

## Hebrews 1:1-4

### Real Word

#### Notes from a sermon preached at Christ Church Liverpool

Today, give or take a couple of days, is the third anniversary of the founding of Christ Church Liverpool. Our 157<sup>th</sup> Sunday. And, looking round the room, I see a good number of people who were there that first Sunday morning at Pleasant Street School, just down the hill. We didn't really know how to use the video projector. We made the coffee on very small PE benches. And more than half the congregation of 50 were visitors who were there just for one week to encourage and help us – rather than people who were planning to join the church family.

Most of that initial group are still part of our church family – which is great. Some have moved on to serve God in other places around the country and around the world – which is also great. But a few of the people there that morning, just three years ago, are not with us any more – either physically or spiritually. A couple would say that they are simply no longer Christians at all. And a couple more would say that they need a religious expression which is more physical, more visually impressive than what they found here.

And for every person in a church who says “No, I don't believe it any more” or “No, I need something more tangible, more real” there are, I am sure, quite a few others who are thinking the same. People for whom the Christian life just seems really, really difficult. People for whom church seems hugely uninspiring. Regular people, like you and me, who are finding it really hard to keep going as a Christian. People who know that they haven't grown a lot recently and who, if we were really honest with ourselves, would probably admit that we are moving away from rather than towards spiritual maturity. People who, to use a word the writer to the Hebrews would recognise, are drifting.

Perhaps that's you this morning. If not then it very easily could be you one day. In his kindness though, God has ensured that there is a book in the Bible written exactly for people in that situation. People in a church that has been going for a while. People in a church that is finding that not everything is quite as exciting as it was at the start. People in a church where some people are at risk of giving up the Christian life – and a few already have.

A book that is designed not just to arrest the drift – but to encourage and inspire us to be missionaries in our city, bringing the true and wonderful news about Jesus to the countless thousands who do not know him. It's a book that we're going to be

studying, on and off, for the next four months on Sunday mornings. It is the book of Hebrews.

Apart from the verse about Jesus being the same yesterday, today and forever, and chapter 11 about the heroes of faith, Hebrews is probably the least well known book of the New Testament.

Much like the book of Revelation, many Christians find Hebrews inaccessible because it is steeped in ideas and images from the Old Testament and, if we're honest, most of us don't know our Obadiah's from our Jeremiah's well enough to understand those ideas – or at least not easily. It's a book that deals with concepts that are not found anywhere else in the Bible – such as the idea of Jesus as a High Priest. A book that might seem, at first sight, like advanced Christianity. If Revelation seems like Christianity for weirdoes and cranks then perhaps Hebrews seems like Christianity for geeky intellectuals.

Well my job, with the help of the other elders, over the next weeks is to show you that that's not the case. I spent some really enjoyable time during my study leave looking into this book. I found it fascinating. And I hope some of my new found enthusiasm for Hebrews will rub off on all of us. But more than that I became really, really convinced that this is a book for every Christian. And I'm totally convinced that if we are to keep going as Christians for the long haul. If we are to persevere for another 20, 30, 40, 50, 60 or 70 years – however long it is before you die or Jesus returns. If we're to stick it out we need to understand the things in this book.

**Hebrews is not advanced Christianity. It's Christianity for anyone who wants to keep going.**

And, perhaps not surprisingly, it's all about Jesus. So whether you're here this morning having never been to church before in your life, or whether you've been a Christian since before you can remember this book is for you. Because it's a book about the one who is the beginning, the end, the centre and the heart of the Christian message.

Very helpfully the writer of the book of Hebrews – and we really have no idea at all who that was – has given us an introduction that sums up most of the big ideas in the book. It's chapter 1 verses 1-4 and that's what we're going to look at this morning:

## I Jesus is a final word (v1-2a)

Almost everyone here (including me!) is too young to remember the classic 1960s Monty Python comedy sketch "Wuthering Heights in semaphore". But if you can ever get hold of it on DVD it's very, very funny. The sketch is a spoof trailer for a series of films including: *Gunfight at the OK Corral* in Morse Code and The smoke signal version of *Gentlemen prefer blondes*.

If we were bringing it up to date we could have: *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by e-mail or The text message version of *Harry Potter*.

It's not that there's anything wrong with those means of communication. Text messages are ideal for arranging which coffee shop to meet in.

But they're not really adequate for conveying the full and epic range of human drama and emotion are they?

Well God, the writer of this letter says, has spoken perfectly through Jesus. In the past, v1, God spoke, through the prophets. Further on these words, the words of the Old Testament, are described, 2:2, as having been spoken by angels. God spoke his words through angels, to his prophets and from them to the people of Israel. Those messages were binding. What God spoke through the prophets in the Old Testament was true and right and important.

