

Discovering Hebrews

Mike Starkey, Holy Trinity Twickenham, November 2006.

Part 1: Christ the Priest (Hebrews 5:1-10)

Last week I was with a group of people from our church and we were doing a Bible study together. In fact, it was a kind of beginners' guide to one of the books of the Bible. In this case, it was the book of Isaiah in the Old Testament. One of the women in the group had managed to read Isaiah before we met up. And she said that at the end of reading Isaiah, she put the book down and said: 'Well, what on earth was all that about?'

Another bit of the Bible that has a similar effect on people is the New Testament book called Hebrews. People read it and they find they're entering another world. A world full of strange names and cultural references that they just aren't familiar with. So most people are tempted to put the book down and say: 'Well frankly, that's just too weird. I don't understand a word!'

But what we found with Isaiah the other evening was this. You only need to know a couple of bits of helpful background information, and suddenly things start to fall into place. Clues like who wrote the book, where it was written, and who it was written to. Once you know one or two useful facts like that you suddenly find yourself saying: 'OK, I've got a sense of what the big picture is and suddenly all the details start to fall into place'.

I'm not going to tell you what the clues were to understanding Isaiah today. But we are going to find the clues to understanding Hebrews. So when you first look at our reading today in chapter 5, it all looks a bit daunting and obscure. References to people called Melchizedek and Aaron, and priests offering up blood sacrifices. (Incidentally, if you're expecting a baby soon, and you're not sure what to call it, the name Melchizedek has been strangely neglected in recent years). But in a passage like this, you soon realise you're not in the world of Strawberry Hill 2006!

But it's like so many other bits of the Bible. Once you know one or two useful clues or bits of background, suddenly it all starts to fall into place. And instead of being weird and offputting, you start to find it's fascinating and compelling.

So what do we need to know if we want to get to grips with Hebrews? Well, here's a starting point. The Book of Acts is the story of the early Church. And in Acts Chapter 6 (v7) we read this: 'The number of disciples in Jerusalem grew larger, and a great number of priests accepted the faith.' In other words, some of the earliest converts to Christianity were Jewish priests from the Temple in Jerusalem. They recognized in Jesus the Messiah that their people had been waiting for for centuries. They found their Jewish faith was somehow 'completed' in Jesus.

And we reckon that the book of Hebrews was written to this group of Jewish priests, using the sort of language and terminology they were familiar with. Or at very least, it was written to a group of practising Jews who'd become Christians, including a lot of Jewish priests. And that's why it's called the letter to the Hebrews.

Either way, this group of priests had been experiencing extreme opposition for their faith. There was a huge pressure on these people to give up their Christian faith, and go back to Judaism, in other words to 'de-convert'.

This book of Hebrews was written specifically to respond to this pressure, and to encourage these Jewish priests to keep the faith. We don't actually know who the writer was. It wasn't Paul, who wrote most of the other New Testament letters. But it may well have been his friend Barnabas or his other friend Apollos. Either way, the author was another Jewish Christian who knew the Jewish faith from within.

So you look at the very start of Hebrews and it says this:

'In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.'

So right from the start there's a contrast being drawn up between the partial revelation of the past, and the fuller revelation in the present. In the past God spoke through prophets, but now, he's actually sent his own Son. And so it goes on through the whole of the Book of Hebrews. Here are a few of the contrasts that are highlighted:

- In the past God sent angels as messengers, but now God's definitive act of self-expression is in his Son Jesus.
- In the past God gave the law to Moses, but Jesus is more than just a faithful servant of God as Moses was. He's actually God in human form.
- In the past, Temple worship involved sacrifice of animals but Jesus's death was the final and perfect sacrifice that does away with animal sacrifice.

You get the picture. The whole letter is an encouragement to these Jewish priests not to go back to the old system, because Jesus is actually the fulfilment of everything they used to believe in. And Jesus is superior to it all, because he's the Messiah, he's God in human form. All that went before was just a dim foreshadowing of Jesus. Even though they didn't realize it at the time, it was all about Jesus. So much of the Jewish faith and what we call the Old Testament was pointing forward to Jesus.

