

22nd Sunday After Pentecost – Epistle

ONCE FOR ALL

22nd Sunday After Pentecost (Proper 27)

Hebrews 9:24-28

Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

Heb 9:24 For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. 25 Nor was it to offer himself again and again, as the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own; 26 for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself. 27 And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment, 28 so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

Note: The letter “To the Hebrews” is a sermon based largely on Psalm 110, written prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE. The writer’s intention is to persuade his group that Christ’s promised return (to Jerusalem), to secure Israel’s future and “to set things right,” is near at hand; but that their steadfast faith in Christ’s “once for all” priesthood, being the “new covenant” for Israel’s “purification,” is necessary in order to ensure their participation in the original promises and so “enter God’s rest.” [Two millennia later, we

realize that the writer's distinction between Christ's sacrifice and the fulfillment of the promises "to set things right" for Israel is too short-sighted. For us, while Christ has not yet appeared a second time, as promised, faith in his once-for-all sacrifice on the cross (being confirmed by his resurrection from the dead) is altogether sufficient for our salvation. The weakness of this sermon is revealed in the contingency of the new covenant to achieve the promises of God in full. Because, in fact, Israel has not yet "entered God's rest," for the writer of this sermon the original promises remain (once again) unfulfilled.]

DIAGNOSIS: A Fearful Thing

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – Old Time Religion

The best that we sinners can "do," it would seem, is to do what God tells us to do, whether that be called "justice" or "love" or, especially, "religion." What God had told our spiritual forebears, the Jews, to do is clearly specified in the Mosaic Code – and in one case for our greatest possible benefit, namely, to remove sins. As explained in the letter "To the Hebrews," God had devised a purification system (or Law) for the people of Israel, whereby the high priest, once each year, would enter the sacred spaces of God's temple and make the God-commanded blood sacrifices as a sin atonement (9:7). What more honorable and praiseworthy thing could ever be expected of us than this? Surely the doing of this command must be well pleasing to God! "Give me that old time religion, 'cause it's good enough for me." [Well, maybe not; see 8:7; 10:9b.]

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – Old Time Sin

Sin had proven too "sticky" (12:1) and "deceitful" (3:13) for their/our religious "work" to "purify" ourselves and "obtain"

the promise, even when their/our work was at the command of God himself. By analogy to the “foundation of the world,” that is, the first days of creation, sin only perpetuates our working, preventing us from entering the primal “Sabbath rest” (4:3-11). Even the Law proved “weak and ineffectual” to achieve the promise (7:18-19a). In fact, what the Law produces in us is “consciousness of sin” (10:1-4), requiring repeated but ineffectual acts of atonement (hence religion; see 7:18-19). Nonetheless we believe that our rituals work to keep the promise alive, trusting all the more in the Law. As sinners, we are obliged to make atonement (if possible) “again and again” (10:11), never reaching that final, promised “rest” which is “still open” (4:1). But of us and our sin, the Law is both witness and accuser (4:12-13). [In contrast, Abraham “patiently endured and received what was promised” (6:15), that is, the birth of Isaac; but not the fullness of the promise. And although Moses was “faithful and obedient” (3:5-6), neither he nor his followers “entered God’s [Sabbath] rest” (4:9-11), that is, concretely, the peaceful enjoyment of the promised Land. The promise went unfulfilled, the writer says, because, despite the faith of a sterling few (ch 11), the people of Israel failed to trust the promise originally given to Abraham (3:16-19). Because final fulfillment of the promises depends upon the purification of Israel’s sin, necessarily repeated temple sacrifices do not work, except to demonstrate Israel’s sin (9:8-9).]

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *The Living God*

Although we sinners cannot bear this final accusation apart from Christ, the truth before us is this: God himself commanded a Law for the atonement of sins even though neither we nor the high priest could, in fact, atone for sins. The Law’s promise failed to produce any “rest” in God. By thwarting the very best of our projects, religion, God has cut off, through the very mechanism of religion, every avenue for us to obtain the goal of

“perfection” (from Greek “telos,” pointing to the promised “Sabbath rest” by means of a “pure conscience”; see 7:11, 18). Nor could we, apart from death (which, if our own, is problematic), ever guess what such “perfection” might look like (2:10). Only in retrospect, from the perspective of the “new covenant” (8:13), do we see that the Mosaic Code had no hope of making good on the purification of Israel. When God himself, through the Law, conspires against us, we are indeed lost, condemned into sin, and without mercy and without hope. “For it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (10:31). And so we are.

