

May I say first of all thank you very much for your gracious invitation to come and spend this Sunday morning and a bit of the afternoon as well, we'll see how much of it later on, with you, and also for Mary and Nick's wonderful hospitality. It really does help a preacher if he's had good hospitality the night before and I'm sure that you will see the benefit.

We've heard so much about Hebrews 13 already this morning in our prayers and the reading and you will be familiar in any case with the passage. The letter to the Hebrews is a strange sort of letter in many ways. First of all it is anonymous. We do not know who the author is and there are very few bits of the New Testament that are like that where no claim to authorship is made and of course that means there's been all sorts of speculation about who actually wrote Hebrews. You'll be glad to know I won't go into them this morning. But maybe it was someone like Apollos because the language suggests someone who was very refined in the Greek language. We know Apollos came from Alexandria and some of the thought of the letter reflects that kind of milieu.

Be that as it may, the letter has many great themes in it. So it begins with *the pre-eminence of Jesus Christ* who is compared on the one hand to the prophets, God did speak to the prophets but the writer says only partially. And He has now revealed Himself fully in the coming of the Son. And then secondly, the pre-eminence of Christ is compared to that of the angels. The angels are mere servants ministers like we are, but it is the Son about whom it is said, "Your throne O God is forever and ever", a quotation of course from the Psalms. The pre-eminence of Jesus Christ is a leading theme of the letter. But also His *unique priesthood*. Which is compared to the passing and frail priesthood of the Israelites, the Levitical Priesthood. And the Priesthood of Jesus is described as eternal. From the very beginning and eternal also in its significance for us. And then there is the *preciousness of His sacrifice*. Here we have both priest and victim. In the sacrifices in the Old Testament you had the priest and then you had the animals who were used for the sacrifice. But Jesus is both the priest and the victim. Especially in the exposition here in this letter. And then just before we come to chapter 13, in case you're wondering when I'm going to come to it, we have *the perseverance of the saints* in chapters 11 and 12. How God's people have been kept faithful to Him. And this is discussed so that it may encourage the readers, those to whom the letter was written, but of course also to encourage us. And in case we think of these people as simply in the past he tells us no, he has a strong doctrine of the communion of the saints, we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. In this matter, talking about the persecuted church, we are not on our own. We have come to the spirits of just men made perfect, and of course to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant. So that is the immediate background to chapter 13.

But as with many other books in the New Testament after we've had an exposition of doctrine and after we've been told what it is like to be God's people, he then comes to the application. So that is really what chapter 13 is about, though of course there is teaching and doctrine here as well about the faith. Well you will have noticed all my p's so far, well there is actually another p here that chapter 13 begins with- I wonder if you can guess what it is? My version has "Let brotherly love continue..." and of course the word is *Philadelphia*. Not just a city in the United States, and not even just a church described in the last book of the Bible, but brotherly love, Philadelphia. The love that there should be amongst Christians. And the New Testament is clear that we cannot speak of the love of God if that love amongst Christians is missing. And that must mean, brothers and sisters, first of all in the local church. It is no use talking about us loving far off people who are persecuted for their faith if we do not have that love here. Here in Fordham. Wherever there is a local church. Wherever people are in fellowship together. There is no way out of this. It is only when this love, this Philadelphia, is shown here that it can also be shown further away. So let there be Philadelphia, he says, first of all.

But then he goes on to talk not just about Philadelphia but hospitality to strangers. *Philoxenia*. This is a word which is the exact opposite of xenophobia. I was interviewed on HARDtalk on the BBC. It's one of their

programmes- I don't know if you know it. It gives an opportunity for some sustained discussion. And in this instance it was Zeinab Badawi who was interviewing me. She is at least nominally a Muslim. And she began the interview by saying "Bishop, your Bible tells you to love your neighbour". So I said yes it does Zeinab but it says more than that, it also says "love the stranger" in the book of Leviticus. Love the stranger because you yourselves were strangers in Egypt. This programme was about refugees and I said, well of course it is the duty of Christians to show compassion to people who are in this situation. Whether in terms of providing food for them or shelter or friendship or whatever it may be. There can be no doubt about that. Of course that is not the same thing, I went on to say, as government policy. All governments need to take a view about how many people they can sustain coming in from outside. In terms of their own social and other infrastructure. And in this case I've been very surprised, I continue to be very surprised, why Northern Europe, for instance, should bear all the responsibility for refugees from the Middle East and I went on to say to her what about the Arab league and the organisation of Islamic Cooperation for instance? What responsibilities are they taking? However, it is non-negotiable this hospitality to strangers. It is the opposite of Xenophobia.

