Backwards into the Future

Meditations on the *Letter to the Hebrews*

by

John FitzGerald, O.Carm.

With a guide to Lectio Divina
by Carlos Mesters, O.Carm.
Let mutual love continue.  

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.  

Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.  

Let marriage be held in honour by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers.  

Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you.'  

So we can say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?'  

Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.  

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.  

(Hebrews 13: 1-8)
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The author of the *Letter to the Hebrews* wrote around 70 A.D. to a community of Jews who had recently become Christian, reminding them that ‘the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword’ (*Hebrews* 4:12). As pastors of the Catholic Church in Wales we commend these gentle meditations on that *Letter* written by Father John FitzGerald, a Carmelite friar, to everyone who sincerely wishes to make that Word of God, as it is found in the Bible, an active presence in their lives.

As a Carmelite, Father John draws on one of the most ancient traditions of Christian spirituality. This work is complemented by Father Carlos Mesters whose concise but masterful *Introduction to Lectio Divina* explains how for centuries individuals and communities have regularly pondered God’s Word as a source of strength in daily life, and tells us how we can join them in drinking from the crystal fountain of holy scripture. Father John’s words as he reflects on the *Letter to the Hebrews* draw deeply from these sources. They are sensitively chosen, reflecting his scholarship, the authentic tradition he is transmitting, and his own poetic skill. As he tells us in his introduction, these meditations were first published in the Welsh language. Now translated into English by his own hand, they faithfully reproduce his sharply honed and active engagement with the Word of God.

Catholic Wales is indebted to Father John for bringing this gift to a broader audience in the much larger English-speaking Catholic community. He has himself been remarkable for his labour in making the cultural tradition of Wales his own, not simply as a possessor but as a contributor. He is well aware how deeply Catholic the Christian tra-
dition of Wales was from the early centuries. If we are to realise the insistent recall to Christian unity which is now demanded of us we will do well to ensure that we too can be complimented on our knowledge of the Bible, which is in- divisible in its ultimate significance from the Eucharist and the visible community of the Church as the Body of Christ.

Father John explains in these meditations that the Church which received the Letter to the Hebrews was a disillusioned community whose members had suffered for their faith as followers of Jesus Christ. Our circumstances are different, but like those early believers, we too can become disillusioned and mesmerised by the immediate demands and requirements of a disbelieving society. It is, therefore, a timely reminder to Christians in Wales at the beginning of the Third Millennium that we too have here ‘no lasting city, but are looking for the city that is to come’ (Hebrews 13:14). That city is the Kingdom of God, and in order to build it in this, our own part of the world, we must be deeply attentive to the Scriptures, and their excellent news of Jesus Christ.

Whether you are already familiar with reading the Bible, or whether it is something you have never really done before, we encourage you to encounter the Word of God in a renewed way this year with the help of this book. These reflections have been prepared as Lenten reading for individuals, groups, and parishes across our dioceses. They will help you to appreciate the Letter to the Hebrews not simply as a piece of literature written nearly two thousand years ago, but as a profound affirmation of the timeless Christian values of hope, conversion, discipline, forgiveness, generosity, hospitality, and love.

These virtues are still active, but they need cultivation in our lives. For this reason we earnestly hope that you will spend some time, and not only during this Lent, to use Fa-
ther John’s reflections in this book as ‘solid food’ (*Hebrews* 5:14) for nourishing your own relationship with the God who, in Jesus Christ, has become ‘one like us’.

+ *Most Rev. Peter D. Smith, LLB, JCD*
  *Archbishop of Cardiff*

+ *Right Rev. Mark Jabalé, OSB*
  *Bishop of Menevia*

+ *Right Rev. Edwin Regan*
  *Bishop of Wrexham*

*Ash Wednesday, 9th February, 2005*
ABOUT THE AUTHORS

John FitzGerald joined the Carmelite Order in 1942. As a Carmelite friar he has long served our Catholic community in Wales, and his own religious family, as a pastor and a scholar.

He first came to Wales in January 1940 when he began studying at the Junior Seminary, St. Mary’s College, Castell Brychan, Aberystwyth. There he met Saunders Lewis who was then teaching Welsh to the boys who might later be ordained as priests in Wales. Greatly inspired by this teacher, he went on to study the language and literature of Wales at University College Dublin, under Professor John Lloyd Jones, who also directed his attention toward the Classics. Following his ordination to the priesthood he was sent by the Order, in 1952, to the Gregorian University in Rome for post-graduate study in theology. He then went to Cambridge University to continue reading Classics.

