

Message for November 14, 2021

Hebrews 10:1-7

Have there ever been times in life when you have felt sad, lost, weary or frightened? Or have there ever been times when you have felt so discouraged, and no longer sure of what you believe in or why? That's certainly how one small group of Christians felt at the time of this morning's scripture passage; in the words of an old saying, they felt as if they were "caught between the devil and the deep blue sea". But what was their problem?

To put it simply, they were both Jewish and Christian. By race and religious upbringing, they were Jewish and yet since they believed that Jesus truly was the Messiah, they were Christians as well. The term didn't exist back then, but they were what we would call today Messianic-Jews. The problem though, to quote another old saying, was that "they were neither fish nor fowl". The Jews rejected them saying that because they believed in Jesus, they were Christians. The Christians on the other hand rejected them because they thought that they were too Jewish. These poor people were despised and rejected by both sides. Not surprisingly perhaps, some of them started asking themselves, "why bother going on this way? Why bother believing in Jesus? Let's just give up on him altogether and go back to being Jews and Jews alone". And that is why the letter to the Hebrews was written. It was written to try and convince them not to give up on Christianity.

The Jewish people at that time had a very strong sense of sin and many of them saw their religion in terms of dos and don'ts. God was the judge and he had given them the Law including the Ten Commandments. The people were to obey the Law and when they didn't, then they were guilty of sin. Their sins offended God and separated them from him. There was however a way around this. If a person truly felt sorry for what they had said or done wrong, then they could buy an animal and have it sacrificed in the temple in Jerusalem. Doing this showed that they were truly sorry for what they had done, and this pleased God. And so the sacrificial system emerged. Day after day, year after year thousands of birds and animals were ritually slaughtered in an effort to atone for sin and gain God's forgiveness.

As time passed though, an increasing number of people were troubled by this. How, they asked, could the slaughter of animals make up for the sins that they had committed? There was a growing sense that animal sacrifices were not enough and that something else, or rather someone, was needed to atone for sin and bridge the gulf between them and God. The author of the letter to the Hebrews insisted that we have that someone and that someone is Jesus.

That writer, whomever he was, insisted that all the offerings ever made in the temple could never take away all our sins. Only God can and he has done this through his son's dying on the cross. Symbolically Jesus had taken everyone's sins upon himself and then died for all as the ultimate sacrifice. Did the Hebrews, and anyone else for that matter, really want to be forgiven? Did they really want peace with God, themselves, and one another? Then all they had to do was confess their sins and believe in Jesus. If they believed in Jesus, felt sorry for what they had done and made restitution whenever possible, then as far as God was concerned it was as if they had never sinned in the first place. Forget about the temple and the animal sacrifices the author urged, just believe in Christ and all will be well. And what that author wrote to those sad and discouraged Christians so long ago still goes for us today. The question increasingly being asked however is whether this is news that the world wants to or even needs to hear?

I recently read a book in which the author posed the question, "whatever became of sin?" It often seems, he said, as if sin no longer exists; that in an effort to be open-minded and tolerant, virtually any sort of behaviour is considered to be acceptable. And if there is no real right or wrong, then it follows that there is really no such thing as sin either. And since there is no sin then there is no need for Christ. What does it matter if Christ died for the forgiveness of sins if there is no sin in the first place? And so the argument goes, but if this is the case then why are so many people troubled by such as the hurtful things said or done, or even by the good things that for one reason or another were never said or done? Our very consciences testify to the reality and the power of sin. This was once brought home to the Christian songwriter, Michael Card.

