

Therefore, brothers ... let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Heb 10.19-22.

Last time, when we came to this tremendous passage in *Heb 10*, we unpacked that little word, 'brothers'. I was taken aback by your reaction to that sermon. The idea that we are not numbers but individuals with names who are brothers and sisters to each other clearly struck a chord. The Fatherhood of God implies the Brotherhood of Man. If we all believed this, there would not be so many wars and so much injustice in the world. When we see each other as brothers and sisters, we treat each other better.

Now I would like you to notice the little word, 'therefore'. We found all those middle chapters about sacrifice, Temples, priest and high priests tedious and convoluted. But the point is that for those original Jewish converts to Christianity who first read this Letter to the Hebrews 2,000 years ago, the Temple sacrificial system with its priesthood was a reality. Sacrifice was the way God had told the people sinful people could approach a holy and righteous God. They did not just barge into God's presence, just as we would not dream of bursting in to see the Queen. They took God – the holy and righteous God – seriously. And, unlike today, they also took their own sinfulness seriously. Sacrifice was the way ordained by God for sinful people to come to him. But it was also a pointer to the perfect sacrifice of God's Son, Jesus, on Calvary's Cross, making animal sacrifices redundant.

And *therefore* – because of all that Jesus did on the Cross sacrificially for us sinners – we can now draw near to God. We do not now have to worry that God might be angry with us for presuming on him. Nor do we have to fret that God can't be bothered with our problems. Because of Jesus, we can now

approach God *confidently*, 4.14-16... We can know that our consciences are clean. Our past is done with and God remembers it no more. Whatever you have done; whatever you were, if you repent and put your trust in the Lord Jesus, you can be free of that past, and start a new life. Jesus changes lives. He turned around the life of Zacchaeus the tax man who thought only of money – until he met Jesus. And people are still meeting Jesus today and experiencing changed lives, vv19-22...

But there are other 'let us' phrases here which are dependent on the work of Jesus as priest and sacrificial victim. 'Therefore, because of all that Jesus did sacrificially for us on the Cross, let us draw near to God, v22. Let us, v23, hold unswervingly to the hope we profess. Let us, v24, consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds. Let us, v25, not give up meeting together, but let us encourage one another. How many sermons could I get out of those five 'let us' exhortations?

'Let us draw near with to God with a clear conscience'. I know that in today's world no-one ever thinks they have done anything wrong and even preachers have made God all cuddly and soft, but this is all delusion. Too many these days are in denial about what they have done and what they are. They kid themselves that they do not need God anymore. We have outgrown this childish and neurotic superstition. But if they are so mature and liberated now, why are so many people unhappy, addicted and fearful? Seeing through the God-nonsense has not made them happier. No, they are in denial. But we Christians know we need God and we can draw near to him, as to a caring Father. We can open our hearts to him in prayer and find help in our need.

And look at the next 'let us' in v23 'let us hold fast to the hope

we profess'. If there is one thing in very short supply in our society these days, it is hope. I don't come across many who are hopeful about the future. Brexit is a frightful mess. Parents worry about the world they are bringing their children into. Who really feels confident about the future? But what marks us Christians out from the secular crowd, is – or should be – our hope. Because of Easter, we have hope beyond the grave. That is not wishful thinking. It is fact, based on the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. We have hope beyond the grave. We have hope that God has planned one day a new heaven and a new earth. We have hope that whatever befalls us, God will be our faithful Good Shepherd. Again, this is not wishful thinking but is based on the promises of God recorded in the Bible. And we know from scripture and from our personal experience that God keeps his promises. 'He who promised is faithful', says v23.... *Zech* 9.12 talks of 'prisoners of hope'. In other words, we Easter people are 'trapped' in hope. Isn't that brilliant? We can't help but hope. We alone can face the future with confidence, because we know God is on the throne, and he is *with* us, and he is *for* us. What more do we need?

V24 has another 'let us': 'Let us spur one another on towards love and good deeds'. We Christians are not isolated. We belong to this great family called the Church. And here we encourage each other. We learn from each other and are inspired by each other. Each Sunday we hear God's Word read and explained. It all spurs us on to love each other and to help each other.

And that is why we must not stop coming to church regularly. This is our fourth 'let us', in v25a... No doubt you have heard umpteen times people justify their not coming to church by saying, 'I can still be a Christian without coming to church'. That sounds good, but it is rot, because, as I said, church

is a family and Christianity is a relational rather than a philosophical thing. Even the Trinity – Father/Son/Spirit – is all about relationships. Because God is love, and love is about relationships. God reaches out to us sinners through Jesus. We take God's hand of love. We reach out to others as brothers and sisters. And, as in all families and loving relationships, we *encourage* each other. That's the last 'let us' in v25b... 'Let us encourage one another'.

It's a challenge to be a true Christian, because such selflessness goes against nature, but these are also very challenging days for the church. We need encouragement through the night of doubt and sorrow.

I have said many times before that if you take the live coal out of the fire, it will not be long before it stops being red. But put it back into the fire, and it will begin to glow red soon enough. The truth is that we need each other. The lie that we are autonomous little units is killing people in our society. In church we are inspired by each other's stories, especially of how God is working in our lives. We learn about who is sick in our congregation and want to visit them. We want to support the grieving and the struggling. We can pray for each other. We can nurture the young and new Christians. We make isolated people feel they belong here and that they count. They count to us, and they count to God. It's all encouragement. So many people outside the church just aren't experiencing this love at all. Let's read vv23-25 again It's so practical but it all comes from God's love in Jesus for us.

This loving-kindness in the church which for us is so natural is rare in the world where it's each man for himself. Everyone, whether Christians or not, needs this love. We have something very special to give to the world: love, and joy and peace and hope, because we know God is on the throne.