

Hebrews 12:18 to the end – 9.30 am

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord our strength and our redeemer
Amen

Today I am going to talk about our reading from the letter to the Hebrews and I have to say that on first reading it isn't the most cheerful reading for a Sunday morning, but the messages contained in it have an effect on our very lives, especially in this increasingly secular country of ours.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews was addressing a problem of the many Jews, who had turned to Christianity, and who were now returning back to Judaism.

Life for Jews in Jesus' day was fairly stable; they were not persecuted individually for their Jewish religion, and were living quite normal lives in the circumstances of living in an occupied country.

But those who had renounced their Judaism for the new Christian faith; life was very different, their lives were far from stable.

When we read St Luke's account of the Acts of the Apostles we read in Acts chapter 5, for example, of the persecution of the apostles and of followers of Jesus, many of whom may be those who were going back to Judaism for safety.

In chapter 7 of Acts we read of the stoning to death of Stephen, and in Acts chapter 12 we hear of the death of James, John's older brother, at the hands of King Herod.

So Jewish Christians were being persecuted and even being put to death, which was the reality of the early Jewish Christians. No longer were they living normal stable lives, but living in fear of their own Jewish leaders.

And on top of that their neighbours were probably putting allsorts of pressure on them to come back to the fold of Judaism.

And those who had converted to Christianity, but who were not yet affected could nevertheless see at first hand the suffering that many of their fellow Christians were going through, and didn't particularly want that to happen to them.

Mark chapter 4 comes to mind here, that is, Jesus' Parable of the Sower, because as a result of all these pressures a significant number of Christian Jews were reverting back to Judaism and a safer life.

In the first few verses of our reading the author of Hebrews was reminding the Jewish waverers that unlike their ancestors they didn't go to Mount Sinai with its blazing fire, darkness and gloom to hear God's ear splitting words; and where they could not endure the order that was given; that even if an animal touched the mountain it shall be stoned to death.

Where the old covenant said do this, or do that, or you will be judged, and in some cases it said do not do that or you will die. Indeed so terrifying was the occasion that even Moses said, "I tremble with fear".

No, the author of Hebrews is saying to the Christian Jews that that is not their experience, their experience is of the New Covenant which he describes from verse 22 when he writes, "But you have come to mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem", "And to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant".

So whereas verses 18 to 21, deals with all that man could expect from the old covenant, a God of wrath who was to be feared, a lonely majestic God who was separated from them to the extent that if they saw his face they would die,

Whereas verses 22 to 24, deals with what man can expect from the new covenant which these waverers had experienced, which speaks of a new relationship with God, a God of love, where the law had been replaced by grace, and where the Holy Spirit actually dwells in them and in us to guide us all in daily living and ultimately to bring us all to God.

Whereas Mount Sinai, which represents the old covenant, and which was not touchable or they would die, Mount Zion represents the new covenant which is approachable through our Lord Jesus Christ; Mount Sinai represents law whereas Mount Zion represents grace.

So whereas in the old covenant God promised them a land flowing with milk and honey, in the new covenant God promises us a place in heaven with him.

In the old covenant the law confronts us with commandments which lead to judgement and condemnation, but in the new covenant grace presents us with love, forgiveness and salvation to eternal life

Whereas nobody can be saved by the law, anybody can be saved by grace, and these were the messages that the author of Hebrews was pointing out to the waverers.

Jesus also spoke to us in a similar vain as recorded in Matthew chapter 10 verse 39 when he said, “Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it”.

Going on now to verse 25, after giving us the contrast between Mount Sinai where Moses spoke to the people, and Mount Zion where God spoke directly to them from heaven through his Son, the writer of Hebrews says to the Jewish Christians see that you do not refuse the one who is speaking to you from heaven.

The writer is telling them that those who refused to listen to Moses at Mount Sinai did not enter the Promised Land; and they would have known that because it is all written down in the Old Testament which they would be fully aware of.

And now the writer of Hebrews is drawing a parallel to the old covenant by telling the Jewish Christians to stay faithful and not to refuse to listen to God, who has now spoken to them directly from heaven, or they will never enter the heavenly promised land of the kingdom of God.

The question that I would like to address now is what the writer to the Hebrews would write to our situation today in light of our declining Christian community?

The first thing he would probably note I’m sure, certainly in this country today, is the lack of persecution, Christian aren’t persecuted, but I think he would also note the high level of apathy towards God and Christianity.

He would almost certainly record the obvious signs of the pressures from materialism and secularism, and our love for earthly treasure at the expense of heavenly treasure.

So whereas the Hebrew writer was addressing Christians moving back to Judaism, he would now address Christians moving away from Christianity to materialism and secularism.

His argument for us staying faithful to Christ would be the same as the argument he used to the Hebrews, namely why throw away a life with Jesus in heaven for a few quiet years as a Jew, or in our case, why throw away eternal life with Jesus in heaven for earthly treasure that rots, falls to bits, never works when you want it to and which you can’t take with you when you die.

Or why throw away a life with Jesus in heaven because you prefer to have a lie in on a Sunday morning or what ever it is that has put Christianity at the bottom of our priority list.

I realise that we who are here today may not have done either of these two things, but if either one is in any way applicable to you then I urge you to think again in light of the message you heard from the author of the letter to the Hebrews.

The question we all need to ask ourselves before we decide to leave off going to church is do I really want to break off my relations with Jesus.

I had a similar conversation with some one recently who told me he was a Christian but saw no need to go to church, I asked him if he thought it was possible to be in an earthly relationship with a family that he never sees or speaks to.

We now need to be mindful of the last few words in our reading from Hebrews which I haven't touched on yet, they are, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven".

God will shake the earth and the heavens, indeed the whole universe, and all created things will drop away, and only the eternal things of heaven will be left which is the kingdom of God which cannot be shaken.

So we need to ensure that we not only stay faithful to Christ but also stay in a close relationship with him, because all the earthly things, which are not of God, will be removed and destroyed.

And anyone that Jesus doesn't know and I refer us to Matthew 7: 23 or Luke 13: 27, which reads, "I don't know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers".

I want to finish by quoting verse 28 from our reading, "therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God and acceptable worship with reverence and awe".

And this should not only be this Sunday, but every day, and for all of our future Sundays.

As we sit let us pray

Lord Jesus you said that you are the way, the truth, and the life, let us never stray from you, who are the way, nor distrust you, who are the truth, nor rest in any other but you, who are the life, beyond whom there is nothing to be desired, either in heaven or on earth. We ask this for your names sake

Amen