Card was worshipping in a Presbyterian church in Kentucky and the sermon that morning was about sin. Card greeted it with a yawn; ho-hum, another sermon about dos and don'ts he thought. The minister though soon

had his and everyone else's attention. He noted that they all felt confident that they were pretty good people but then, without identifying anyone, he proceeded to specifically list the sins that he knew the people present in church that morning were committing. To say that it made them uncomfortable was an understatement; in fact most of them started to get very, very angry. The minister pointed out that if they thought that there was nothing wrong with their behaviour then why were they getting so upset? They were because he had hit a raw nerve. They were angry because even if they didn't like to admit it, they knew that he was right; their own consciences testified to the reality of their sins. The minister though didn't just identify their sins or put them on a guilt trip; he also moved on from the bad news to the good news of the gospel. That quite simply was that despite all that they had done wrong, God still loved them and was willing to forgive them.

The love of God and his willingness to forgive is the great news of the gospel. This in fact is one of the reasons why Christ was born, died, and raised; to demonstrate just how much God loves, cares and is willing to forgive. God in fact even wants to forgive. It doesn't matter what we did or didn't do, forgiveness is always ours for the asking if we want it. The love, mercy and forgiveness of God is beyond all our comprehension, and this was brought home to me by a TV show this past week.

For the past while Susan and I have been watching the TV show "Lucifer" on Netflix. The show is a bit of everything: crime, comedy, drama, and romance. The premise is that Lucifer, who is the devil, got bored in hell and decided to come to earth for a vacation. At the beginning of the series, he acted like the devil and lived a very debauched life. As the series went on though Lucifer slowly evolved and by the end he was a totally different being; he loved and cared about others, and was even willing to sacrifice his life for the sake of others. At the very end of the series, he returned to hell but not to torture the inhabitants there but rather to redeem and restore them. In short, the series is all about Lucifer's redemption, and while this of course is all fiction, its message is actually very Christian. If there is hope for the devil, then there is hope for everyone else as well and no one is beyond the reach of God's love and redemption.

William Langland wrote in his great medieval poem, "Piers the Ploughman": "All the sins of the world are but one burning coal in the sea of

God's grace." I have long loved that line; what is one burning coal compared to the boundless ocean? And so it is with our sins and God's forgiveness. This is the good news and promise of the Christian faith. This is the good news and promise of the gospel. God loves and is more than willing to forgive no matter what we've said or done. The depth of God's love and willingness to forgive stretches far beyond our comprehension and imagination. And it is this, our belief that all the sins of the world are like one burning coal in the sea of God's grace that sets us free and enables us to embrace the future without being haunted or tied down by the mistakes of the past. How, asked the author of the letter to the Hebrews, could the people turn around and walk away from this? How could we?

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, hear us as we come to you in prayer on this mid-November morning.

There is so much for which we can and should be grateful for. There is the wonder of the world around us and the universe beyond us, a universe so vast that it boggles our imaginations. Truly when we look at the creation around us and the night sky above us, we are reminded that you are God and that there is none other like you, so majestic, powerful and creative. We pray for your blessing on your creation and all therein, and that all the good promised at the Glasgow conference on climate change may become a reality.

We thank you this day for our loved ones, praying for your blessing upon them, that they may be well and safe.

We thank you for our homes, the food that nourishes our bodies, and all that nourishes our souls and minds. We pray this day for all who hunger whether it be for food, a place to call home, peace and security or love and acceptance.

We thank you for your love revealed to us in so many different ways but first and foremost by your Son. We thank you for his life, teaching and example.

We thank you for his dying upon the cross for the atonement of our sins, and that he has, in the words of the hymn, “opened the life-gate that all may go in”.

We pray this day that everyone may hear and believe the good news of the gospel and in doing so, may be set free from the mistakes and burdens of the past.

We pray this day for all who are burdened, and not just by the past but also by the present as well. We pray for all burdened with grief, illness, and fear of what the future may have in store.

We pray this day for the well-being of all as the pandemic continues, remembering those who are living with its effects whether it be upon their health, livelihoods, social isolation, or tensions over vaccine status. Help us to remember the words of the slogan so popular at the beginning of the pandemic; that we are all in this together. And help us to remember too that you are in it with us as well.

We ask these things in your Son’s name. Amen