Of course, it does mean I think here in Hebrews 13, hospitality to those strangers who are also brothers. So Philadelphia and Philoxenia are related to one another. I'm always impressed when people preach on Matthew 25, you know the coming of the Son of Man, and how He recognises those who have provided for those who are hungry and thirsty and clothes to those who need them and so on. And this is very often in our church widely applied to society. And to some extent that's okay. But Matthew 25, if you are being faithful to the text, is not really about wider society, it is about love for the brethren. That is what it is about. The least of these followers of mine. So if we do not show love amongst ourselves we will be unable to show love to the world. Sometimes we jump the gun. You know, it's too difficult to love fellow Christians so let's go out and love those who are outside but that's a mistake and Hebrews is pointing us to this mistake.

In his day, no doubt, these strangers were Christians who had come, in some danger possibly, for help. One of the most moving pieces of early Christian literature is the body of letters that Ignatius bishop of Antioch in the late first, early second century, wrote to churches as he was being taken from Antioch to Rome to be thrown to the wild beasts. And the letters are mainly thanking these churches for the help they had given this prisoner. That is what it means, "show hospitality to brothers and sisters who are strangers in the first instance" and then by extension elsewhere.

Then he does come to those who are in *prison*, as though in prison with them. Many years ago I went to visit a man who had been sentenced to seven years in prison for giving a Bible in Arabic to an Arabic speaking person. I'd never met him before. When I went in all the other prisoners were milling around waiting for their visitors, but as soon as I saw him I knew who he was. His face was shining even in those dreadful conditions in which he was being held. Well we succeeded in having his sentence reduced to two years from seven. We thought that was a great achievement at that time. But he still did two years for giving a Bible to someone. Would you be convicted of such an offence? Would I be?

So remember those who are in prison. 106 Christian leaders are in prison today in Iran for leading a Christian fellowship. That's all, that's all they've done. And those who are ill-treated; I don't know what the 'Nearly Infallible Version' says at this point, what is ill-treated? Can you see? What does it say? Ill-treated, it says ill-treated. Yeah, I mean this is a little bit weak to be honest, what it means is tortured. You remember Richard Wurmbrand's book, we are talking about Release International, Tortured for Christ. I was invited by a very distinguished physician in an Islamic country who had become a Christian and who was arrested and tortured. And this has affected everything since both positively and negatively. So how to have empathy with someone who has been tortured, when we have not been. I mean physically tortured. And yet today there are so many people in our world who are being physically tortured because of their faith in Jesus Christ like this doctor had been.

But we are told that we are to have this empathy because we are in the body. Now there is I think a deliberate ambiguity here, because it could mean “because we also have bodies” we can imagine what can be done to the body. Deprivation of sleep, of food, of physical beatings. But I think here it means more than that, “because you’re in the body” this is about our solidarity with our fellow believers, because we are all in one body by one Spirit says St Paul, by one Spirit you have all been baptised into the one body, you see. It’s a very strong metaphor this. He doesn’t say you all belong to one association, or to one club, or even to one church but to one body. If one organ of the body is suffering all the rest take part, participate in the suffering, of whichever part of the body it is that is in pain.

Now you may think, “why does this reflection on those who are being tortured for their faith lead him to this discussion of marriage?” I mean for most people marriage is not torture is it, or prison? Is it? Who said marry and repent and do not marry and repent? But in fact there is a connection. The connection is that in those days in the permissive world, the gentile world in which the Christian faith was spreading, permissiveness and promiscuity were rife. And if you wanted to belong then you had to take part in that permissiveness and that promiscuity. So what he is saying is even if you are to be excluded, even if you are to find yourself on the margins, let marriage be held in honour among all. Don’t take part in the permissiveness and the promiscuity of the guilds and some of the mystery religions simply to belong. Of course this has a contemporary ring, doesn’t it, for us. Are Christians going to be distinctive, different, or not? How will people know we are Christians, if there is nothing distinctive about us in our personal lives and our relationships?