The Carmelites next sent him to Tre-gib, Llandeilo, where they then had a school. He taught there until the school moved to Cheltenham in 1958. Father John was appointed to remain at Tre-gib to teach philosophy to students within the Order. In 1964 he was appointed by the Order as Catholic Chaplain at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, and was to work in the town for the next forty years. In 1970, he became a Lecturer in Philosophy at the university, teaching principally in the Welsh language, and when he retired from this position in 1993 he returned to the Chaplaincy where he continued to work until 2004. At present he is prior of the Carmelite community at Llanelli.

Father John has been notable in his work as a spiritual director, and for his scholarship in the sacred languages. He has also given unstinting attention to the cause of the Welsh community and its culture. He has lectured and published widely and written poetry in the Welsh language. Father John is a supporter of the National Eisteddfod, and was
a member of the Joint Supervisory Committee of the New Welsh Bible from its inception. He was joint Editor of *Llyfr Offeren y Sul* (the Missal for Sundays and Holy days), and is Editor of *Y Cylchgrawn Catholig*, a journal which sensitively represents Catholic scholarship and spirituality in the native language of Wales, and is a contributor to *Efrydiau Athronyddol* a journal of philosophical study.

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Carlos Mesters is a Carmelite friar from Holland, and one of his Order’s leading experts on reading the Bible. His approach to *Lectio Divina*, the prayerful reading of the holy scriptures, arises from his experience of working for many years with ‘base communities’ in Brazil. He now lives in Rome as the Carmelite Order’s Councillor General for Latin America.
BACKWARDS INTO THE FUTURE: 
MEDITATIONS ON THE 
LETTER TO THE HEBREWS

Introduction

‘GOD knows who wrote Hebrews’, said Origen: all the same, the book is Scripture, the Word of God speaking through an anonymous but learned and able author.

It is a fascinating and eloquent composition: it starts with the message that the ‘many and various ways’ of God’s speaking to his people of old are now caught up, fulfilled, and surpassed in his speaking to us in his son Jesus; and goes on to use all the resources of the old scriptures to present the significance of the Son. On the one hand, the old rituals and remedies for sin are now void, superseded by the suffering, death, resurrection and ascension of the Son, because of who he is and what he has done for us, (chapters 1-10). Yet, on the other hand, the life of faith which was lived in the presence of God can be traced in the old (indeed the oldest) traditions (chapters 11-12), and continues to be an example for us. For us too, there is quiet light on the inner meaning of Mass and Eucharist.

This little book started life in Welsh in 1994 in the series O Ddydd i Ddydd. It was not and is not meant as a commentary, although there is an element of commentary here and there. The purpose is to offer the reader (who is willing to work at it) some help towards engaging bit by bit with the text of Hebrews in meditation and prayer. Whilst it is meant as a help to lectio divina, and not a substitute for it, an introduction to lectio divina, by my Carmelite confrere Carlos Mesters, is appended to the book to help the reader along the way.

In order to facilitate reflection, the text of the Letter to the Hebrews is reproduced in its entirety, chapter by chap-
And when it is opportune, please pray for

John FitzGerald, O.Carm.
Letter to the Hebrews

Chapter 1

1 Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. 3 He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, 4 having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs. 5 For to which of the angels did God ever say, ‘You are my Son; today I have begotten you’? Or again, ‘I will be his Father, and he will be my Son’? 6 And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, ‘Let all God’s angels worship him.’ 7 Of the angels he says, ‘He makes his angels winds, and his servants flames of fire.’ 8 But of the Son he says, ‘Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, and the righteous sceptre is the sceptre of your kingdom. 9 You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.’ 10 And, ‘In the beginning, Lord, you founded the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands; 11 they will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like clothing; 12 like a cloak you will roll them up, and like clothing they will be changed. But you are the same, and your years will never end.’ 13 But to which of the angels has he ever said, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet’? 14 Are not all angels spirits in the divine service, sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?
THE OLD AND THE NEW

Hebrews 1:1

1 Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets

The past is behind us, the future in front. That’s the common picture. And yet what we know is our past — it is before us! — and our future is unknown to us. Don’t we in fact move backwards as it were towards the future? Don’t we look to our past for guidelines as we grope our way into that darkness? Isn’t the pilgrimage of faith a bit like that?