Now let me say something here in brackets. Some people might say: 'Well, that sounds rather anti-semitic. Isn't it anti-Jewish to say that Christianity replaces Judaism and is superior to it?' But the letter to the Hebrews is not anti-semitic at all. It would only be anti-semitic if it was non-Jews being rude about Jews and the Jewish faith. Remember: this letter was written by a Jew to Jews, and at the time it was simply a debate within Judaism about how God has revealed himself. The writer's saying: 'The fulfilment of the Jewish faith is in the Messiah, Jesus'.

I suspect if you told the writer to the Hebrews he was being anti-semitic he'd be shocked. He'd say: 'Wait a minute. We're a group of people who grew up in Judaism and respect Judaism. What we're saying is that Jesus is the Messiah, and he's the culmination of the Jewish story. What would be really anti-semitic is NOT to tell Jewish people about their Messiah!'

Anyway, all this gives us the clue we need to understand today's reading from Hebrews 5. It's another of these contrasts:

- In the past, the Jewish high priest offered up sacrifices of animals to erase the sins of the people. What happened was that the person's sin and guilt was symbolically transferred onto the bird or animal, which was then put to death. And the fact that blood had to be shed to bring about forgiveness underlined the seriousness of the matter. Our separation from God is a big deal.

But here's the point. The writer to the Hebrews says that the Temple priests were themselves weak and sinful. So they had to offer sacrifices for their own sins. And the sacrifices were only temporary, they had to be repeated. But now, he says, Jesus has offered the final and perfect sacrifice. Unlike the Jewish temple priests, Jesus was himself perfect.

And the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross didn't need to be repeated: it was effective for all time. That's why the Bible says Jesus died 'for us'. The cross of Jesus is a place of sacrifice. But after it, blood sacrifice becomes redundant. We can experience forgiveness because all our wrong actions and thoughts are put onto Jesus on the cross and put to death. And the way we access that now is through faith in Jesus.

Now, who are these characters Aaron and Melchizedek? Well, Aaron's easy. Aaron was Moses' big brother, and he was one of the very first priests. So in later generations he was seen as the ancestor of all priests. So Aaron represents Old Testament priesthood, which the writer to the Hebrews is contrasting with the fuller revelation of God in Jesus.

But Melchizedek is a bit more obscure. Melchizedek lived in Jerusalem at the time of Abraham. And he was unusual in that he was both a king and a priest. But here's the strange thing. In the Book of Genesis we're told quite a lot about the birth of characters, who their parents were, and when they died. But Melchizedek is different. We know he existed, but we don't know anything about him, his parents, or how he died.

So he became this mysterious figure. In Jewish storytelling he becomes almost like a figure who never died, without origins and without end. His name means 'king of righteousness', his title King of Salem means 'king of peace'. He was both a king and a priest.

So remember: the writer to the Hebrews is writing to Jewish priests. And he's telling them that Jesus is the ultimate High Priest who opens the way to God and forgives sins. But he says: 'Hang on, he's not a priest like Aaron. He's more a priest like Melchizedek'. So Melchizedek becomes a kind of foreshadowing of Jesus. A king and priest who was somehow more than human, who transcends death, a priest who's also the King of Peace.

Next week, Bev is going to finish our two-week introduction to Hebrews, and she's going to focus on what the writer says about Jesus: just how awesome he is, and how he fulfils all the dreams and aspirations of the whole Jewish tradition. But more than that, his significance for all people in all generations.

But here's a challenge for you this week. Get a easy-to-understand modern version of the Bible. Find the letter to the Hebrews, which is right near the end of the Bible, and read it all the way through. Bear in mind some of the things we've said about who it was written for, and why it was written. And then ask yourself this question: 'This was written a long time ago, to Jews who'd come to faith in Jesus. But what does this section of the Bible also say to me today?'

Part 2: Christ the King (Hebrews 1 :1-13) © Bev Watson

A few weeks ago I was talking to a friend of mine who works on the staff of Guildford Cathedral. She was telling me about a visit that the Queen paid to the Cathedral at Easter this year, for something called the Royal Maundy Service, which is a tradition going back to the 13th century. What happens is that, before going out to lunch with the Mayor, the Queen visits the cathedral, and distributes 2 small silver coins, known as Maundy money, to elderly people in the area; this is in recognition of the contribution they have made to society and the church. You can't spend these coins, as they're not common currency, but apparently quite a few of them have been sold on eBay, for a considerable amount!

