

Hebrews 4:14-16, 10:19-23 ... 'touching the throne'

This morning we are shining the spotlight on a couple of paragraphs in Hebrews ... one in chapter 4, the other in chapter 10, where it's all about prayer. It has been said that 'prayer is the Christian's vital breath.' It was Martin Luther King Jr. who said on one occasion: 'To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing.'

So when we talk about prayer, and we talk a lot about prayer, don't we ... we read books on it, we hear sermons on it, we know what it is, we hear amazing stories of answered prayer ...

and yet, when push comes to shove, we don't do much of it, until we find ourselves in a tight corner or facing a crisis of some kind. Sadly, for many of us, prayer is seen as a last resort, rather than it being our first port of call.

At its simplest, prayer is you and I talking to Jesus! James Montgomery said that: *Prayer is the burden of a sigh, The falling of a tear; The upward glancing of an eye, When none but God is near.*

According to Psalm 55, it is taking our burden to the Lord and, hopefully, leaving it there! In prayer, we roll our cares and concerns on to him! His shoulders are

bigger and broader than yours and mine. He can handle it, no problem.

As the old hymn, penned by Joseph Scriven, reminds us: *What a friend we have in Jesus, All our sins and griefs to bear, What a privilege to carry, Everything to God in prayer.*

The Puritan pastor, Thomas Watson, said: 'Prayer delights God's ear, it melts his heart, and it opens his hand; God cannot deny a praying soul.' We're grateful for that, aren't we? I'm sure many of us can testify to the sweet reality of that truth in our own lives. And it's all because we have a great high priest whose name is Jesus, the Son of God - we see that in Hebrews 4, verse 14.

I'm reminded of the hymn penned by Isaac Watts when he rejoiced: *Jesus, my great high priest, Offered his blood and died; My guilty conscience seeks, No sacrifice beside: His powerful blood did once atone, And now it pleads before the throne.*

Back in the days of the old covenant before Calvary, the Jewish people had a priesthood and they also had a high priest. It was his role once a year, on the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, to enter into the holy of holies in the Tabernacle in the wilderness or the Temple in Jerusalem on their behalf - his

work was never done, it had to be repeated year on year, he never sat down ...

and then, two millennia back ... Jesus arrived on the scene - he lived, he died, he rose again, he ascended, then 'he sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high,' and that's what we have here in Hebrews 4.

Jesus is peerless, for he's the only one who bears the title of 'great high priest' ... he is described in that way in 2:17 where he is 'merciful and faithful' and again in 3:1. And the writer adds to that when he says here, 'since [seeing then that] we have a great high priest ...'

That's amazing because those words signify possession - we are one with him and he is one with us. It speaks of a close relationship and even has the idea of someone we cling on to, someone we hold tightly to ...

and the reason why is fairly obvious - because he is our Rock and our Refuge, our shelter in times of storm, we run to him, we make a beeline to him in our hour of need (verse 16). And, thank God, we're not left struggling and stranded, for we read over the page in Hebrews 7:26 that 'such a high priest meets our need.'

When we have that sinking feeling in the pit of our tummy, what do we do? We reach up and reach out to Him, and he reaches down to where we are. You see how honest and helpful it is at the end of chapter 4, for we

all have our times of need - you have yours and I have mine ...

it may be one thing or another and I don't need to itemise them here 1-2-3, and so on ... here's the good news: there's a safety net underneath us - the everlasting arms of the eternal God - so, whatever the issue, big or small, we have Jesus - and he's set before us as our 'great high priest.'

And that begs the question: What makes Jesus a 'great' high priest? I think there are three answers to that question. We have his **position** in verse 14, his **perfection** in verse 15, and his **provision** in verse 16. Let's shine the torchlight on each of these in turn, then we'll head over to Hebrews chapter 10 ...

1. his position

Jesus is our great high priest because of where he is - right now, he's at the right hand of the Father in heaven. Under the old economy, the high priest went through the blue, purple, and scarlet veil, year on year - but Jesus, our great high priest, has rent the veil in two and passed through the heavens! Eternally glorified! Ah, there's a man in the Glory and he's praying for you! He ever lives to intercede for us.

You see, Jesus is where he is because Jesus is who he is ... he's a **great** priest - he stands on his own when it comes to such greatness - from Aaron on, there is a long list of high priests, some of them better than others,

but Jesus outshines them all - every single one is far surpassed by him. No other priest did what he did.