God has touched my life in many ways and bit by bit, giving me many bright spells on the way. This is valuable guidance, something to be thankful for. But guidance it is, an invitation to grow. Pining for the honeymoon romance can prevent people from growing in their marriage relationship (so I am told.) It can come of failing to realise that ‘the best is yet to be’, failing to discern that now is the time for true love to be active ‘for better, for worse’.

Hebrews was no doubt written for people who were a bit nostalgic for the past, for the ancestral inheritance. And so they are told here: ‘Yes, God has dealt graciously with us for ages past, but now the promises are being corrected in the act of being fulfilled, and the very word EMMANUEL is coming true, truer than all expectation’: ‘God with us’, thanks be to Him.

Why not pause a while in this silence to remember everyone who has awakened me and supported me up to today, and to give thanks for them and pray for blessing on them? Then pray for insight into how God has spoken to me and worked in me through all these contacts, and through his Son, so as to bring me to this day, this new opportunity.
HEIR OF ALL THINGS

Hebrews 1:1-4

1 Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. 3 He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, 4 having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

OUR attention is drawn to the Son; he is the centre, to him we turn. In him ‘the whole creation moves’, he too is ‘the one whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds’.

Lord Jesus, you are the first and the last, the living One; you died, and you are alive for ever. In the beginning, before the world was, you were with your Father, and you will be with us to the end of the world. In you dwells the whole fullness of God. In you the whole of creation is to be brought together in unity in the plan of fulfilment of the ages, bringing together all things in heaven and on earth.

To you all flesh shall come. To you all shall bring their confession of sin. In you are centred the hopes of all ages, in you the desires of all ages find their correction and fulfilment that will turn out better than all dreams.

I turn to you with my fears and desires, admitting my sin. So often have I seen you in need and failed to offer help to you. So often have I misused the opportunity and the gift you have given me so lavishly.

Gentle Lord, though you have searched me and known me long before I knew it, though you know me so well, I know you love me in spite of all. Thank you for your
patience, for your mercy, your grace. Let me realise more and more how great you are. Kindle in me the fire of your love.

**SPEAKING**

*Hebrews 1:1-2*

1 Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds.

GREAT music rises out of silence, without completely filling the silence. So it is with the word of God. He speaks ‘in many and various ways’, and his silence too is a speaking, behind all other speech. Already in creation he offers himself for us to know, to discern ‘his eternal power and divine nature’, without saying anything yet. ‘The heavens are telling the glory of God’, without speech, without words, ‘yet their voice goes out through all the earth.’ ‘There is one teacher’, says Ignatius of Antioch, ‘who spoke, and it came to be, and what he did in silence is worthy of the Father.’

Yes, he spoke of old ‘by the prophets’, and sent them to present his message, sometimes in story and parable and poetry, and now and then in significant action. But when at last he speaks ‘by a Son’, he doesn’t send the Son to convey a message, or not mainly for that. The Son is indeed a Prophet, but much more than a prophet. The Son himself is the message; Jesus Christ himself is the Good News. Before Jesus spoke, and after he spoke, the Father is already eloquent in the silent presence of the Son. ‘The one who has the word of Jesus’, says Ignatius again, ‘can listen to his quietness as well, in order to be complete, one with his word and manifest in action’.
Hebrews springs from quiet faith in Jesus Christ, and its aim is to strengthen and deepen faith in him. Let us rest quietly in his company, silently open to the fullness of his love.

THE GREATNESS OF THE SON (1)

Hebrews 1:2-4

2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. 3 He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, 4 having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

WHAT a writer often does is create an experience, putting words together in a way that makes notional things real and gives shape to what was nebulous. That is not quite what we have here in Hebrews. God is already present on this side of every expression. And before anything is said about the Son, he is already fully himself, fully present to the author and his hearers, and to us too; every expression falls short of conveying the majesty of the One given to us, who has us.

Even so, the author of Hebrews has the skill to tell of the Son. Already in this beginning he presents the heart of what he has to say. ‘By a Son’. What sort of son? One ‘whom he appointed heir of all things’ (compare the parable of the vineyard, Matthew 21:37-38). One who was engaged in the creation, who fully represents God, who is the Saviour. Then the author develops these themes, as it were, in a symphony. The central theme is the communion within the fullness of God that is given us in Christ. To express that as far as may be, he draws on the ‘many and various ways’ of his Jewish heritage. They are the patterns of expression that are
available to him and his audience, but Jesus gives them new significance: ‘The Scriptures testify to me’ (John 5:39). And so we search for Jesus in them. Let us ask him to open them for us (Luke 24:27-32).