The whole question about marriage is one increasingly that will define those who are faithful to the good news as it is revealed in Jesus Christ. There can be no doubt about it. In different places, in different ages there are different questions that arise which are important for Christians. And whether we like it or not in our age, in the western world in any case, this is *the* question, the question about human sexuality, that for the time being will be where you and I and Christians generally will be tested. To hold marriage in honour is to say, “what is God’s purpose for human beings?”. This goes right back to creation, to being made in God’s image, it is to say, “what is good for society?” “For the bringing up of children” I mean all the evidence is stacked one way, and yet society is headed another way, and we have a duty to bear witness. When I first resigned the see in Rochester to do this work with persecuted Christians and churches, I had imagined that nearly all my work would be in the Middle East and, regions beyond. And some of it has proved to be that. But I was then challenged by people, Christian Concern here have some literature available, there’s Chris whom you know. I was challenged by people like Christian Concern who said “Yes Bishop, that’s fine, you’re working with those who are being persecuted all over the world, but what about here? What about those who are losing their jobs because they hold marriage in honour? What about those who are losing their jobs because they will not take part in the abortion industry? What about those who will not, because of their profession, want to engage in experimentation on embryos? What about those who are taking a stand on assisted dying and euthanasia? What are you going to do about them? What about those who are losing their membership of their professional association, etc. etc.” In Richard Scott’s, *Christians in the Firing Line*, there are thirteen different cases discussed. So I thought to myself, you know, this is a fair criticism and I cannot just engage with those who are being persecuted elsewhere without also taking into account what is happening here. Of course it’s not the same thing. People are not physically being tortured. Well, some of them are going to prison actually, at least for a short while, but if you lose your job, if you lose membership of your professional association, in some cases if you lose your home- that’s quite serious. Call it whatever you like. Then, as then so now, not only sex but money. You see teaching in the New Testament about our sexual lives and our financial lives often comes very close together and there is a reason for it because both can lead to idolatry. I mean greed is actually described as idolatry. In the Bible.

Keep your life free from love of money. And be content with what you have. I never feel that I’ve got enough, you know I’ve got masses more than I had as a student, when I was getting married, you know when you say “with all my worldly goods I thee endow” my best man said in a whisper that could be heard “there goes his

bicycle". What of course he didn't know was that even that was borrowed! But of course I have much more than that and I still feel I need more, it's sort of part of human nature. And this can lead us away from God. From the will of Christ for us. And treating our money and our possessions as gods replacing God and Christ in our lives. And yes, I found this so encouraging where it says "I will never fail you nor forsake you" I think NIV's better in its translation at this point "The Lord is my helper I will not be afraid". Because of course so often we need or we think we need money because we need security. For ourselves and our families, our children. I have been twice a diocesan bishop, in Pakistan and then here in England and one of the things about being a diocesan bishop is that you get everything provided. You know, house, and people to do things for you and people to drive you and all of those things. And many of them are necessary. But when you cease being one the next day you've nothing. You know everything sort of disappears, it's like Cinderella. But I have to say that in the last six years we have lacked nothing. Nothing. It was an act of faith just stepping out like that, and so when I think to myself, you know I wish I had a bit more, this teaching is so important "I will never fail you nor forsake you". "The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid". Now the leaders again you know the thought of the writer is connected here. Everything is connected. The leaders are probably those who have been persecuted and are now dead. Probably martyred. We talk about remembrance when someone has gone.

Whether that is so, or not, the reason we are told to remember them is because they have brought to us the good news of Jesus Christ. That's the reason for the remembrance, and so he begins now to talk of the suffering of Christ. We are strengthened by grace because of the Cross. When it says we have an *altar*, the reference is to the cross. This is the place where the transaction, *the* transaction, has taken place. This is the place where we are made right again with God by Jesus' radical act of obedience.

