

Sunday 27 October 2024 – Last Sunday after Trinity – Bible Sunday

(Job 42.1-6, 10-end); Hebrews 7.23-end; John 5.36b-end

For the last three weeks we have been reading passages from the Letter to the Hebrews as our Epistle or first reading. The odd thing about this letter is that no one knows for sure who wrote it, so for example it is not actually correct to refer to it as the Letter of St Paul to the Hebrews. The letter itself does not refer to an author, although a reference to “our brother Timothy” at the end of chapter 13 may have started the theory that Paul was the author. The tradition that it was not Paul seems to come from Tertullian, a Christian writer in 2nd century north Africa, who thought it was Barnabas. But apparently none of the evidence is conclusive, so the official line is that the author of the Letter to the Hebrews is anonymous, and the date of its writing as somewhere between 55 and 90 AD.

Who are these Hebrews the author addresses as if he were making a speech? It seems likely they are simply fellow-believers, but why call them Hebrews as many of them will not have been Jews? Right at the end of the letter he refers to “those from Italy” sending greetings to the people he is addressing, and it is known there was already a flourishing Christian community in Rome, where Paul is said to have been executed.

So much for the mysterious origins of the Letter to the Hebrews; what about the message it is aiming to convey?

In brief it would be fair to say it is a combination of explanation and encouragement. In its thirteen chapters it wants to make it clear that Jesus Christ is the cause of our salvation, because of what he has done for all of us. He abased himself, lowered himself to come among us and live our life with us, even though he was born not just of the Virgin Mary but also by the Holy Spirit, thus making him sinless. Also, and this occurs in today’s reading from chapter 7, the letter draws a parallel between the Levite priests of the Old Testament, who were temporary because they were only human, and Jesus who holds his priesthood permanently

because he continues for ever. He is in a position to save us by acting as a mediator and interceding for us. But, as our Gospel reading this morning makes clear, there were plenty of Jewish authorities at the time who would have none of it. They would search the scriptures but they wouldn't know him.

The letter to the Hebrews does not rest in making it clear that Jesus is the cause of our salvation, which might test our own faith if taken by itself, but goes further and this is where the encouragement comes in. Heaven knows we all need encouragement, because our daily lives are complicated. But Jesus shows himself to be a model for our behaviour, acting and reacting in ways which dumbfound us; just think of the parables. In the letter the encouragement has two aspects: on the one hand the writer urges his readers to hold fast to what they have – their faith, their partnership with Christ with all its accompanying virtues.

So far, so good, you might say. But, and this is really interesting for us today and for all time, the author wants to persuade his readers to move either “in” towards Jesus who can be for them a source of help and comfort, or “out” to endure a world that challenges their commitments and even their faith. We have all been in such situations; I know I have, nowhere more so than in hospital when talking to patients who do not know where to turn in desperation. It is often a matter of intuition as to what I might say, but then I remember that Jesus suffered, just as a human being in physical agony would do, and in the silence between us I hear a huge sigh.

Today is Bible Sunday, and reading it can teach us what God has been and is up to in the world which he has created, difficult though its lessons can be. There is a notice in this week's E-news about help with reading the Bible. Reading the New Testament puts a completely fresh complexion on God's purposes for us and how he wants us to behave. I commend the Letter to the Hebrews to you, no matter who wrote it and who was to receive it.

25.10.2024

