

Heaven once a week

Readings: Hebrews 12 v.18-29 and Luke 13 v.10-17

The Tenth Sunday after Trinity -25th August 2019

A poet (*Henry Vaughan*) once described Sundays as “heaven once a week.” I don’t think he meant it was because he could have a lie-in. He was talking about worship, coming to church. “Heaven once a week.” This is in marked contrast to the man who said, “I never experienced one uplifting moment in church, but the sixpence they paid me as a choirboy was very useful.” (It must have been a long time ago). Worship as Heaven once a week. Surely this is what worship is; or at least should be. It lifts us (ever so slightly) nearer heaven. It deepens our sense of heavenly realities. It is a touching the Rock; a standing on the foundations. Worship; Heaven once a week.

This must be what the writer to the Hebrews is talking about when he says, “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem...” He is not talking about something that is available to the senses; that can be seen, that can be touched. He makes this clear by contrasting our experience with the very physical story of the ancient Israelites receiving the Law on Mount Sinai. Then there was “a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet and a voice that made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them.” Plenty of experiences there for the senses and most of them pretty terrifying! “No”, says the writer, “It’s not like that for you.” “You have not come to something that can be touched....but you have come to Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem..”

It is a matter of faith. Faith –the writer has spent a whole chapter (11) expounding examples of faith, listing all those who went before, that “great cloud of witnesses.” (last week’s reading) “Faith”, he says, is “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Faith is the difference between the poet who saw Sundays as “heaven once a week” and the ex-choirboy who never experienced a single uplifting moment, but who enjoyed spending his sixpence!

When we gather here, let us take these words to heart; words concerning heaven; words concerning worship. “But you have come to Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly

Jerusalem..” I wonder how these words were first received? I wonder how they were first heard by a little group of Jewish Christians gathered in a house or hall somewhere in the vastness of the Roman Empire? I imagine there would have been tears and sighs. The reader’s voice may well have choked with emotion as he read out these words. This is because at the time of this letter, the earthly city of Jerusalem had recently been destroyed by the Roman armies. It lay a smouldering ruin, its streets littered with the dead. The Temple itself ;the Holiest Place on earth was desecrated and was being demolished stone by stone. The Jewish population were forbidden to re-enter. The first hearers of this letter were not unlike the Syrian refugees of our own day; people far from home, having to watch the destruction of all that they have held dear; all the familiar streets, all the old sights.

Gathered in that little room and through tears, those Hebrew Christians heard the words, “but you have come to Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem..” Contrary to how it seems, says the writer, heaven is more real than earth. What we see around us are just passing shadows. There is a deeper reality; something more substantial, something eternal. When we worship, this is what we enter.

The writer continues....“and to innumerable angels in festal gathering..” I wonder what he means? I like to imagine that the angels have on their “Sunday best”, as opposed to their working clothes.“...and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven...” In Judaism, the firstborn- in some peculiar sense belonged to God. This idea stemmed from the Passover story, and the words “enrolled in heaven” reflect Christ’s words in Luke 10 v.20. The disciples had just returned from a mission; the mission of the seventy, and they’d experienced great success with many healings and exorcisms, and Jesus said, “Do not rejoice in this....but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”

I recall a man very ill in hospital. He experienced a vision which gave him great comfort. He said it was sort of “projected” on to the wall of his room. Christ was showing him an open book, and in the book was his name. The man died a week or so later.

The writer to the Hebrews continues.. You have come.. “to

God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect..” We need no reminder, and those who know us best need no reminder that we are not perfect yet. There was a tee-shirt in vogue in Christian circles several years ago which said, “Please be patient with me; God hasn’t finished with me yet” (Nowadays it would be a tattoo, though I’m not planning on getting one!)

The writer continues, “..and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel...” From the treasury of our hymns we recall, “Abel’s blood for vengeance pleaded to the skies, but the blood of Jesus for our pardon cries.” And just take those three words “...and to Jesus...” I recall a conversation with a lad called Tommy. This was many years ago. We had just got our A-level results. We were on a street corner talking, not of career options strangely, but about heaven. He said, and I’ll always remember his words, “I don’t know what heaven will be like; but it’ll be OK, because He will be there.” Jesus will be there. To some, this may seem a rather narrow individualistic view of heaven. After all, isn’t heaven about the renewal of all things? I saw a sign the other week outside the Christian Centre up near Bassenthwaite: “One day, it’ll all be fixed.” I think that was referring to the renewal of all things. Yes, heaven is the place, as Julian of Norwich said, where “All shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well”, but it is most certainly the place where He is.

“And to Jesus...” At the heart of all things, at the heart of all reality is a heart of compassion. We see that compassion in today’s gospel where Jesus heals the woman in the synagogue on the Sabbath to the delight of many and to the consternation of a few. “All his opponents were put to shame, and the entire crowd was rejoicing at the wonderful things he was doing.” The congregation were divided. It’s last week’s gospel where Jesus said those disturbing words, “I came to bring division.” There was quite an atmosphere after that service. To some, it was heaven to have Jesus there, and to others not.

Worship as “heaven once a week.” Worship—not to escape our daily lives or the ills of this world, but to strengthen us to live more truly and more compassionately within those lives. This is the worship we seek when we gather together. “But you

have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus...”