

Hebrews 10:11-25 14November2021

Koinonia Fellowship Applied – ‘Heart Stuff’ 6 - Confidence before God

Both today’s readings are about focusing us on what we are to do as Christians in the midst of the usual disasters and worldly evil that surrounds us and in particular the persecution that comes for Christians as they live in that world. We look at that at this time of the year because we are approaching the end of the Church year – this isn’t at the end of December but rather sometime in November. Next Sunday we look at Christ the King – as the last Sunday of the Church year – celebrating Jesus being revealed as King over all in the Age to come. Then the new church year begins with Advent – the four Sundays before Christmas – preparing for Jesus coming both as a human being and also his second coming!

I’m going to take us carefully through our Hebrews passage because this tells us so much about how we are to be and do in the face of a world hostile to the gospel, a world which we live in here in Dunedin too. It is also particularly relevant to us practically being a koinonia fellowship, here and now.

So lets get into this passage from Hebrews – probably one of the more difficult New Testament letters to understand. It may be useful to follow this in a Bible – Hebrews 10:11-25.

It begins - Every priest stands day after day at his service. I bet most of us spend most of our working time sitting down. We probably need to spend a bit more time standing up and walking around for our health and wellbeing. Most of the time when we stand up it’s a sign that work is over for the moment and we’re off to do something else.

However for much of the world and for much of history the act of sitting down meant that you had finished work, not that you were beginning it. In a world where most working people laboured in the fields or in energetic crafts like building, only a few sat down. Most people stood to work and sat to rest. That is the contrast which Hebrews is making here between the priests who (in the author’s day) still served under the old dispensation, offering regular sacrifices in the Temple, and the position Jesus has now taken after completing his work. They all stand daily at their duties (verse 11); he has finished his work, and now sits at God’s right hand (verse 12). He doesn’t have to offer his sacrifice any more; he’s done it, and it’s complete.

The author then quotes a bit of Psalm 110 about the Messiah sitting at God’s right hand until God makes his enemies into his footstool. This fits with the picture the author of the Hebrews has built through the rest of his letter until this point – I won’t explain it all now – that Jesus is the Messiah, the truly human being, the great high priest after the order of Melchizedek, the one who has offered the perfect sacrifice through which the sin-forgiving new covenant has been established at last. The argument of the letter is about Jesus at every point. What Jesus has achieved is to fulfill God’s purposes as set out in scripture, so that the only wise place to be is with him, rather than with those who cling to the signposts instead of the reality.

When we look to see where this Jesus is now, and what he’s doing, we discover, not that he needs to die over and over again, like the regular repeated sacrifices offered in the Temple; nor, indeed, that he is again and again presenting his sacrifice to the father, as though he needed to do that repeatedly within the heavenly sanctuary. He is no longer at work; no longer sacrificing, or offering his sacrifice. That was done once and for all, and is finished and complete. He has taken his seat, signifying that his principal work is over.

The writer intends that his readers should find this enormously comforting. What Jesus has done, in dying as a sacrifice for us, to procure the complete forgiveness of sins spoken of in Jeremiah, and to establish God’s new covenant with us, is complete. It does not need adding to, let alone repeating. To suggest either

of these would be to suggest that there was something incomplete, something left undone which Jesus didn't quite manage to do the first time round. When as Christians we look for assurance that we have truly been forgiven, we don't look—or we shouldn't look—at anything we do, at anything the church does, at anything Christian ministers, clergy, priests or whoever do. We look back to the event outside Jerusalem on that dark Friday afternoon, and thank God for what was accomplished fully and finally on our behalf.

However this is not something that all Christians are very clear about and some odd practices and ideas have been built up over the centuries which are very church and people focused and not true to the Bible here at all. Of course the time when Jesus spoke most strikingly about the 'new covenant' through which sins would be forgiven by the shedding of his blood was at the final meal he shared with his disciples, the 'last supper' which he commanded his followers to repeat 'in remembrance of me'. This event, and the keeping of this command by Christians ever since (what we call communion or eucharist), are enormously important. We shouldn't be surprised that different interpretations have grown up as to what exactly this meal means, and, so to speak, how it works. We have looked at this a couple of times already recently but this passage points to another aspect I'd like to bring out.

