

repentance from sin and faith in Jesus as our Saviour and Lord – continue to form the true basis on which alone we can proceed to maturity.

Verses 4-6 contain a very solemn warning. “It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.” These sombre words warn of the serious consequence of deliberate and wilful apostasy.

The writer’s purpose, however, isn’t to frighten his readers but to encourage them to a diligent, persevering faith so that they will “inherit what has been promised” (vv. 11-12).

And that promise is sure. There are “two unchangeable things” – God’s word is true, for he cannot lie; but he has also sworn by himself (“as I live” recurs throughout the Old Testament).

“We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf” (vv. 19-20a).

Our great high priest has already entered the sanctuary. We are anchored to an immovable object – the very throne of God!

- “We are anchored to an immovable object – the very throne of God!” Reflect on these words.
- What does this have to say about the true foundation of our faith?
- How does this understanding affect our quest for spiritual maturity?



3. A Great High Priest

Reading: Hebrews 4.14-6.20

In facing the reality of sin, humankind has been unable to approach God without some attempt at appeasement and someone to act as a go-between. This has been expressed in a variety of ways in different cultures. There seems to have been some witch-doctor, guru, shaman or priest claiming the ability to open the way to the divine.

Of course, we have people – at times it seems a good number of them – who pride themselves in being ‘irreligious’. And then we are amazed at the extent to which such people ‘consult the stars’ or go to some new-age ‘spiritual adviser’ or ‘channeller’. Folk may have opted not to believe in the God of the Bible, but it is hardly an age of unbelief, for people still end up believing in something.

- “Folk may have opted not to believe in the God of the Bible, but it is hardly an age of unbelief, for people still end up believing in something.” Do you agree? Why?
- To what extent and in what ways do we see people in our community seeking a “go-between” to enable them (hopefully) to have access to some sort of spiritual reality?

The Aaronic Priesthood

In Exodus 28.1 we read, ‘Have Aaron your brother brought to you from among the Israelites, along with his sons Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar, so they may serve me as priests.’

Clearly, a priest must be able to deal sympathetically with the people on the one hand and therefore to represent them before God, offering gifts and sacrifices for their sins. Priests in the Aaronic line are certainly “able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and going astray”. They also are sinners. They have to offer sacrifices for their own sins, as well as for the sins of the people (Heb. 5.1-3).

Jesus can sympathise with our weaknesses. He was “tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin” (4.15). We don’t have to infer, as some writers do, that Jesus underwent every kind of human temptation – any more than each of us may face every temptation. There are areas where, for a whole variety of reasons, we ourselves haven’t felt the pull of temptation. There is no reason to

assume that Jesus would have done so. The temptations recorded in Matthew 4.1-11 and Luke 4.1-13 were not, however, the end of the temptations he faced. (Note the surfacing of some of them again at the crucifixion, as in Mt. 27.39-44.) But they are typical temptations to fulfil his physical needs, to draw attention to himself and to use the enemy's methods to fulfil his mission on earth.

While the temptations were specific to him, they were not in themselves unique. They were in fact particularly strong for Jesus, appealing both to his identity and his mission. Yet he did not yield to them.

“Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Heb. 4.16). “Throne of grace,” by the way, has become a religious cliché which we can tend to use without thinking. It refers to the throne from which God rules and from which grace is offered to all who come to receive it in faith.

- Why do we need “mercy” and “grace”?
- What are our grounds of confidence in coming to God?

Call and Qualifications

Human priests need to have – (a) a divine appointment and (b) the ability to sympathise with people. Christ has both of these qualifications.

Psalms 2.7 and 110.4 are quoted as evidence of the call of God (Heb. 5.5-6). These Psalms were, of course, written long before and had been understood in a more immediate reference. Both of them are what have been called ‘royal’ Psalms. Yet, like so many other Old Testament passages, the words cannot be adequately fulfilled by local references. They were ‘hanging’ in the record, as it were, awaiting fulfilment.

Our great high priest had come to do the Father's will. Note his ‘reverent submission’ and ‘obedience’ (vv. 7-8) – a theme to which the writer returns in 10.5-10. In Lk. 22.44, we read, ‘being in anguish, [Jesus] prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.’ It has been suggested that Jesus was praying to be saved from dying there and then in Gethsemane, either through physical exhaustion or by satanic assault – and that he was delivered from that assault. However, this is an unwarranted suggestion.

‘The fact that the cup was not removed qualified him all the more to sympathise with his people; when they are faced with the mystery and trial of unanswered prayer they know that their high priest was tested in the same way and did not seek a way of escape by supernatural means of a kind that they do not have

at their disposal. At no point can the objection be voiced that because he was the Son of God it was different, or easier, for him. He who would not have recourse to miraculous means to relieve his hunger in the wilderness refused to summon angelic forces to rescue him from his enemies. He recognised the path of the Father's will, and followed it to the end; herein lay his ‘godly fear’ – his ‘humble submission’, as NEB renders it” (FF Bruce, *Hebrews*, pp. 102-103).

- How important is it to your prayer life and experience that Jesus wasn't spared the cup of suffering?
- “Submission”, “obedience”... These aren't popular words today, yet they were the path by which Jesus “became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him” (v. 9). Reflect on these words in regard to God's “grace” and the “faith” that receives God's grace.

A Call to Maturity

The theme of Melchizedek's priesthood will be picked up in chapter 7. There is much to be said, but they aren't ready for it yet.

“Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment” (6.1-2).

In 1 Cor. 3.1-2, Paul says that ‘I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly – mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it.’

The writer to the Hebrews has also concluded “you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food” (5.11-12). Yet he calls them to ‘leave the elementary teachings... and go on to maturity’ (6.1).

“The elementary teachings about Christ” is more literally “the word of the beginning of Christ.” FF Bruce comments that “it is remarkable how little in the list is distinctive of Christianity, for practically every item could have its place in a fairly orthodox Jewish community. Each of them, indeed, acquires a new significance in a Christian context; but the impression we get is that existing Jewish beliefs and practices were used as a foundation on which to build Christian truth” (p. 112).

It all seems to be part of the pressure they were facing to renounce Christ and revert to Judaism. The distinctively Christian foundations – including