whether they are in Italy or Greece, Antioch or Alexandria, Cardiff or Beeston, grace will find them – all of them – and dwell with them. That is the ultimate message of Hebrews, the ultimate message of the gospel. Because of the ministry of the great high priest, the great shepherd of the sheep, grace is with us all.

Amen

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