The messages came, 1:1, at many time and in various ways – some of the prophets preached, some wrote things down. Some explained dreams and visions. One in particular – the prophet Ezekiel – made extensive use of models and drama as well as his spoken words to convey God's message to God's people.

In the past God spoke through the prophets. But, v2, in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son. If you really wanted to know what someone was thinking you could ask their messenger boy. But you'd be much better off asking the son who lives in their household. Who sees the person all the time. Who is in on their decision making and thought processes.

God's word in Jesus is a better word than the word of the prophets. Not because there was anything wrong or untrue about what they said. But because it was incomplete. It was not a word from a son.

Quite often I think we would like to live as if we were one of the OT prophets or their audiences. If only we had flashes of lightening, stone tablets, miraculously multiplying olive oil, talking donkeys

and a big tent with a pillar of cloud over it – well then we might believe in Jesus – or find it easier to keep believing in Jesus.

But God, through the writer of Hebrews, says NO!

In the past were the prophets. But now, in these last days, in our time – the time between Jesus' first coming 2000 years ago in Palestine and his return in the future, in these last days we have the words, not of a messenger but of a son.

As we've said the Christians who first received this letter were in danger of drifting away. Some would drift away from Christianity altogether. But far more would simply drift backwards into an Old Testament religion. The great warning of this letter is not to go back to Old Testament religion. Not because it wasn't true – it was wonderful and brilliant and really, really gracious of God. But because Jesus is so much more amazing.

And, as we'll see over the weeks ahead, Old Testament religion is alive and well in what claims to be the Christian church. And that's a tragedy – because Jesus is better. Jesus is a final word – because he is a perfect son.

## 2 Jesus is a perfect Son (v2b-3a)

Someone said to me recently that they were not at all convinced they could believe Christianity because, and I quote: "*If there was a God as described by the Bible then I think he would be more emphatic at making himself known*"

Maybe people have said that to you. I find it one of the most frustrating things to hear – especially when it comes, as it usually does, from the lips of people who haven't ever read the gospels.

Jesus makes God known. He is the word made flesh. The heir of all things, v2, the radiance of God's glory, v3, the exact, precise, perfect, representation of the being of God come to live amongst us, v3.

Sure his glory was to some extent veiled during his time on earth. But it was hardly hidden out of sight. He healed the sick, spoke perfect sermons, turned a whole well of water into fine wine, calmed storms, cast out demons, walked on water, raised the dead and was resurrected himself. After that he transformed a group of cowering wussies hiding in a safe house in Jerusalem and calling themselves disciples, and a violent fundamentalist Pharisee called Paul into a group of people who have changed the world more than anyone else in history through grace, self-sacrifice and some passionate preaching.

And the astonishing history of the growth of the church around the world, such that there is a living, Jesus centred church in every country on the planet, shows that Jesus is, indeed, the Anointed Son, predicted in Psalm 2. The one who may be conspired against by the nations but who is in reality the ruler of those nations. The one who will dash to pieces those who reject his kingship and requires of all people that we “kiss the Son” – worship and adore him because he is a rightful, perfect, Son King.

We should be awed by Jesus, God’s emphatic statement of his existence and reality to the world. But we should not be wrongly frightened of him. Because as well as being a perfect Son...

### **3 Jesus is a complete priest (v3b)**

Once upon a time, many years ago, I worked in the food hall at Littlewoods in Chester. Littlewoods, this was before the days of Netto, was pretty much at the bottom of the heap of food and drink retailers, selling single bananas to old ladies counting the pennies and the cheapest 40% proof Vodka in the city to people who came in every day for another bottle. We did pick and mix sweets for noisy hormonal school kids – and cigarettes for any of them who could cover up their uniforms enough to look 16. But the pay was top notch (at least for someone whose previous employment experience was a paper round) at £1.74 an hour. So you could go home after a full days work with almost enough money to buy a CD - £13.92. 7p raided from mum and I could buy Simple Minds, The Alarm, Pink Floyd, The Smiths or whatever other miserable sounding band was engaging my affections that week.

But the main reason it was satisfying to finish a day at Littlewoods was because I could then go home, get showered and sit down. Littlewoods was standing up work. Whether it was shelf stacking, tills, floor supervisor, cigarette kiosk, pick n mix or the wine shop you were on your feet all the time. Sitting down at the end of a day was a sign that my work was done. It was finished. Unfortunately, of course, the next Saturday I had to get up and go in and serve the same miserable people all over again.

