

Trinity Baptist Church  
Sunday 7 February 2021: Don't Give Up! (Ron Jones)

Reading: Hebrews 10: 19 - 36

The message of this passage is one of encouragement. The Hebrew Christians to whom it was written needed encouragement in their situation, which we will look at in a minute; and you don't need me to tell you how much we need encouragement in today's environment. Mind you, comfort in the Bible is associated more with giving people strength rather than giving them cushions; and the encouragement in our passage is rather like that too. But don't we need it! So easy in this interminable lockdown to lose focus, lose motivation - and I want to encourage you this morning.

Hebrews is thought to have been written to Jewish Christians in Rome, after the start of persecution under Claudius but before the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in AD70. The major thrust of the letter is that the Jewish system has been superseded by the sacrifice of Jesus - and if the writer had known of the sack of Jerusalem and destruction of the temple it would have been such a powerful support to his argument; but Hebrews does not mention it. It refers to the High Priest "standing daily" to offer sacrifices, as if it were still going on.

So these people had had their first taste of persecution - and there was for them a very real temptation: to give up. The Jewish system had been ordained by God in the first place, and in one way it had everything going for it: ritual, robes, acknowledgement of a sort by Rome (as long as the Jewish hierarchy complied with the Roman authorities), synagogues in every city - and somehow it didn't need proving or justifying; it was known everywhere, and going on throughout the Roman world. Now, under the new "Way", there was trouble on all sides: the Jewish communities were generally opposed to the message of Jesus, often violently; the Romans were not pleased with a message that presented a more powerful king than Caesar, and that caused rioting and disturbances, and the pagans were suspicious of their own people who joined in with the new movement. The Christians were without a recognised place to meet, and after the first flush of enthusiasm you can imagine them missing the ritual, the hierarchy, and so on. This is what is behind the heavy warnings in Hebrews about the dangers of falling away - and what is warned against is a very different "falling away" from professing Christians or church members today who have somehow gone off the boil, drifted away, given up, or had a lurid past. We'll go into this a bit later.

So the encouragement in our passage says three things:- come near, hold on to the hope, consider how to encourage each other to love and good deeds. Furthermore, it tells us why we should. What nourishment can we extract from this in our present circumstances?

Verse 21 speaks of the "new and living way" into the holiest place, and the Great Priest. You can't get the impact of this without a look at the Jewish temple background. In Luke 1 we have a picture of the crowds praying outside the sanctuary while Zechariah was offering the incense - and noting that he couldn't speak to them when he came out: they expected him to declare a blessing over them, because Jehovah had accepted the incense offering. A similar thing would have happened on the annual Day of Atonement, when absolutely everything depended on the High Priest going not just to the Incense Altar but into the Holy of Holies, anointing the Ark of the Covenant with blood - and **getting it right**. The relief when he emerged and blessed the people must have been tremendous: atonement achieved, for another year ahead. **Now** we are told that the way in is wide open for all of us, a **living way** (because Jesus is alive and his sacrifice has been eternally accepted), and that he is our Great Priest: this is why, Hebrew believers, you don't need the temple system, or annual sacrifices, or Levitical priests, any more - God has replaced them with something immeasurably better.

***"Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from a guilty conscience and our bodies washed with pure water"***. This reference to washing is generally taken to refer to baptism, but the New Testament does not expand on this. Today I want to draw out the "full assurance of faith" and the sprinkled hearts.

So what about “full assurance of faith”? Let’s try to clear some undergrowth here. The word “faith” is often used to mean “religion”: “Do you have a faith?” “Yes, I’m Catholic”: that sort of thing. We know what we mean: but that isn’t a Bible use of the word. The really dangerous contemporary meaning, though, is when “faith” means some kind of consciousness, or feeling. Now, we know that the life of following and trusting in Jesus can often affect our feelings - wouldn’t it be awful if it didn’t! But in the Bible sense of the word, faith is emphatically NOT a feeling! Tom Wright, in his daily commentary on Hebrews, sums it up by writing that faith cannot be “drummed up”, but that “it’s what happens when we look hard at the object of faith”. I like to think of faith as a window: never mind the pane of glass - what is the view like through the window? What do you SEE? So the writer is telling them: look at the facts: the blood of Jesus, his resurrection (much of which he has expounded in the earlier passages in Hebrews) - and come close to God in clear and absolute reliance on this truth.