PROGNOSIS: A Sure Thing

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – Once For All

In fulfillment of a greater promise (or covenant) than that which could be sustained by the Law, Jesus the Christ was given unto death, becoming a blameless and willing sacrifice, in order that [Israel’s] sin would be put to death in him, by his death (2:14-15), without repetition, “once for all” (v. 26). Taking the old covenant with its Levitical priesthood, animal blood sacrifice, and sacred spaces as a “copy” (9:24) or “shadow” (10:1) of the new covenant in Jesus the Christ, the writer to the Hebrews proclaims the surpassing benefit of Jesus’ atoning work “at the end of the age [that is, now] to remove [Israel’s] sin by the sacrifice of himself” (v. 26). Jesus is Christ, a “priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek” (5:6, 10); that is, similar to Melchizedek’s non-legal “blessing” to Abraham which was PRIOR to the establishment of the Levitical priesthood (7:1-18). Since Jesus’ atoning sacrifice is unrepeatable, it is a finished work. And since Jesus is raised from the dead, his “priesthood” is perpetual. There is now no possibility for religion (as a cult of atonement) since all of our priestly doings are proved naught, that is, “abrogated” (7:18) and made “obsolete” (8:13), by Christ’s perfect atonement

and eternal intercessions. [The way is again open for Israel, the writer says, to “inherit the promises” (6:12), which were expected to be fulfilled “at the end of the age” (v. 26).]

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *No Looking Back*
Since God has enacted a new covenant in Christ, we who trust in him will also partake in the promise of Christ, that is, the joy of God’s Sabbath “rest” (4:1-11). This is the “perfect faith” (11:40; see 12:2) that we as “partners” (3:14) share with Christ, which in summary is more permanent, confident and secure than the true, though inferior, “faith” of our spiritual forebears (ch 11). Because Christ intercedes for us in the heavenly places (abrogating the older covenant), our faith is “unshakable” (12:28) and our greatest “possession” (10:34-35). There is now no point in looking back towards the Law which has proven so “ineffectual” in obtaining the promise.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *Faithful Endurance*
Those who have embraced the new faith in Christ should be able “to endure hard struggles and sufferings and . . . do the will of God” (10:32, 36), but those who “drift away” or “fall away” or “shrink back” from the faith will not escape the judgment to come (2:1; 6:6; 10:39). [Consider well, the writer says, that Christ “endured the cross, . . . so that you may not grow weary or lose heart” (12:2-3), “neglecting so great a salvation” (2:2-3) and thus forfeit the promised “rest” like your/our spiritual ancestors.] What sustains us in the trials of life, which “test” and “purify” us, is our faith. But the greatest test that we, like all other readers of this is sermon, face, is the apparent tardiness of Christ’s “appearance a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save [from judgment] those who are eagerly waiting for him” (v. 28). For the original hearers of this sermon, Christ’s second appearance and their Sabbath rest (the “great reward,” 10:35) was indeed imminent, yet contingent on their faithful endurance; hence the writer’s constant

exhortations not to lose faith. But for us, faith in Christ's all sufficient sacrifice is its own "reward"; his second appearance is thus not a goal to be achieved by our own faithfulness, as if God's promises are dependent upon us, but a secure hope borne by the faithfulness of him who promised.

End note: We today must finally understand "the end of the age" (v. 26) as having begun in Christ 2,000 years ago and continuing until Christ returns in glory. The age of the Law is over. The age of Christ is upon us. This understanding is consistent with the Hebrews sermon. But the promise of the sermon (then and now) is not, finally, a "Sabbath rest" that failed to materialize in the first century. Rather, Christ himself is our Sabbath rest, the Promise of all promises fulfilled already in his death, because he offers us a full share in his own Sabbath rest (resurrection) which is ours even now, by faith in him. What promises are yet to come are hardly imaginable.