For now, we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.

THE GREATNESS OF THE SON (2)

*Hebrews 1:3*

Saying ‘He is the reflection of God’s glory’ echoes the praise of wisdom in *The Wisdom of Solomon* (7:25-26), as does saying that he is ‘the exact imprint of God’s very being’. There is also an echo of the beginning: ‘let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness’ (Genesis 1:26-27; compare Wisdom 2:23, and 1 Corinthians 11:7). Not only an echo, but also a promise.

In the man Jesus ‘the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily’ (Colossians 2:9), to bring us to clothe ourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator (Colossians 3:10), ‘until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ’ (Ephesians 4:13).

In the man Jesus, ‘the image of God’ (2 Corinthians 4:4) creation is marvellously fulfilled and restored; he is ‘the exact imprint of God’s very being’ – ‘whoever has seen me has seen the Father (John 14:9). As was said already, Jesus is the heir of all the promises.
Along with that we are reminded that Jesus is the one ‘through whom he also created the worlds’. He is the one, the same one, but that is so not by virtue of his human nature. It is not as man that Jesus ‘sustains all things by his powerful word’. It is not of him as man that it is said that ‘all things have been created through him and for him’. Nor is it in virtue of his full humanity that ‘he himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together’. And yet in the man Jesus ‘all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him’ – yes, through his humanity – ‘God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things… by making peace through the blood of his cross’ (Colossians 1:17-20).

The Word from heaven, kin to us —
The great little one, weak but strong —
The giver and support of being, and ruler of all that is …

THE GREATNESS OF THE SON (3)

Hebrews 1:3

3 He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high

JESUS Christ is the full and final self-communication of the Father, but human thought and discourse about him is never total. Faith in Jesus is simple, but ‘many and various ways’ are needed to express it even in part (John 21:25).

So Jesus is ‘the reflection of God’s glory’ and ‘the exact imprint of God’s very being’; he it is who ‘sustains all things by his powerful word’, and who ‘when he had made purification for sins’ (of which we shall hear more presently) ‘sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high’.

As he has always been equal to the Father in Godhead, he is Lord in his humanity also, after the Cross, Resurrection
and Ascension (Philippians 2:11; compare Romans 10:9). Here something similar is suggested, by saying that Jesus, after his sacrifice, is seated on his royal throne. But here another contrast is used to express his greatness: not that he has received ‘the name which is above every name’, but, all the same, that he has become ‘as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs’.

**HIGHER THAN THE ANGELS (1)**

*Hebrews 1:4*

4 having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

As we consider the titles of the Son, we begin to realise how much higher than the angels he is said to be. He excels them as their Creator (compare Colossians 1:15-16); He excels in every way beyond comparison.

Contrasting Jesus with the prophets of old was not meant to disparage the message given through them; the point was to celebrate his greatness rather than to diminish them. The same is true of contrasting Jesus with the angels, those high creatures who surround the throne of the Lord to wait on him (for example in Isaiah 6:1-8). The Son sits on the right hand of the throne, higher yet than their height; exactly because he stooped to be a servant, his humanity too is raised to be Lord.

Jesus did all this for us, to raise us to himself (compare John 14:2-3). Let us ask him to lighten the eyes of our mind to learn how rich is the inheritance that is given us in him and through him, and how great is the power that ‘raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not
only in this age but also in the age to come’ (compare Ephesians 1:18-21).

Oh! To have faith to gaze with the angels on the mystery, to see the order of salvation.

HIGHER THAN THE ANGELS (2)

Hebrews 1:5-9

5 For to which of the angels did God ever say, ‘You are my Son; today I have begotten you’? Or again, ‘I will be his Father, and he will be my Son’? 6 And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, ‘Let all God’s angels worship him.’ 7 Of the angels he says, ‘He makes his angels winds, and his servants flames of fire.’ 8 But of the Son he says, ‘Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, and the righteous sceptre is the sceptre of your kingdom. 9 You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.’

