

Trinity 19 [Proper 22, year B]

A sermon preached at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, on Sunday 7 October 2018.

Readings: Hebrews 1.1-4 & 2.5-12 and Mark 10.2-16

When I was exploring the possibility of moving to Guernsey, I turned to the internet to try to find out as much as I could about this island, the role of the Dean and this parish. I was used to being able to see pictures of the places I was planning to visit in England and, indeed, many other places, thanks to Google's 'street view'. This wasn't possible in Guernsey, as I think that Guernsey had refused permission for Google to film the island. That's fine. But it was very hard to find any pictures of St Andrew's Church and impossible to find any pictures of the Rectory, apart from a glimpse of the east well of the house in the rare pictures of the church. And so the Rectory was a tantalising mystery until Judy and I were driven, with the other candidates, to meet the Church Advisory Committee members and view the house. Until then, a glimpse had to suffice.

Today's New Testament reading is the opening verses of the letter to the Hebrews and some verses from chapter 2. This book, from which we will hear more in the New Testament readings over the coming weeks, is quite different to the other letters we find in the New Testament. For a start, we do not know the author. The other letters are by Paul, John, Peter, James and Jude – or at least they are written by people with a close relationship with the named author. But the letter to the Hebrews is something of a mystery.

It is well written, described by commentators as 'polished and elegant'. One fascinating proposal, based on the letter's anonymity, is that the letter was written by a woman, possibly Priscilla. She is mentioned in a number of places in the Acts of the Apostles and in Paul's letters with her husband Aquila. Paul is generous in his recognition and acknowledgment of his indebtedness to them.

What seems indisputable is that the letter was written for Jewish Christians who lived in Jerusalem. The writer wanted to encourage Christians to persevere in the face of persecution. The theme of the letter is the doctrine of the person of Christ, our understanding of who Jesus is, and his role as mediator between God and humanity. So it is possible that it was written to some Christians believers were considering turning back to Judaism to escape being persecuted for accepting Christ as their Saviour.

The writer of this letter is unambiguous and clear. Whilst in the past, people had a glimpse of God, Jesus allows us to see God clearly: 'Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son ... He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being.' No longer just a glimpse. Jesus shows us the unambiguous glory of God, and seeks to draw us deeply into the mystery of God's love and his yearning for us to reach out to him in return.

God had spoken through Moses. God had spoken through Samuel and Elijah. God had spoken through Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel. And yet, through these human mouthpieces, something had always been lost in translation. There had been misunderstandings. Communication breakdowns. Often God and his people seemed to be talking past one another. Sometimes the problem was that the people weren't yet ready to grasp what God was trying tell them. At other times, they simply weren't listening.

Through Moses and the prophets, God's people had been given glimpses of the truth. But now, God has revealed us the truth in his Son. The whole truth. God had previously spoken to humanity in the words of the prophets. But now he has spoken to us in the flesh and blood of a Son. His Son.

Many years previously, the Hebrews had cried out for years over their slavery in Egypt. God had broken that silence, not in words, but by leading this assortment of enslaved people out of their slavery and forming them into the nation of Israel.

At Sinai, God had begun a conversation with his people and gave them the Law. This conversation continued through the prophets. This ongoing conversation had formed and reformed; had fed and sustained; had disciplined and comforted the people of God for hundreds of years. And yet, there were these long, awkward periods of silence.

The author of Hebrews begins the letter with the audacious claim that God has broken his silence by sending his Son, Jesus Christ. And that in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, we do not merely catch glimpses - rumours or hints or fragments - of the truth. In Jesus the Son, we have been given the truth. The whole truth.

God's most vulnerable, intimate, revealing self-expression is in the earthy, flesh-and-blood life of his Son, Jesus. God has not only re-opened lines of communication between himself and us. He has not only renewed the conversation, but the conversation can never be the same. Jesus has fundamentally changed the dynamic between God and humanity. Because now, seated at God's right hand, is his crucified and resurrected Son.

Through Jesus, God has completed the conversation that had begun in Moses and continued through the prophets. With Jesus, the priestly representative for all humanity, we have a direct line of communication. For in the person of Jesus the Son, God has had a human experience and understands us better than we understand ourselves.