

ON TO MATURITY: THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS

Martin Bleby

1. 18th September
Heb. 1:1–2:4; Matt. 22:41–46; Psa. 45:1–7
Maturity: Knowing Christ
2. 25th September
Heb. 2:5–18; John 12:27–33; Psa. 8
Maturity: Purified Sons and Daughters
3. 2nd October
Heb. 3:7–4:13; Matt. 7:21–29; Psa. 95
Maturity: Hearing the Voice of God
4. 9th October
Heb. 6:13–7:3; John 2:13–22; Psa. 110
Maturity: An Eternal Salvation
5. 16th October
Heb. 9:24–10:18; Matt. 26:26–32; Psa. 40:1–10
Maturity: Sanctified through a Single Offering
6. 23rd October
Heb. 10:36–11:16; John 6:27–29; Psa. 63:1–8 [9]
Maturity: The Assurance of Things Hoped For
7. 30th October
Heb. 11:39–12:13; Matt. 11:25–30; Psa. 16
Maturity: A Father's Discipline
8. 6th November
Heb. 12:14–13:8; John 13:31–35; Psa. 133
Maturity: Mutual Love

1. MATURITY: KNOWING CHRIST

Hebrews 1:1–2:4

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

For to which of the angels did God ever say,
'You are my Son;
today I have begotten you'?

Or again,

'I will be his Father, and he will be my Son'?

And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says,

'Let all God's angels worship him.'

Of the angels he says,

'He makes his angels winds,
and his servants flames of fire.'

But of the Son he says,

'Your throne, O God, is forever and ever,
and the righteous sceptre is the sceptre of your kingdom.

You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness;

therefore God, your God, has anointed you

with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.'

And,

'In the beginning, Lord, you founded the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands;

they will perish, but you remain;

they will all wear out like clothing;

like a cloak you will roll them up,

and like clothing they will be changed.

But you are the same,

and your years will never end.'

But to which of the angels has he ever said,

'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet'?

Are not all angels spirits in the divine service, sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?

Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it. For if the message declared through angels was valid, and every transgression or disobedience received a just penalty, how can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? It was declared at first through the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him, while God added his testimony by signs and wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, distributed according to his will.

I am aware that up to last week you have been doing a particular program, and you may now be wondering, 'What next?' I was wondering the same thing. I decided that it would be good to do some work in the Letter to the Hebrews. Particularly because it talks about going on to maturity. Once we have done one program, we may be inclined to look for another program, and then another program after that, and we could get stuck at that level of just doing programs, when God may have for us so much more than that. So there is a danger that we could become like the people that the Letter to the Hebrews was written to. This is what the writer said to them:

MATURITY: KNOWING CHRIST

everyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is unskilled in the word of righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil (Heb. 5:13–14).

He said, 'You are still at the level of milk, not solid food. You still need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God, when by now you ought to be in a position to be teaching others'. He also highlighted another danger: he said it will be hard to get through to them, because they had become 'dull in understanding'—literally 'sluggish' in their thinking. 'Sluggish' means like a slug. We have a watering system in our garden at home, with taps in the ground under a cover. Often when I lift up the cover to turn the taps on, I find slugs. Slugs are slow and slimy, and often in the dark. Not very complimentary, is it, to call people 'sluggish'? We don't want to be like that. So the writer to the Hebrews says:

Therefore let us go on toward maturity (Heb. 6:1).

So we can live life as it is meant to be: 'skilled in the word of righteousness', as 'those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil'.

So, 'let us go on toward maturity'!—as we study the letter to the Hebrews. 'Ah,' some of you may say, 'Martin is from the New Creation Teaching Ministry, and New Creation teaching is more advanced than we hear elsewhere, so that is what we are going to get now—more advanced teaching!' Actually, I don't think it works that way. It could be that we already know what we need to know, but we need to be encouraged in it. The writer to the Hebrews says at the beginning of chapter 2:

Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it (Heb. 2:1).

That is what I want to help us do over these next eight weeks: 'pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it'. That is what the writer to the Hebrews says is going 'on toward maturity'.

And the thing that he considers most important first of all is that we should know Jesus Christ as he really is. Maturity is knowing Christ.

The trouble is: we like to settle for so much less. We like to revert to what we think is familiar and safe for us. That is our natural default mode. Computers have default settings. They are what the computer opens up to whenever you turn it on—whatever you may have done last time you used it. We all have default settings, that we revert to when we are under pressure.