But there is another gem for us in the phrase about “hearts sprinkled from a guilty conscience”. What’s going on here? We can get some help from looking up the original passage where this occurs - which is Exodus 24. Here, the Israelites had been delivered from Egypt: they had just seen Pharaoh’s army destroyed. Then they started their journey across the desert, and they had seen God provide them both with food (the manna) and water - and had been warned about grumbling and doubting God. They had been attacked by the Amalekites, and had seen them miraculously defeated through Moses’ public prayer on their behalf. Shortly after that they had arrived at Sinai, and Moses has been called up for the first of two visits up the mountain to receive the first tranche of the Law, including the Ten Commandments, has come down to the people, and has read them a good deal of what God required - and they have committed to follow God in every detail. At that stage Moses was summoned up the mountain again, but before he went he built altars and offered sacrifices. Then he sprinkled the people with some of the sacrificial blood, and said “This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you according to all these words”.

Notice that this was not the sacrifice made at the time of their salvation, their deliverance: that had happened back in Egypt on Passover Night - and that blood wasn’t on them, it was on their doorposts. This sprinkling, at the foot of Sinai, was therefore because God had already brought them into relationship with him. Now come back to Hebrews:- the “sprinkling of our hearts” is presented as the cure for a guilty conscience. Now, every time we celebrate Communion we are reminded that we need to examine ourselves and repent of any unconfessed sin - but this is different. Of course we need to confess sin as it occurs in our lives - but we do still tend to feel guilty, feel as if we need to tiptoe into God’s presence, keep our heads down in case he looks at us and notices anything wrong - after all, we are such unsuccessful Christians, aren’t we? The Israelites were sprinkled because they were already redeemed: we have looked at the facts of our redemption, and if we get a hold of that it sprinkles our hearts, so to speak. Of course it doesn’t mean that we can be casual in the way we approach God - but it does mean that we should not feel hang-dog about it! This general sense of being unworthy, unsuccessful - we don’t need it! We need to get hold of the sprinkling: read what the Bible says about eternal forgiveness. Don’t you think that’s good news?

So what about the terrifying warning later in the passage? Does this raise worries at all about committing the Unforgiveable Sin? Apparently, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries some teachers thought this referred to “serious” sins committed after your baptism; and some people would put off being baptised until the last possible moment, as a safety precaution against committing this sin accidentally. That seems very strange to us - but do we need to worry?

I might just stop to add: forgive the phrase, but I hope God’s Word does bother you! The Lord deliver us from a sort of “going with the flow” - as if it was all up to the minister, and we didn’t need to concern ourselves overmuch with sound teaching and discernment. So:- how can we understand this warning?

Firstly, the classic, text-book passage explaining the Sin that cannot be Forgiven is Mark chapter 3 - and Andy dealt with that comprehensively last Sunday. As he said, the fact that you are worried means that you cannot possibly have committed that sin. If you didn’t catch that sermon when it went out live, or if you are still worried that this might be you, please, as a matter of urgency, re-run that sermon from 31<sup>st</sup> January.

Now for our passage: Imagine a first-century Jew who has heard the message about Jesus as the true Messiah of Israel, the Son of God, his death and resurrection having made the Jewish sacrificial system obsolete, eternal forgiveness for all through relying on Jesus' death and resurrection; imagine that person exploring these revolutionary ideas, even associating with Christians for a while, but eventually deciding that on balance the old way was better. Map that on to the teaching in Hebrews about Christ's superiority in every sense over every detail of the old system, God's approval of what Christ has done signified by raising him from the dead - and bear in mind that many were still living at that time who had met the risen Jesus: remember Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 15. This isn't talking about wavering between two sets of belief, or going through a period of indecision before finally deciding which way to go: it's describing a settled decision - "No: Jesus and this gospel you keep talking about is not for me - I would rather rely on the God-given sacrifices and ritual in the temple." In other words, a permanent and deliberate refusal of Jesus' credentials and claims - which in effect parallels the attitude of the Jewish leaders in Mark 3, about which Jesus spoke so very seriously. Hebrews mentions elsewhere such people "crucifying the Son of God all over again"; in the terms of our passage today, "trampling the Son of God underfoot" and "treating the blood of the covenant that sanctified him as an unholy thing", "insulting the Spirit of Grace".