It would be easy for us to think of a priest in ancient Israel as having a bit of a cushy job – being on an easy number. But believe me, if they were doing their jobs properly it wasn’t. They were required to play instruments, act as security guards for the temple, read the Bible out loud (long before PA), and be butchers. They had to kill the sheep, goats and bulls. Drain the blood. Burn some of the carcasses and cut the others up for meat. They had to polish silver and gold utensils and constantly wash and purify themselves.

And it went on day after day after day. There were no bank holidays for priests – sin went on and on – so they had to go on and on. They represented the people before God. And as the people kept sinning, the priests had to keep working.

So it is one of the most amazing things you will ever read to see in the book of Hebrews that Jesus, after he had provided purification for sins, v3 there, **sat down**, at the right hand of the majesty in heaven.

Why did he sit down? Well, like me at the end of a shift at Littlewoods, he sat down because his work was finished. But, unlike me, and unlike the OT priests, Jesus never had to stand up again. His sacrificing to purify people from sin never needed, and never needs, to be repeated.

Jesus’ work on the cross, which is how he provided purification for sins, is a finished work. An unrepeatable work. When someone’s sins are forgiven by Jesus they are really, really forgiven. Totally. Absolutely. Finally, Forever.

Maybe some here are troubled by a dark cloud in the past. A sin that you are not sure God can really forgive. Maybe others are caught in a pattern of sin that seems to overwhelm you at times. Well there will be many warnings about the dangers of sin in this letter. But there is also wonderful, liberating good news. Jesus has sat down. He has done enough to deal with all and every sin. If you trust in his word, in the message God has spoken perfectly in his Son, there is nothing, nothing, nothing that cannot be forgiven. That has not been forgiven.

You do not need to slave away trying to make things right with God for all the rubbish stuff you have done in your life. Because Jesus has sat down. He’s done it all.

All we need to do is recognise him for who he is – the perfect son and the complete priest. We need to recognise him for who he is – and, simply, that means listening to Jesus.

### **4 So we must listen to Jesus (v4)**

At first sight v4 seems like a bit of an anticlimax doesn’t it?

We’ve just been hearing that Jesus, God’s Son, is the exact representation of God. That he has achieved a purification from sin for his people that no religion in the world could attain. And then the writer tells us that Jesus is better than angels! Not a mistake most of us were likely to make you wouldn’t think. I’ve never met someone calling themselves a Christian who worshipped angels instead of Jesus – and I don’t suppose you have either.

So what's it all about?

Well next week, in 1:5-14, we'll see in much more detail why Jesus is greater than angels and why it matters. But the essence of it is very simple. First century Jews believed that the Old Testament law was given to the prophets not directly by God himself but through the mediation of angels. In other words God's words went from God to the angels to the prophets to the people. And they believed that those words were true and powerful. And they believed that disobeying those words should result in punishment – even the punishment of death.

Well the message of the New Testament, the Christian message, doesn't come from God, to angels, to a prophet to people. It comes from God's perfect radiant Son to us. So how serious do you think it is that we listen it?

As the writer to the Hebrews puts it in 2:2:  
*“For is the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?”*

That is not some nutter getting on your case and saying that God's got a big stick to beat you with if you step out of line. It's the writer of the Hebrews, who loved the people he was writing to, reminding his readers, and his, how utterly undeserved and amazing the good news about Jesus is.

And saying that if we do not listen to Jesus and his good news that we are shutting ourselves off from the very words and the very person who can give us life.

Some people do that very brashly – they simply dismiss Jesus' words – the words of the Bible – as wrong, outdated or made up. Others, including many who like to think they are followers of Jesus, dress up their rejection of Jesus' words in a more sophisticated way. I was talking to someone the other day who is being disobedient to Jesus in an area of their life that the New Testament speaks very clearly about. They acknowledged that what they were doing was the opposite of what the Bible said. But, they said, it's OK for them to act in that way because God has not told them personally that what he says in the Bible applies to them.

And I think if we're honest we all act in that “it doesn't apply to me” way quite often don't we? Whether it's our doctrine, or our dating, our ambitions or our anger we tend to think that God isn't that bothered.

Or sometimes it seems that life is just too busy to listen to Jesus regularly. Too busy for a Christian

conference. Too busy to read a Christian book. Too busy to read the Bible for ourselves. Too busy to be at church regularly. Too busy to go to housegroup. None of those things will ever save us or make us right with God. Only Jesus does that. But, the writer to the Hebrews says, we ignore Jesus, in all areas of our life, at our peril.

No one else reveals to us perfectly what God is like. No one else has offered a perfect sacrifice to make us right forever with God. No one else is worthy of our attentive ears as much as Jesus Christ, God's Son.

That is the first thing we need to know if we are going to be Christians who keep going.

*Andrew Evans  
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