

Nov 17 2024 Sermon Rev Don Owers

Hebrews 10.11-14, 19-25

Sometime last century – it was about 1990 actually – I was in a meeting with a few other clergy when I noticed that one of my colleagues – let's call him Peter – was wearing a distinctive lapel badge. It featured two question marks, picked out in gold against a dark green enamel background with a gold border. So, it was quite eye catching. And sure enough, one of the other clergy said, 'Hey Peter, what's the badge?'

'Well' Peter said, 'Actually I wear it because it provokes people to ask about it, and when they do, I tell them it stands for two questions that I often ask people.'

'Ok, what are they?'

'They're questions about faith,' said Peter, 'they can be a bit confronting, but I find they really help to focus people's thinking.'

'The first question is this: If you were to die tonight are you sure that God would accept you into heaven?'

You might like to think how you would answer that question. Note that the question asks if you are **sure** that God would accept you! To answer, 'I think so, or I hope so' means you're not sure.

I suspect that many Anglicans might hesitate to answer 'yes' because it sounds a bit presumptuous. But, actually it's not, and the Christian answer to the second question makes that clear.

Peter continued the conversation by saying that, if you answered, 'Yes', to the first question he'd ask the second question, which was: 'If you **were** to die tonight and God were to say to you "Why should I accept you into heaven?" what would you say?'

The Christian answer is: 'God would accept me because Jesus died for my sins and Jesus is risen, and I've accepted him as my Lord and Saviour!'

If you answer in that way, what you are saying is that your confidence is not in yourself but in Christ, who died for you and is your saviour. That's not being presumptuous, it's not being confident in yourself, it's being confident in God's promise.

Now, obviously that's not a verbatim account of that conversation, my recall's not that brilliant, but I think I have the gist of it.

I suspect that one of the most common anxieties that Christians experience is about their assurance of salvation. The reality of our mortality sharpens those anxieties. What would happen, where would I go, if I died tonight? Those two rather confronting questions explore the assurance of salvation which people have, or don't have, and they can bring out the basis for the assurance that God **wants** us to have. And be in no doubt, brothers and sisters, God does want us to have the assurance that flows through faith in Jesus as Lord and Saviour. In numbers of places the New Testament writers seek to emphasise this.

St John, for example, concludes his first letter write by writing:

*¹³ I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may **know** that you have eternal life (1 John 5.13)*

And St Paul reminds the early Christians:

Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ² For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. ³ For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to deal with sin. (Romans 8.1-3)

'Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.'

The writer to the Hebrews is no exception. In Hebrews 10 vs 14 – 25, our New Testament passage today, he sets out reasons why Christian believers can have assurance of salvation. You have the text in your pew sheet notes, and I encourage you to have that before you as I speak.

As we have heard previously, Hebrews was written to an early church, possibly in Rome, which was made up predominantly of converts from the Jewish faith. It's a church that has experienced some persecution, and it seems that some members were muttering about abandoning their faith in Jesus as the Messiah in favour of the more orthodox Jewish faith which they had previously practiced, and which, at that time, might have seemed to be less prone to persecution.

Our author then, is writing to these early Christians, who are almost certainly under pressure both from the pagan culture in which they lived and from within the Jewish community, and he's seeking to persuade them to remain faithful to Jesus. To that end he makes numerous comparisons between the benefits of Christian faith as against the Jewish faith from which they had come. In today's reading the emphasis is on the assurance of salvation that Christians have through the forgiveness and new life which flows to us through the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Because he's writing to predominantly Jewish Christian readers the author makes considerable use of imagery drawn from the Old Testament and the rituals of Jewish worship.

So, in vs 11 – 12 of our reading the comparison is between the Jewish priests who stand day after day offering sacrifices, and the **once for all** offering of himself that Jesus makes for sins of the world. The sacrifices made by the priests don't take away sin they simply symbolise it. That animals die in these sacrifices brings home the seriousness of sin – sin leads to death. That seriousness needs to be kept in view, so the sacrifices are repeated. But the sacrifices do nothing actually to deal with sin and its consequences. The self-offering of Jesus, in contrast, is 'once for all' and having made that sacrifice Jesus is seated in the place of honour at the right hand of God. Both Jews and pagans criticised Christian faith on account of the shame of the cross – crucifixion was universally understood as the most shameful way to be put to death. Probably with this criticism in mind our author portrays the shame of the cross as leading directly to exaltation to right hand of God – which the readers understand is the place of highest honour in the presence of God.

To emphasise his point the author goes on to write: (v14)

¹⁴“For by a single offering he (ie Jesus) has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.” To be perfected, as our author uses the word, doesn’t mean to be made perfect in an ethical sense – as if those who are sanctified can never again exhibit any faults or frailties – rather it means being made perfect in the sight of God through the self-offering of Jesus. Now, of course, we are called, as Christians, to grow, day by day, into the likeness of Christ, but when it comes to our standing before God, from the moment we come to faith in him, we are made one with Christ in faith and made perfect in him. Why can Christians have assurance of salvation? Because, brothers and sisters, it doesn’t depend on us or on what we do; it depends on God and what God has done for us in Christ – and what God has done is ‘once for all’ – it is done, it is accomplished. It’s not by accident that the ‘once for all’ language occurs in our liturgy. As we prepare for Communion we affirm that in this celebration ‘We do as our saviour has commanded, proclaiming his offering of himself made once for all upon the cross.’ Our salvation doesn’t depend on us or what we do but on God and what God has done for us in Christ. All we do (as it were), is accept in faith the gift of salvation that God offers to us in Christ – but you don’t earn a gift, you can’t earn a gift – and certainly not this gift. Faith is simply accepting the gift of God, and through this faith we are saved, in this faith we have assurance of salvation.

In contrast to the restrictions which prevented Jewish believers, from entering Israel’s sanctuary, the Holy of Holies in the temple of Jerusalem, those who have been made perfect through the blood of Christ have confidence to enter the sanctuary, that is to enter into God’s holy presence – there’s no need for anxiety or timidity. Jewish believers were screened off from the presence of God by the curtain in the temple, **but now** our writer tells us, Christian believers have access to the very presence of God through the blood of Jesus – this is a new way which is also a living way – Jesus died for our sins, yes, but he also rose triumphant over death, his way is the living way because Jesus lives and offers this life to all who will trust in his promise.

In the light of all this our author concludes:

*19 Therefore, my brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus . . . 22 let us approach with a true heart **in full assurance of faith.***” (Hebrews 10.14-19)

‘Let us approach with a true heart in assurance of faith.’

If we accept that all scripture is inspired by God, we must understand from this verse, that God wants those who trust in Jesus to be assured of their salvation in him. Again, this is perfectly Anglican, and again it’s affirmed as we prepare for Communion when we declare: *‘By his death on the cross and rising to new life, he offered the one true sacrifice for sin and obtained an eternal deliverance for his people.’* Salvation, for the Christian is something given by God not earned by us.

We used to sing,

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine

Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine

Heir of salvation, purchase of God

Born of his Spirit, washed in His blood

That hymn isn’t in the Anglican hymn book, I’m not sure why, because it’s good theology. In some ways it sums up what our author was trying to get across to his Jewish Christian readers, and what my message is to you today.