That is what had happened to the Hebrews to whom this letter was written. They had come into a wonderful experience of salvation, through believing on Jesus Christ. Jesus had come, and had 'made purification for sins' (Heb. 1:3). That is no small thing, is it—to have all your sins washed away for ever? Those who had been with Jesus and had heard him had brought this message to these Hebrews, and to this wonderful message 'God added his testimony by signs and wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, distributed according to his will' (Heb 2:4). Marvellous. This was the experience of these Hebrews. They were among those who have 'been enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come' (Heb. 6:4–5). And, in the early days, they had been very strong in it all. In chapter 10 he reminds them:

MATURITY: KNOWING CHRIST

recall those earlier days when, after you had been enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion for those who were in prison, and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves possessed something better and more lasting (Heb. 10:32–34).

And, we are told, they did great work in those days, and they showed great love and served one another for God's sake—and they were still doing that (see Heb. 6:10). But such suffering and persecution is not easy to take. It can wear you down. None of them had been killed for their resistance to sin (see Heb. 12:4)—that might have sharpened them up—but the struggle had weakened them considerably. They had reached a point where, figuratively speaking, their hands were drooping, and their knees were weak, and their feet were lame, and they were in danger of becoming bitter about it (see Heb. 12:12–13, 15). And that is the point where we begin to wonder if it is really all worth it? And we long for an easier life, and we revert to our default mode—to what we think is familiar and safe for us.

And for these Hebrews, their default mode was, of course, their Jewish religion. Ancient, profound, strong, and comforting. So in their weakness and weariness they were settling back into that. And, while that might have done for them before, it could not do for them any more, now that Christ had come. Everything is different, now that Christ has come.

For us, Jewish religion may not be our default mode. But something else is. For us in the Anglican Church, it may be Anglicanism, particularly as we knew it in an earlier decade. All of us have our culture, that surrounds us as we grow up and that in many ways determines who we are. I grew up in a church family, and I remember when I realised that my culture was being an Anglican. Yours may be like that, or it may be something else—think about what it may be. It may be some form of fundamental belief, that we cling to, and we see everything else in the light of that. It may be the way we go about church—that can become the be-all and end-all for some people—especially if you try to change it. Yours may not be religious at all: it may be some regular routine or activity that provides the stability and colour in your life—maybe sport. It may be some family or relational setting. But whatever it is, and however well it has served us in the past, it can't be that for us any more, now that Jesus has come. Everything is different, now that Jesus has come. He is so much more than anything else we may know. He is the real thing.

Not that these Hebrews had turned away from Christ. The Jewish religion had plenty to say about Christ, and they loved to go back over it in their Scriptures—what we now call the 'Old Testament'. The writer to the Hebrews listed some of these things they loved going back over:

the basic teaching about Christ . . . repentance from dead works and faith toward God, instruction about baptisms [washings], laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment (Heb. 6:1–2).

That is no mean list of things. We've got a lot of those things in our creed. Anglicanism has plenty to say about Christ. But if we ever think that Jesus can be contained in those things, and that we have him there, then sooner or later we will become a bit ho-hum about it all, and we will grow weary in it all, and weak, and fuzzy in the end as to what is right or wrong in anything. We stand in danger then, the writer to the Hebrews says, of holding Jesus up to contempt; even of crucifying him again (see Heb 6:6). And our lives then will not only be unproductive, but will actually become harmful to others, and distasteful to God (see Heb. 6:7–8). Not a good way to be.

So let us not be that way—let us go on to maturity. And maturity is, first and foremost, knowing Jesus as he really is. This is how the writer begins his letter to these

MATURITY: KNOWING CHRIST

Hebrews, because this is what they need to be reminded of, more than anything else. So here we go:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son (Heb. 1:1–2).

That is the first thing: through Jesus, God is speaking directly to us. That is what we have been made for—to hear God speaking to us, and to do and to say what we hear from Him. We could say that is everything we have been made for. That is what it is to be truly human. If we did all of that, and if we did nothing else, that would be really something. And here it all is—in Jesus. God speaking directly to us, so that we can be in all that God says and is and does. We will come back to that in a couple of weeks.

What is the status, and stature, of this Son?

the Son, whom he [God] appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds (Heb. 1:2).