And he's a **human** priest - his name is Jesus - as a man, he understands us, he knows us better than we know ourselves, he knows our trials, he's fully aware of what makes us tick ... as a man, he whispers in your ear to say, "I know ..."

He's also a **unique** priest for he is 'the Son of God.' There's the deity of the Lord Jesus - he is the Son of God, and he is God the Son. As man, he fully understands us - as the Son of God, he graciously undertakes for us.

2. his perfection

The words of verse 15 are beautiful in every way - they point us to one who has been there and done that, for he's been 'tempted in every way' - he knows what it's like when the enemy attacks - Jesus encountered him in a variety of places and he experienced it firsthand ... it's all there in the gospel narrative where you can read it for yourself. We simply can't understand what he went through, but he understands what we go through!

Tempted, yes, he certainly was ... but here's the insurmountable difference between him and us - never once did he give in to the tempter, on no occasion did he hesitate and yield, not once did he slip his moorings and fall into sin.

He was victorious each and every time ... and that's why the writer exhorts us in verse 14 to 'hold fast and hold firmly to the faith we profess [hold fast our confession]' It's because of him that we press on day by day - we keep on going because he has gone ahead of us!

Maybe, in our pursuit of God, that's the impetus we need to take time out of our busy schedules just to pray ... we need to sharpen our focus on him and what he has done, and on what he is doing right now on our behalf ...

For that's what the penman talks candidly about in the opening sentence - you'll see it's one of those double negatives, and he does that to emphasise his point: sure, we have our many weaknesses, you have your Achilles' heel and I have mine - we know what they are! And if you don't, you'll soon find out!

One translation has it that he is 'touched with the feeling of our infirmities.' And he is. Thank God. Jesus knows how to suffer with us, he knows how to sympathise with us ... he feels for us ...

so, when you're having a hard time and you're struggling to hold it all together, Jesus understands ... when your heart hurts and the burden is heavy, Jesus understands. As the old hymn reminds us: *In every pang that rends the heart, The Man of Sorrows*

*has a part, He sympathises with our grief,
And to the sufferer sends relief.*

Jesus succours us, he strengthens us; in the daily grind and in the upheavals of this life, Jesus is always there - in the best of times and, yes, in the worst of times, Jesus is on our side, he has your back 24/7. In fact, he's only a prayer away!

3. his provision

The converted slave trader John Newton wrote these tremendous words: *You are coming to a king, Large petitions you can bring, For his grace and power are such, None can ever ask too much.* In many ways, that's the heartbeat of verse 16 - by faith, we can touch the throne of the Most High! And when we rise to the challenge, and respond to the invitation, it's a no-brainer ... for the benefits and blessings are huge! We read, 'let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence ... [let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace]' It's a warm, open invitation for you and I to come close, to draw near - back in the old days, the sons of Abraham worshipped from afar - not us, we have his ear, we see his eye, we feel the beat of his heart ... we're on the inside, we are beyond the rent veil ... And we come to him, our priestly king, with 'confidence' - not with brashness, but with boldness, and a sense of brokenness. We come just as we are, with our fears, and our

foibles, and frustrations - in our weakness - in moments when we feel beaten in the fight, when it all seems too much for us - we come to him ...

in those seasons of deep distress when darkness envelops us - in those times when we know we've blown it and messed up big time ... yes, whatever it is, we come to him, we spill the beans, we pour out our hearts and tell him the full unvarnished story ... ah, this is prayer, it's when we tell it to Jesus.

The old hymn encourages us to 'count our blessings' - well, here's one ... when we take time out with Jesus at the throne of grace, we 'receive [obtain] mercy.' And that's something we all need - as sinners, we're recipients of the kindness of our good God. Mercy means we don't get what we deserve. We need it for our past, we need it in the here and now - thank God, there's an abundance of mercy with the Lord.

There's more than mercy lavished on us; there's also 'grace to help us in our time of need.' And that guarantees we get what we don't deserve ... sovereign grace, sufficient grace, sustaining grace ... and just when it's needed, the favour of God is always dispensed on time; such generous and immeasurable grace never hinders or hampers us, it's there to help us, it's there to aid us as we walk on life's thorn strewn trail.