That is what your leaders have taught you, he says. And that is what you must remember, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. That is why we can be strengthened by the grace that is released from the Cross.

Soon we are going to celebrate the Supper of the Lord, and that is of course remembering what Jesus has done in making us right with God again. But it is also a means of grace in helping us to live the Christian life. At the Supper of the Lord, we receive all the benefits of the Cross. This is a living reality, we have an altar, he says. The benefits, all the benefits of the cross are available now, in word and in sacrament for us. And so having focussed on Jesus' suffering and what that has done for us, having mentioned the suffering of our fellow Christians, he now comes to the necessity of being prepared to suffer ourselves.

So just as Jesus suffered outside the gate, so that the city may not be polluted by the execution, let us go forth to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured. I think NIV is weak here again, it says something like disgrace or something. It's the *abuse* that he endured. You know the crucifixion- we see sanitized versions of the crucifixion. But it was a terrible affair. The torture, the beating, the hunger, the thirst, the nakedness. You know there were no nice loincloths that you see on crucifixes. The humiliation, one of the purposes of this form of execution was humiliation. And then of course we know from the accounts in the gospels how people ridiculed Jesus on the cross, "He saved others, Himself He cannot save". So this is now turning to the need for us to bear abuse because we are Christians, for our careers to be affected, are you willing for that? More and more we will find that advancement in our careers will be affected because we are Christians. In this country Christians are not used to this, but I think we will have to get used to it. There will be a bar on how far you can go, into what professions you can enter. Again and again we find in the cases that come to Christian Concern for instance that people are simply not allowed in certain areas of professional life because they are Christians.

To bear the abuse which He endured. And it is this that enables us to offer praise to God he says. That's rather strange isn't it? We talk about praise and that's right, I think we, we should of course praise God especially when we come together. But he is talking about the sacrifice of praise. Our

Alleluias are possible of course because of the *atonement* of Jesus Christ, but also in the context of our own sacrifice. To be a living sacrifice to God. Which is your correct, suitable, right worship. No praise without sacrifice is what he's saying. You know this is not just empty, superficial, praising. The praise is the sacrifice of praise.

And then as always the New Testament turns outward to mission. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have. For this also, this engagement with the world... I'm so glad you're celebrating the Queen's birthday here in this community as a kind of outreach of the church to the community. To do good and to share what you have. The giving of aid is part of the sacrifice. Such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

Now, we find here then that the focus is the suffering as always of Jesus Christ. That reminds him of the suffering of fellow believers and to our own calling to suffer, to take up our crosses and to follow Christ. Christian leaders, and I speak for myself, I'm sure John would agree if he'd not just left for the next service, Christian leaders need to set out this whole counsel of God for their people and for the community in which they live. If they're not doing that they're falling short of what they are called and commissioned to do. And this is why the reading ends with the giving of an *account*.

Christian ministry is costly business of course, it should be, but those who have taken it on, those who are claiming to be teachers and preachers of the faith, have to be very careful. You know St Paul says in 1Cor9, lest after having preached to others I myself should find that I am not acceptable. Let not many of you be teachers says James. For more will be required. When I was bishop of Rochester, people would often say to me, "Bishop we don't agree with you about this or that." And I would say, "that's absolutely fine, who am I after all? If you don't agree with me that's fine. But, if you don't agree with God's word, that I am duty bound to bring to you, that's a different matter." So there is a solemnity about this responsibility. He reminds us that those who are leaders, I mean the reason we obey our leaders is not because they're leaders, but because they bring to us God's word. And if they cease to do so, then the duty of obedience also ceases in one way or another.

Obey your leaders because they have brought God's word to you. And they in turn will have to give account of their ministry. I just wish and pray and hope that our leaders would realise this. They will have to answer for the stewardship to which they have been called and which they have been given. So brothers and sisters thank you for this opportunity for bringing God's word to you. Jesus Christ in the end is the same, yesterday today and forever and it is because of His suffering, His dying, His rising again from the dead and His ascension into heaven that the Spirit is given to the churches and for that we rejoice. Amen.