The one through whom and for whom all things have been made—wouldn't it be worth knowing that one? We might think: No way could we get near him. That is not the case. He is one of us. His name is Jesus. We can know him. We can be with him. We do know him, and we are with him, and he with us.

How is he in relation to God?

He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word (Heb. 1:3).

There he is, alongside God, as everything that God is, and in everything that God does.

What has he done? He has:

made purification for sins.

As we said, that is no light thing. All our sins, and the sins of the entire world, atoned for. Total cleansing. We will hear more about that next week.

Where is he?

When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high (Heb. 1:3)

—the position of chief authority in the whole creation, ruling over all the events of our world, and over everything that happens in our lives.

Now, you'd think that such a one would be our whole concern—but no. In the face of all of that, we want to settle for something less. Something much, much less. Of course, it can still be something very 'spiritual'—'spirituality', of all flavours, is very much in vogue. And do you know what? These Hebrews had developed a fascination for—the angels.

Oh yes—angels are very much in fashion today. Any number of films are made about them, and they get people in. I saw an advertisement in the paper the other day for a speaker visiting Adelaide and she could tell you all about the angels, and how they can help us in our lives. I wonder which angels those are—the Bible tells us there are angels loyal to God and angels who have rebelled against God, and the rebellious ones are only too ready to appear to us as angels of light to get some control over us.

MATURITY: KNOWING CHRIST

But it was the good angels, sent by God to serve us, that these Hebrews were fascinated with (see Heb. 1:14). The big thing in Jewish religion is, of course, the law of God, and Deuteronomy 33:2 has a poetic description of how the law was given:

The LORD came from Sinai,
and dawned from Seir upon us;
he shone forth from Mount Paran.
With him were myriads of holy ones;
at his right, a host of his own.

Here was God, coming to meet them in Person with His commandments, and what do they fix their attention on? The angels that accompanied Him! They had a belief that it was through these angels that the commandments were declared to them (see Heb. 2:2)—perhaps thinking out of some false piety that God was too holy to address them directly in Person. So they had settled for the angels, and had become preoccupied with them.

See how easily we veer away from God, even apparently from the best religious motives—but actually out of a bloody-mindedness that picks on little details rather than the main game that God has set.

The writer to the Hebrews has to crack through that with them—as he does with us—and he does that with numerous quotations from their own Scriptures—mostly from the Psalms—all setting forth the pre-eminence of Christ:

For to which of the angels did God ever say,
'You are my Son; today I have begotten you'?
Or again,
'I will be his Father, and he will be my Son'? (Heb. 1:5).

There is that special relationship, that belongs to no other creature. He is the one whom the angels worship and serve:

And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says,
'Let all God's angels worship him.'
Of the angels he says,
'He makes his angels winds,
and his servants flames of fire' (Heb. 1:6–7).

There is no one like him, who shares the very throne of God:

But of the Son he says,
'Your throne, O God, is forever and ever,
and the righteous sceptre is the sceptre of your kingdom.
You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness;

—this one actually knows what is right and wrong, and rules accordingly—

therefore God, your God, has anointed you
with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.'
And,
'In the beginning, Lord, you founded the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands;
they will perish, but you remain;
they will all wear out like clothing;
like a cloak you will roll them up,
and like clothing they will be changed.

MATURITY: KNOWING CHRIST

But you are the same,
and your years will never end' (Heb. 1:8–12)

There again is that involvement in the very creation of the universe, with a view to the fulfilment of all things. No one else has that authority, and no one else has that assured victory:

But to which of the angels has he ever said,
'Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet'? (Heb. 1:13).

So the whole of maturity is to know Christ as he really is, and to relate with him accordingly. Throughout the letter the writer is saying: Consider Christ! See how great he is! Look to him! And we must do the same.

No doubt we have heard all of this before. If this is what we have heard, how can we ever become ho-hum about it—unless it has never really figured with us. 'Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it' (Heb. 2:1). And this we shall do, if God permits (see Heb. 6:3), over these eight weeks.

2. MATURITY: PURIFIED SONS AND DAUGHTERS

Hebrews 2:5–18

Now God did not subject the coming world, about which we are speaking, to angels. But someone has testified somewhere,

‘What are human beings that
you are mindful of them,
or mortals, that you care for them?
You have made them for a
little while lower than the angels;
you have crowned them with glory and honour,
subjecting all things under their feet.’