Some churches have seen the meal as itself a sacrifice, and have seen the clergy who conduct the liturgy as 'priests' in the sense of people who offer this sacrifice. There is just a grain of truth in this, since the meal which Jesus commanded us to repeat always takes its meaning from the single sacrifice he offered. From that point of view it is true to say that we are continuing to share in the single sacrificial event, like the priests or people in the Temple eating the meat after the animal had been slaughtered. But this isn't all that has usually been meant when people have seen the eucharist as a sacrifice. The present passage rules out entirely any further notions down this line, particularly any suggestion that the sacrifice of Jesus is somehow repeated at each service.

What then does Paul mean when he says that, as often as we eat the bread and drink the cup, we 'show forth the Lord's death' until he comes (1 Corinthians 11.26)? He means that the meal itself proclaims, or announces, the single, past, unrepeatable event, not that it somehow re-enacts the sacrifice. The only time anything is said in the New Testament about re-crucifying the son of God, it is mentioned as a dire warning of something nobody in their right mind would wish to do (Hebrews 6.6). This is why we have a table we gather around to re-enact the meal which points to what Jesus did, not an altar on which a sacrifice is given.

This passage emphasizes that the sacrifice of Jesus was a single moment in history which accomplished forgiveness, and is not to be repeated. Christianity is not a religion that imagines itself going round and round in a circle, coming back to the same point. It is not a religious system like that at all. It is about events that move forwards, in a historical sequence, from a beginning, to a development, to a climax, to the results of that climax. Part of being a Christian is to know where you belong within that story, and to celebrate what it means: that God's dealing with our sins, and establishing his new covenant with us, have been achieved once and for all.

What has been achieved is described by the Old Testament quotations from Jeremiah 31:33 and 34. Our hearts, our consciences, are cleansed ready for the implanting of God's law and our sins are forgotten and forgiven. With that done we are able to go right into the presence of God, where Jesus sits, having completed what needs to be done for that to happen. We have confidence to enter God's presence.

What does confidence mean? In Greek, the meaning of the word includes frankness, outspoken speech, openness to public scrutiny, courage, boldness, fearlessness, and joy. It is a characteristic of free citizens who may hold their heads up without shame or fear, looking others directly in the eye. In Roman society, slaves did not exercise such boldness; it belonged to the free members of the household. In Hebrews that confidence is a characteristic of those in the household of God, the family of God. With that boldness we

have access into God's presence through Jesus' blood, which takes us on a new and living path into the innermost shrine through the work of our high priest. That is quite something. At this point we need to ask ourselves the question – do we have that boldness, that confidence, to stand before God? Have we really accepted the good news? I want to pause now and ask you to consider in silence how ready you are to accept this as your reality, to accept that you can stand before God in confidence. Then I will look at the rest of what our excerpt from Hebrews says about this.

The rest of the passage speaks of how this confidence plays out, of the condition we are in as a result of all that has been said about Jesus and what he has completed. We are invited to draw near to God, which basically means to come to worship him. How will we approach – with true hearts, genuine hearts, full of assurance of faith, with a strong hold on the confession of our hope, and with a willingness to irritate each other into love and good deeds. Notice here Paul's pattern of Faith, Hope and Love.

So first we should have a true heart. This looks back to the promise in Jeremiah, that God will place his laws in our hearts and write them in our minds. Something happens to us when the new covenant opens up to include us within it – something involving the heart. We become truly human beings, from the inside out. It starts with our heart and works its way into the rest of our personality, thinking, behavior and all.