My friend, as a member of staff at the Cathedral, was amazed at the extraordinary amount of work that went into organizing the service: obviously security is a huge issue and involves a lot of planning; the Cathedral had to be thoroughly cleaned and spruced up; the choir had to rehearse its anthems – no doubt 'Zadok the Priest'; and they even had to build a brand new, double sided toilet facility for the Queen to use, because it's a royal requirement that no one is allowed to hear what is known as 'the royal tinkle'... Such an extraordinary amount of planning and effort for a very brief royal visit!

Now our theme for today is not actually 'Elizabeth the Queen', but a related subject, which is 'Christ the King'; and there are some parallels. If you were here last Sunday you'll remember that we're spending a couple of weeks looking at the book of Hebrews in the Bible. It's quite a theological book, or letter really, which at first sight can seem a bit obscure and daunting, but it has a lot to tell us about the person of Jesus, who he was, and what that means for us today. The background to the book, which Mike talked about last week, is that it was most likely written for a group of Jewish priests who had become Christians; the letter explains how Jesus fulfils all the Old Testament prophecies, and is himself the Messiah, or true king of Israel, that they had been waiting for. Last week we looked at how Jesus is the ultimate high priest who lays down his life as the perfect sacrifice

for our sins; rather like Aslan in the Chronicles of Narnia – if you've seen that film, or read the book 'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe'; Jesus chooses to give up his life on our behalf.

The passage we're looking at from the book of Hebrews today describes what happens next. As Aslan in the film comes back to life, Jesus is raised from the dead, and shows himself to his disciples. Then finally he ascends into heaven where he is now seated at the right hand of God. The picture here is of Jesus exalted to the highest position, and equal with God himself. He's described in this passage which Anne-Marie read for us as 'the radiance of God's glory, and the exact representation of his being' (v3). So Jesus himself shows us what God is like; he demonstrates God's character. The description here is of Jesus as a king ruling over an everlasting kingdom, characterized by justice and righteousness and joy. He was with God in the beginning, when the heavens and earth were created, and now he is worshipped by angels, and has conquered the forces of evil in this world. Here we see Jesus, at the end of his life on earth, taking up his rightful place as King of kings, and Lord of lords. In the window behind me there is a picture of Jesus with a crown and sceptre; Jesus as King.

I wonder how this aspect of who Jesus is comes across to you; I wonder how you react to the idea of Jesus as Lord and King? In our society we're used to the idea of monarchy, and the royal family, but it's clear that they don't wield great power over us in the way that previous kings and queens of England – mostly kings actually! – have done. We may well respect and admire our present Queen as a person in her own right, but we wouldn't expect her, say, to give out her Maundy money, and then conscript us into an army to fight a crusade in the Holy Land! We wouldn't expect her to have lunch with the mayor, and then attempt to abolish parliament and set herself up as a dictator! She is largely a figure-head, and real power lies elsewhere. Maybe as a society, too, we have a tendency to be suspicious of authority, and authority figures.

It's sometimes thought that this goes back to the battle of the Somme in 1916 in which 20,000 British troops were killed on just the first day; we no longer feel comfortable with the idea of unquestioning or blind obedience. For those of us who are parents, it's noticeable that our children tend to have a much more relaxed approach to their school teachers than we had when we were their age; there is much less deference than there used to be. We don't generally kneel in church any more, but prefer to sit. So it may be that this picture of Jesus as a King and Lord raises some questions in our minds.

I think what is important here is to grasp what Jesus himself understood about kingship; what he thought being a king meant. There is a lovely description in John's gospel of the events of Palm Sunday which you may remember. Jesus goes up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish feasts, and crowd goes out to meet him waving palm branches and shouting 'Hosanna! Blessed is the king of Israel!'. Jesus then finds a young donkey to ride on as he makes his way into the city. It's a real picture of humility and gentleness; the Roman rulers at the time would no doubt have blazed in with chariots and horses. Jesus' idea of kingship is completely different.