But there is another layer to this which really proves that this kind of "falling away" is different from our idea of it, or from anything we might have done. Suppose you went through a long period of indecision before you came to Jesus; or perhaps you did teenage rebellion very thoroughly, or before coming to Christ you said and did things of which you are now ashamed to think. If you examine what you actually believed during that stage, you will probably find a sort of swamp of vague ideas, more or less anti-God, certainly anti-anything you thought was getting to you, claiming authority over you. Possibly you'd been affected by some other teaching, which you now reject because of the firm ground of the Gospel of forgiveness through Christ and obedience to him. Have you perhaps started to drift, for various reasons? Any of this is very different indeed from what was open to a Jewish person in the first century who had turned his back on Jesus. Why?

The people to whom this was addressed hadn't come from the same place as we might find today, possibly from a nominal faith or no faith at all, or from a different religion: they came from a regular practice of God-given Jewish ritual. They lived in a pagan society that worshipped many alien gods including Caesar, and their Judaism took a firm and good stand against that: so for them there was no room for just drifting away - it would have meant embracing the whole Jewish system again with a firm decision - or going pagan, which was unthinkable. The attitude that we often find in today's secular society, of believing nothing in particular but non-specifically "having a faith", would have been unthinkable for a Jewish person. The exalted truth about Jesus that the writer has laid out so far in Hebrews thus makes a settled decision to rely on Judaism after all a terrible decision to have made. And be quite clear: this isn't just that stage of coming to a decision where we tend to shift back and forth before finally making up our minds: this is a settled, finalised conclusion. Hence: "It is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the Living God".

If you have been worried about this, I urge you to read Hebrews for yourself, and Romans, and Mark 3, asking the Lord to reveal to you from his word how secure you are in Christ. And look how the passage goes on: "Look how well you were doing just recently; remember how well you stood up to the recent persecution." **Do not throw away your confidence** - the word we can take to ourselves this morning, though in very different circumstances from theirs. And we can help each other in this: the passage we read tells us to "**consider how we can encourage one another to love and good deeds**". How could we do this? I want to close by making two suggestions.

The first is to join in the fortnightly Zoom prayer meetings the church is holding during lockdown, or to join in if your Home Group runs these. Does it seem that regulars at these sessions must find prayer a constant delight, can't wait for the next opportunity to get on their knees or join others in prayer? Now, I am told I am prone, when preaching, to imagining that everybody else thinks the way I do. OK, point taken - but I do believe I'm on firm ground here: I think most of us find corporate prayer an effort. If that isn't you, thank God for it. But these days, work and the pace of life are demanding, and it's not easy to get a baby-sitter - so it's not always feasible to get out to a prayer meeting. Anyway, I'm so tired in the evenings! But live streaming via Zoom means it can be done without leaving your house. I am going to confess something to you now: when it's Prayer Meeting night, whether everyone on Wednesdays or the Prayer Ministry Team on a Thursday, I almost always find myself wishing I didn't have to be there. I confess this in case you

might think I'm talking to you from the moral high ground. But I will tell you this: I come away from these prayer sessions having been genuinely encouraged and warmed, not only by the prayer activity but by the sharing-in-common with my brothers and sisters. In the spirit of Hebrews 10: 24, may I please encourage you to this good deed in particular?

My other suggestion is this: ask yourself what you would like to be remembered for. One of my best friends was once asked this question as an ice-breaker at the start of a home group meeting: after thinking carefully, he said thoughtfully that he would like to be remembered for his humility. He said this quite innocently; it took him a few minutes to realise why everybody else fell about laughing.

But suppose that for some reason you have left Trinity: moved away, perhaps, or even received your final Home Call. What will people think of, when they remember your time at Trinity? Wouldn't it be good if you were remembered as an encourager? That's what I would like for myself. I learned some of this as a department manager in the bank: there was something inductive about telling the staff they were amazing - they were great people, and because they knew that the boss thought they were fantastic they really acted up to it: wins all round! I also learned from previous placings in the bank what it was like to work under a suspicious, overbearing, out-of-touch management.

In the current situation we need so much encouragement: let's be keen to give it to each other. Especially in lockdown, when we can't actually meet: use the phone, or set-up a Zoom or Skype call. Remember Philippians 4? "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right" (and so on) "think about these things". Now add that to Hebrews 10:24: find those things in your brothers and sisters - and tell them. They need it - and it will do both them and yourself a power of good.

Let me leave you with a blessing from the pen of Thomas Merton:-

"Be good, keep your feet dry, your eyes open, your heart at peace and your soul in the joy of Christ."