In the first place, the supreme excellence of Jesus is conveyed by the name that has been given him; indeed both quotations come from the context of enthroning the king of Israel: ‘You are my son; today I have begotten you’ (Psalm 2:7). And again: ‘I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me’ (2 Samuel 7:14). But applied to Jesus they acquire a far finer significance. This is to declare that he is Son, after the cross and resurrection (compare Romans 1:3-4). The old kingship was a shadow compared to the kingship of Jesus Christ. And again we notice that the new thing is conveyed by means of the old expressions. They are employed not to prove the point, but to express it as well as possible.

So, as the Hebrews-author continues, he picks up quotations here and there to be used to tell how Jesus Christ excels
them all: ‘Let all God’s angels worship him’. In the original context (the Greek of Deuteronomy 32:43), worshipping God is what is meant, but here God is presented saying this of Jesus, as ‘he brings’ him, his ‘firstborn into the world’ (this is open to referring to his first coming into the world, to his coming again in glory, or to his daily coming to us).

The angels are ministers; not so the Son. Once again the words used were addressed to a king, but here they have far far greater significance. He is the Anointed, the Messiah, and more: ‘Your throne, O God, is for ever and ever’. Thanks be to him for raising us to share his inheritance (Revelation 1:6; Matthew 25:34; 1 John 2:20; 2 Corinthians 1:21; Romans 8:17; 2 Timothy 2:12).

**HIGHER THAN THE ANGELS (3)**

*Hebrews 1:10-12*

10 And, ‘In the beginning, Lord, you founded the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands; 11 they will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like clothing; 12 like a cloak you will roll them up, and like clothing they will be changed. But you are the same, and your years will never end.’

JUST as the words of the Lord in Isaiah 45:23 – ‘to me every knee shall bow’ – are applied to Jesus in Philippians 2:11, so here the Son is taken to be addressed by the Father in the words of Psalm 102:25-27: ‘of the Son he says... “In the beginning, Lord, you founded the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands; they will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like clothing; like a cloak you will roll them up, and like clothing they will be changed. But you are the same, and your years will never end”.’ This is shocking at first sight, and yet it is no more than a development of what has already been said: Jesus is more than a prophet, more than a king, more than an angel, the shining
of the glory, the image and likeness, the exact imprint of the very being of the Lord, the living God.

This develops a better notion of the excellence of the Son, indeed it does; but it also deepens the revelation of the Lord God of the covenant, the God who reveals himself to his people. In the Son God reveals himself more fully still; and the Son’s being what he is reveals yet more about the life of the living God. How is it revealed that God is love? (compare 1 John 4:7-12).

Here there is room for us to open ourselves to the greatness of the Son, not in order to unfold ideas, but to adore him more loyally, and to come through him to adore the Father in spirit and in truth. Yes, and to do that with the confidence that his Spirit will guide us in the whole truth.
Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it. For if the message declared through angels was valid, and every transgression or disobedience received a just penalty, how can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? It was declared at first through the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him, while God added his testimony by signs and wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, distributed according to his will. Now God did not subject the coming world, about which we are speaking, to angels. But someone has testified somewhere, ‘What are human beings that you are mindful of them, or mortals, that you care for them?’ You have made them for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned them with glory and honour, subjecting all things under their feet.’ Now in subjecting all things to them, God left nothing outside their control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to them, but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honour because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, saying, ‘I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.’ And again, ‘I will put my trust in him.’ And again, ‘Here am I and the children whom God has given
me.’ 14 Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, 15 and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. 16 For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. 17 Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. 18 Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

SO GREAT A SALVATION

Hebrews 1:13 - 2:4

13 But to which of the angels has he ever said, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet’? 14 Are not all angels spirits in the divine service, sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation? [Chapter 2] 1 Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it. 2 For if the message declared through angels was valid, and every transgression or disobedience received a just penalty, 3 how can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? It was declared at first through the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him, 4 while God added his testimony by signs and wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, distributed according to his will.

AGAIN the Hebrews-author cites one of the royal Psalms, which recalls the promise to King David (2 Samuel 7:11-16); the Son is told ‘sit at my right hand…’ something never said to any angel. The angels, for all their high status and function, are all of them ‘spirits in the divine service, sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation’.
With this mention of salvation the lesson comes home to us (to the second generation of disciples, and to us in our turn today). To us this most excellent inheritance has been passed on, with all the more pressing a challenge because the manifestation of God’s love in it is now full and final. We are not asked for less attention than was asked of those of old. Living true to the spirit of the Gospel is not easier than keeping the letter of the Law, although it is not a matter of keeping law. Jesus said, ‘Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil’ (Matthew 5:17). We know what fulfilment he has in mind: ‘ “Love the Lord with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind”… “Love your neighbour as yourself”. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’ (Matthew 22:37-40; compare 25:31-46; Romans 13:8-10).