To draw near to God we must be in full assurance of faith. There is no sense of approaching God with humility or self-effacement here. Faith isn't something you can just drum up by your own efforts. It's what comes not when you are looking at yourself but when you are looking hard at the object of faith, namely Jesus - or, if you like, God seen in the light of, and in the face of, Jesus. The whole letter has been about Jesus, and about who we are as a result of who he is and what he's done. Thinking that through, and holding firmly on to it, produces the complete assurance Hebrews is talking about. We have full assurance of God's work in preparing us to be in the divine presence, that is, the faith that Jesus's work in our lives produces, the faith God gives us without requiring any strength from ourselves. The effect of Jesus work on the cross, his sacrifice, is our hearts are sprinkled clean from an evil conscience. Most people, most of the time, have something which hangs heavy on their hearts, something they've done or said which they wish they hadn't, something which haunts them and makes them afraid of being found out. How wonderful to know that the sacrifice of Jesus, and the 'sprinkled blood' which results from it, has the power, as we accept it in faith and trust, to wash every stain from the conscience, continuously, so that we can come to God without any shadow falling across our relationship. And through accepting this in our baptism when our bodies are washed with pure water, we become one of God's people, able to approach him as family members with confidence, with that full assurance of faith.

Our confidence means we approach God with a firm grip on our confession of Hope. Notice we confess our hope not our faith. Its not about confessing our faith to demonstrate the certainty of our belief. Our faith is what God has given us through what he has done. This hope we hold fast to looks forward eagerly to what God is finally going to do for us, it is a mark of our identity as Christians. We are people of hope. When questions about our hope arise in our minds, the answer is not to try and think up clever answers ourselves, but to trust in the one who has promised it to us, that is, the God we have learned to recognize in Jesus. He is utterly trustworthy.

And the confidence with which we draw near to God, with which we worship in his presence, is something we do together, in koinonia fellowship. The danger of people thinking they could be Christians all by themselves was, it seems, present in the early church just as today, and verse 25 warns against it. This may well not be due to people not realizing what a corporate thing Christianity was and is, nor yet because they were lazy or didn't much like the other Christians in their locality, but because, when there was a threat of persecution it's much easier to escape notice if you avoid meeting together with other worshippers. Much safer just not to turn up. There's no place for that, declares Hebrews. Every Christian needs the encouragement of every other Christian. In fact the confidence and frank openness with which we come

before God also applies to how we relate to one another. We are to provoke one another to love and good deeds – basically everything central to Christian living. The word translated provoke here is *paroxismos* – we get the word *paroxysm* from this meaning a sudden outburst of emotion or action. The idea is that we are to provoke, irritate, even exasperate each other to love. How does one provoke love? How does one irritate someone into good works? We so often talk about love as something without irritation or exasperation, a stance toward the other that involves toleration, patience, and comfort. But the writer of Hebrews notes that we should encourage one another in the irritation of love. Instead of being a fellowship built on sameness and good feeling, we are told that provocation and exasperation is part of being a fellowship. We are exhorted to build a kind of fellowship gathering that relentlessly, even irritatingly, suggests that actions of love and deeds are not what create faith, but are rather the responsibility of our community which *needs* to gather because of our faith in the great high priest — a faith God gives. The assurance of faith and the confession of hope leads to love and good deeds being confidently provoked among us as we meet.

As we look at the world around us, needing to hear the good news of Jesus more and more and see it demonstrated in our love and good deeds, can we stand before God in confidence? Do we have that full assurance of faith, having fully accepted what Jesus has done? Otherwise what good news do we have for the world around us?

Are we holding fast to the confession of our hope without wavering? Are we really standing out as people of hope in a world without hope?

Are we, in that same confidence with which we stand before God, also able to provoke one another to love and good deeds?

Is all this reflected in our life together, in what we do when we meet? Are our actions and words in our services showing that we stand with confidence before God, drawing near to worship him with full assurance of faith, gathering around his table to re-enact the meal which celebrates his once and for all sacrifice? Do we confidently provoke each other to love and good deeds when we meet?

Do we really have confidence in coming before God?