This same humility is apparent at the last supper where Jesus washes the disciples' feet; he says to them, 'You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord' and rightly so, for that is what I am', - he doesn't deny his kingship - but then goes on to wash their feet. It's as if he is showing them that yes he is their Lord, but that his idea of leadership is one of serving people, and eventually laying down his life for them. It's rather like the queen honouring a group of elderly people, and stepping down to acknowledge and value them. It's a complete reversal of the usual concept of power and authority. Jesus is seated at God's right hand in heaven, but his role there, as the book of Hebrews tells us, is to pray for us, or to intercede for us; it's another example of Jesus serving us. William Barclay describes Jesus' glory as 'not the glory of shattering power, but the glory of suffering love' (repeat).

So, finally, what does Jesus' kingship mean for us? What does it mean for us here and now, and what will it mean for us beyond this world, to acknowledge Jesus as Lord? How, practically, do we go about it? Well maybe it begins with having a true picture in our minds, a full understanding of who Jesus is, as a priest, a king as the book of Hebrews shows us, and much more besides. It may be that what we know of him is quite patchy, perhaps based on things we learned in Sunday School, or have picked up from films or the media, and may not even be particularly accurate. Perhaps the best way to get a clear understanding of who Jesus is, is to read one of the gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. None of them are very long, and could be read through in

an hour or two, perhaps on the train on the way into work, or in an evening at home. They are in themselves a really good read, and they make the life of Jesus come alive.

Ken Dodd, the comedian, who some of us may remember, once said that the church has the best story in the world – but we're not always very good at telling it! You may be aware that Advent starts next Sunday, and the time when we begin to prepare for Christmas. In some ways it's a bit of a parallel with Lent when we prepare for Easter. I thought that part of our preparation for Christmas this year could be to read a gospel, and pray that we will have a clear understanding of who Jesus is. Or if you find it hard to make time to read, this video (The Miracle Maker) gives a really lovely and accurate description of the life of Jesus which you could watch with your children (I noticed that there's a copy in the lending library in the Parish Room); or you can get books of the Bible on tape which you could listen to on your way to work. Maybe this could be our Advent challenge...!

Apart from knowing something of who Jesus is, it is also important to know what he requires of us, if we are to acknowledge him as Lord. Jesus once summed up everything that was in the Law in the words, 'You shall love the Lord with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength'; and secondly, 'you shall love your neighbour as yourself' (Mt.22:37)). It's summed up even more concisely on the front of our notice sheet every week which says, Holy Trinity – our vision: 'loving God', 'loving people'.

One of the OT prophets made a similar summary of what the Lord requires of us: it is 'To act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God' (Micah 6:7-9). Really it is a call to a life of both worship and service, which go hand in hand with each other. It's not that being a Christian is simply about coming to church on Sundays; neither is it the case that being a Christian is simply about caring for people and the needs of the world in a practical way. The two go together. And of course it's more personal and individual than that as well: God has specific plans for each of us which relate directly to who we are, with our very individual gifts, weaknesses, circumstances and potential. Part of following Jesus as Lord will involve discovering the particular plans that he has for us.

So we need to know who Jesus is, we need to know what he requires of us, and lastly we need to keep our eyes fixed on him. At the end of the book of Hebrews the writer advises us to do just that; he says, 'Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith'. It sounds a bit like the advice we might give to our children, if we have them, when they're learning to play cricket or tennis or maybe football: 'keep your eye on the ball'. In a way it's the same for us as Christians; if we're wanting to know God, to know who Jesus is, to know his presence with us and his blessing in our lives, both here and now and in the life to come, then we need to keep our eyes on Jesus. We need to fix our eyes on him in prayer and in worship, in reading the gospel story and seeking to live out Jesus' call to love both God and people. In this way we will honour Jesus as both Lord and Saviour.

Let us pray...

Lord we thank you for the book of Hebrews, and what it teaches us about Jesus as both Saviour and Lord. Please help us to have a clear vision and understanding of Jesus himself, and to know grow in our understanding of what that means for us, both as individuals, and as a church.

In Jesus' name, amen.