Backsliding from the ‘law’ of love given in and by Jesus the Son of God is not threatened with a punishment from without, but with a terrible loss within (compare John 6:68-69).

Let me not separate myself from you.

THE LEADER OF SALVATION (1)

Hebrews 2:5-12

5 Now God did not subject the coming world, about which we are speaking, to angels. 6 But someone has testified somewhere, ‘What are human beings that you are mindful of them, or mortals, that you care for them? 7 You have made them for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned them with glory and honour, 8 subjecting all things under their feet.’ Now in subjecting all things to them, God left nothing outside their control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to them, 9 but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now
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everyone. It was fitting that God, for whom and through
whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory,
should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through
sufferings. For the one who sanctifies and those who are
sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not
ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, saying, ‘I will
proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters, in the midst
of the congregation I will praise you.’

JESUS has come into his own, although we have not yet
seen ‘all things subjected to him’ (1 Corinthians 15:24-28).
Yes; God’s rule, God’s kingdom is established. Yet there is
still reason to pray ‘thy kingdom come’; has God’s grace
had its way fully in us, let alone in the world around us?
And remember Pascal’s remark, that the agony of Jesus will
not come to end finally before the end of the world (com-
pare Colossians 1:24). Wherever his people suffer, there he
will be with them.

We are invited to wonder at the way God ‘for whom and
through whom all things exist’ manifests his love and his
sympathy. Granted that God, as God, is beyond the reach of
finite feelings, he is not out of sympathy with them. He
shows that in his Son, who, in his humanity, was to ‘be made
perfect through sufferings’ so as to bring ‘many children to
glory’ – ‘here am I and the children God has given me’.

‘The children share flesh and blood’: we were kin with
Jesus already before he became one of us, because as he is
eternally in God’s love so we are creatures of God’s love.
Once he has come to share our life and suffer for us and
with us, he has come yet closer to us to make us holy, to
enable us to share his divine life (compare John 17:19). He
experienced the human condition at its worst, and could
take the anguish on himself (Psalm 22:1-21; compare Mat-
thew 27:46), winning the right to the victory expressed in
the same Psalm (22:22).
Oh God, comfort of the afflicted and support of the heavy-burdened, hear the prayers of everyone who calls on you from the heart of any trouble, and grant them in their difficulties the taste of your consolation. We ask this through Christ our Lord.

THE LEADER OF SALVATION (2)

Hebrews 2:13-18

13 And again, ‘I will put my trust in him.’ And again, ‘Here am I and the children whom God has given me.’ 14 Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, 15 and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. 16 For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. 17 Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. 18 Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

PUT in the mouth of Jesus, the words of Isaiah (8:17-18) – ‘Here am I and the children whom God has given me’ – accept us as made one with him in ‘flesh and blood’, and present us to his Father in virtue of his having overcome death by dying.

Now, since Jesus’ care is for the descendants of Abraham (compare Isaiah 41:8), ‘he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested’. The author of Hebrews
uses these words to make the same point, but with new effect: yes, Jesus is indeed doing what a high priest was meant to do. The name of the old office is used, but with enhanced effect.

Jesus was not born to a priestly line; he is never said to have claimed directly that he was a priest. There was no trace of Temple ritual in the sacrifice on Calvary hill, ‘a sack of bones nailed on a pole like a scarecrow, outside the town’. There was, for all that, a prophetic suggestion (Isaiah 53:10), and Jesus’ own words (1 Corinthians 11:25), that give ground to discern that his death was more truly a sacrifice than any other (compare Romans 3:25; Ephesians 5:2; 1 Peter 1:19). If he offered himself, then he was a priest indeed, more truly a priest than any other. The central image in Hebrews is the Temple and its high priest, an image given new significance in Christ. Here, so far, the image only begins to be presented: Jesus had to become fully like us; he knows what it is to be tempted, to be tried, and he knows what it is to come through victoriously. We can trust him.