It has been well said by Jerry Bridges that 'your worst days are never so bad that you are beyond the reach of God's grace, and your best days are never so good that you are beyond the need of God's grace.'

And that leads us nicely to the few verses we are exploring in chapter 10 ... verses 19-23. You'll see the link between chapter 4 and what we have here - it's fairly obvious, I think we can summarise it like this:

Since Jesus is our great high priest, we must follow in his footsteps and enter in to the holy place. It's true to say that Jesus valued and treasured those sacred and precious moments of fellowship with his heavenly Father - many of them before dawn had broken - the secret place, the trysting place, meant everything to him.

In so doing, he's left us an example that is nothing short of inspirational - down here in this old world, the Lord Jesus prayed, so we must **copy** him ... up there in heaven, he still prays (7:25), so we must **join** him. It seems to me that these 5 verses show us how best to do it ...

The writer kickstarts this section with the word 'therefore' - in other words, in light of all that's just been said about the 'once for all' sacrifice of Jesus, there are two factors which come into play - one, we are to **enter in** and, two, we are to **endure!**

4. we are to enter in

And the question is, How do we enter in? I think there are three ways for us to do it!

First, **we enter with confidence** in verse 19.

This is nothing short of amazing - under the old economy of the Law, the Jewish people were fearful and tentative when it came to approaching the most high and holy God.

Someone had to do it for them. But, for you and me, in Christ, we can do so with confidence and joy - we saw that earlier in chapter 4. What a blessed privilege is ours!

Second, **we enter with gratitude** in verses 20-21. And we do so because of all that the Lord Jesus achieved for us at Calvary - when his blood was shed, a new and living way was opened up for us ... breathtaking, that is.

He made it possible for us to come in from the cold into the warmth of his near presence ... that's what he has done, but see what he continues to do in verse 21 - he is our advocate, our great high priest, our intercessor - he's praying for us around the clock - a reminder that we are accepted in him, we are helped by him, and we belong to him.

Third, **we enter with sincerity** in verse 22. If we look closely at this verse, we discover there are a few words which highlight the need for cleansing - back then, in the old days, the high priest performed a ceremonial washing at the bronze laver

before he could do anything in the tent of meeting; he set aside his garments of 'glory and beauty' ... so the multi-coloured ephod with the breastplate and the robe of blue with the bells and pomegranates attached to the hem were all removed ... then, after going through the veil, he would sprinkle blood seven times on the mercy seat, on top of the Ark of the Covenant ...

the emphasis here is on you and I being cleansed by the precious blood of Jesus and being washed daily by the water of the Word of God (Ephesians 5). It's a plea for sincerity as we come into his holy presence. 'Clean hands and a pure heart' is how the psalmist put it in Psalm 24:4!

So, he says to each of us right now, 'come on in, you're my son, you're my daughter, the door is wide open, you're most welcome at any time from anywhere ...' Ah, you see, the Old Testament kept us out - the New Testament brings us in ... we enter in ... you can be lying in a hospital bed, driving in your car, sitting at your desk, out for a jog or a walk with the dog in the local park, doing stuff in the kitchen, or attending a service just like this - and, guess what, you can always enter in and draw near to God ...
From every stormy wind that blows, From every swelling tide of woes, There is a calm, a sure retreat, 'Tis found beneath the mercy seat.

5. we are to endure

He wants us to persevere, to hold on tight, to keep plodding on - don't bend or buckle - don't waver or wobble - let us cherish the great truths that we have been taught, let us exult in God our Saviour, and let us take full advantage of the place of prayer.

We have our days of doubt, there are times when we are tossed around on the stormy sea of life - well, in such moments, what are we meant to do?

We look up to him who has seen it all and has passed through to the other side as the Pioneer and Perfecter of our faith - our hope is anchored in the Lord, our hearts are fixed on one who is unchanging; ok, we're maybe still shaking, but we stand upon his unshakeable promises, and depend upon him for he is utterly 'faithful' (verse 23).

There's a golden oldie hymn from a bygone era, first published in 1845, that says it all ... it may sound a tad cheesy to a younger generation, but the words capture all that we have been thinking about today:

*Sweet hour of prayer, sweet hour of prayer,
That calls me from a world of care, And bids me at my Father's throne, Make all my wants and wishes known. In seasons of distress and grief, My soul has often found relief, And oft escaped the tempter's snare, By thy return, sweet hour of prayer.*

Let us pray ...