

Hebrews 4.12-16; St Luke's Modbury, 241013.

When I was eleven years old, our family moved to a new location in the west of England, and consequently I moved to a new school. On my first day in that school, the headmaster came into the classroom, greeted the teacher and the class and then, spotting me, said, 'And you must be the new boy!' Introductions followed and then a short conversation which finished with a question. 'Well, Donald', he said, 'Do you know Percy?' I didn't have a clue what he was talking about, but I gathered some in the class did, because a bit of subdued giggling followed the question. What could I say? Percy who for goodness sake? So I answered, 'No sir, I don't know Percy'. 'This boy doesn't know Percy' the headmaster announced to the class, who like the trained audience they were, responded with sympathetic moans. He turned back to me, 'Percy-verance my boy, Percy-verance, if you know Percy, you can do anything you set your mind to.' So, he said, 'Remember Percy,' whereupon he thanked the teacher and left the classroom including one rather stunned new boy. As you can see this made quite an impression on me – and I think he was absolutely right!

Perseverance is one of the key themes of the Letter to the Hebrews.

Both from the content of the letter and its date, which can be set between 60AD and 90AD, we know that Hebrews was written to a Christian church some 30+ years after the resurrection which had become rather dispirited and in which some were in danger of falling away from their faith in Christ.

We're not sure who wrote Hebrews – somewhat unusually no authorship is mentioned at the introduction. Almost certainly it was not St Paul – the style of writing is too different to attribute the letter to him. What we know of the author is that:

- He knew the church to which he was writing – he knew their history and he knew their current situation.

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- He had an excellent grasp of the OT scriptures and was also familiar with the ritual of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem – and he assumes his readers would have a similar knowledge and would thus be able to follow his arguments.

It's fairly certain that Hebrews was written to a church made up mainly of Jewish converts to the Christian faith and that members of this church were familiar with the Greek version of the Old Testament, and that the church was located in a Roman province, if not in Rome itself. We also know, because the author refers to it, that this was a church that, in the past, had experienced persecution – some members had been vilified, some had property confiscated, some had been imprisoned, though none, at the time the letter was written, had been put to death. It may be, that on account of this persecution, or the threat of further persecution, some church members were tempted to lapse back to Judaism - which enjoyed some protection under Roman law. Or it may be that some were finding that the excitement and hope that they knew early in their Christian lives was fading, or that living out the Christian life in the midst of a pagan society was wearying them. For whatever reasons it seems that some were drifting away from faith in Jesus, and some were close to renouncing their faith. The author of Hebrews writes to this struggling church to encourage them to persevere in their faith, and to do this he marshals a range of arguments based on Old Testament history and Jewish ritual.

The problem for us is that we're not very familiar with this material and type of argument. It's generally acknowledged that Hebrews is one of the most difficult of the New Testament letters for people like us to understand. That, however, is no reason to avoid it, because, while it may take a bit of work, Hebrews offers some remarkable insights – insights that remain relevant for Christians today – and the passage before us today is no exception.

The writer to the Hebrews constantly uses examples from Israel's history as either positive or negative illustrations of what it means to be faithful. Immediately before our passage there's a negative example. In chapter 3 and the first part of chapter 4

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the writer takes his audience back to the days of the exodus, and in particular, to a time when the people of Israel rebelled against God in the wilderness. These were people whom God had delivered from slavery in Egypt, and who God had led and sustained throughout their journey, and they had God's promise of a wonderful future – a land of milk and honey. But, in the wilderness, when times got tough, they began questioning God's faithfulness – Exodus records them as saying 'Is God amongst us or not?' To bring home to his readers the seriousness of this kind of loss of faith our writer quotes part of Ps95:

⁷ Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says,

"Today, when you hear his voice,

⁸ do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion,

as on the day of testing in the wilderness,

⁹ where your ancestors put me to the test,^[a]

though they had seen my works ¹⁰ for forty years.

Therefore I was angry with that generation,

and I said, 'They always go astray in their hearts,

and they have not known my ways.'

¹¹ As in my anger I swore,

'They will not enter my rest.' "

Our writer then goes on to argue that God's word spoken through the Holy Spirit in Ps95 is just as pertinent to his readers (and thus to us) as it was to those who first heard it. In a sense, he says, it's always 'Today' - the Holy Spirit is always speaking to us. Immediately before our passage he repeats the appeal:

"Today, when you hear his voice,

⁸ do not harden your hearts . . .

This leads directly to the injunction with which our passage began: (Heb 4.12)

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Indeed, the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. ¹³ And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

It's poetic language – the word of God – the word of Scripture as taken up and applied by the Holy Spirit is living and effective, it speaks to us today, it discerns the true thoughts of the heart and leaves them open before God, to whom we will give account.

Well, a logical response to this rather daunting description of the function of God's word might be despair. But this isn't what our writer wants to achieve. Instead, he urges his readers to remember Jesus – and the God they have come to know through him – and to persevere in their faith. This time he uses imagery drawn from the ritual of the Jewish temple:

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested^[a] as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

In the ritual of the Jewish temple, the High Priest was the only person who could enter the Holy of Holies which was a symbolic way of entering into the presence of God – and this once a year to offer prayers for the people. In contrast, the writer tells us, Jesus, the Son of God is the true High Priest who, on account of his death for us and resurrection, is now constantly in the presence of God – he rules from the throne of grace – and this assures us of the salvation of all who trust in him and persevere in their faith. What's more, the writer reminds them, Jesus, whose true humanity he has stressed earlier in the letter, has been tested just as all believers

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are – so he knows the stresses faithful people endure, and can sympathise with them.

My reading of Hebrews is that it's written to a church that was experiencing a kind of wilderness experience. The excitement of their discovery of a new life and a new community in Christ had ebbed away, and times had become more difficult as they found themselves swimming against the tide of the pagan society in which they lived. In the Old Testament, Israel's wilderness experience was referred to as a time of testing, and I think that's true of all wilderness experiences. The wear and tear, and the pressure of wilderness experiences, can test the cohesion of a church community and the faith of individuals.

I suspect the Anglican church in our Diocese is going through a bit of a wilderness experience at present. After all, we often find ourselves either ignored or derided by the community, we find ourselves often at odds with the values of a society which more and more seems to be moving away from Christian values. And we constantly hear of ageing and declining congregations while those Sydney Anglicans and noisy Pentecostals tell us how well they're doing. It's a testing time. Add to this those challenging times in life which we all experience from time to time – times of loss and grief and suffering, for example, times when our Christian hope is challenged, and it can be hard sometimes to hold to faith. Recent data published by the Diocese do show congregations declining year on year. Is this natural attrition or is it due to a lack of effective evangelism, or is it people losing faith? Probably it's a combination of all three.

What do we do, how should we respond, to this time in the wilderness? In this passage the writer to the Hebrews bids us remember that wilderness experiences are times of testing, and that in these times we need to persevere in our faith - to persevere with Jesus. That might mean toughing it out at times – but it doesn't mean toughing it out alone – because in Jesus we have a great high priest who understands our experiences and who longs for us to approach the throne of grace

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and find there both forgiveness for our failures and strength to continue – or to put that another way, we find the grace that enables us to persevere. And that, brothers and sisters, is a cause for joy – a joy which we celebrate in our worship, a joy which strengthens us in our Christian living day by day.