Now in subjecting all things to them, God left nothing outside their control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to them, but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honour because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

— It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, saying,

‘I will proclaim your name
to my brothers and sisters,
in the midst of the
congregation I will praise you.’

And again,
‘I will put my trust in him.’

And again,
‘Here am I and the children whom God has given me.’

Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

Over these eight weeks we are doing a series on the Letter to the Hebrews, which says: ‘Let us go on toward maturity’. We began last week by seeing how great Jesus is. Maturity is, first and foremost, knowing Jesus as he really is.

One of the things that Jesus has done—the most important thing Jesus has done—we saw from chapter 1 of the letter to the Hebrews, is that he has ‘made purification for sins’ (Heb. 1:3). That is what we are going to talk about today. We said last week, that is no light thing. To have all your sins purified—washed away completely—for ever. To have a whole family of people standing and living totally purified, with not a trace of sin or evil anywhere—not an issue any more, and no possibility of it ever occurring again. No possible avenue of sin or evil arising that has not been thoroughly pursued to its end, and finally dealt with and closed off forever.

We live with sin and evil every day, don't we? We can't ever leave it out of our reckoning—we have to contend with it every moment. Even when we know that our sins have been forgiven by God—that the *penalty* has been paid for us; that we are free and cleansed from the *pollution* and defilement of our sins; and that anything we have done wrong no longer need have any *power* over us or anyone else—and all of this is what has

MATURITY: PURIFIED SONS AND DAUGHTERS

come to us whose faith is in Jesus Christ—even so, with all of that, we still live very much in the *presence* of sin, such that we have to reckon with it every day. In other people, of course—that can be a very heavy burden to put up with—in families, in workplaces, in the community, in the world. Because the presence of sin is a reality in our world, a great deal of our time and energy is required just putting precautions in place to lessen or contain its impact. It seems we to need to keep on increasing the police force, and making more room in our goals, while the court systems take longer and longer. We have to have complaints procedures in place, with all the paperwork that goes with that. Every financial transaction has to be accounted for and audited and reported on—an enormous industry. In the church we still need two people to count the collection, and records have to be kept and reports made, and even then some church treasurers have been known to make off with the proceeds. Try to imagine a world where none of that will be necessary ever again! Purification made for all sin.

Oh yes, other people's sins keep us very occupied, and burdened. But it is when we turn to ourselves, that we see it is just as bad. Just when we think we are getting it all together, and perhaps making some improvement, we slip up, or we blow it, or we are caught out, and once again we need to be in some kind of damage control. Even as Christians. Especially, it would seem, as Christians. Because, knowing the forgiveness of all our sins means somehow that our consciences are, if anything, more sensitised, and we become aware of things we never would have realised before—to our shame (see Ezek. 36:31, after 25–27)—and God holds us on a shorter leash, and we are more directly in His firing line (as in Amos 3:2), and we know about it sooner. The experience of the saints is that, the closer we come to God and the better we get to know Him, the more aware we are of how far we fall short. Won't it be good to be free of all that, and never to be bothered by it ever again!

That is just on the negative side—the relief of being free of all of that. But on the positive side: to know and to be in the wholesome goodness of righteousness, and the strong and pure beauty and splendour of holiness, forever, with nothing to tarnish or detract from it, nothing to call it into question—just full-on truth and love in action, for eternity—what an experience that will be!

In chapter 2, the writer to the Hebrews is talking about the whole plan and purpose of God for His creation, and where He is taking us. So he talks about 'the coming world', that we have been trying to imagine, and who will be in charge of it. Who do you think might qualify to be in charge of such a world? Maybe God's mighty angels? Surely it wouldn't be us! But no, the writer to the Hebrews says we are the ones whom God has appointed to be in charge of this coming world:

Now God did not subject the coming world, about which we are speaking, to angels. But someone has testified somewhere [actually it is in Psa. 8],

‘What are human beings that
you are mindful of them [*Gk* What is man that you are mindful of him?],
or mortals, that you care
for them ?
You have made them for a
little while lower than the angels;
you have crowned them
with glory and honour,
subjecting all things under their feet.’

Now in subjecting all things to them, God left nothing outside their control (Heb. 2:5–8).

MATURITY: PURIFIED SONS AND DAUGHTERS

Now, reading that, we would say, 'You'd have to be joking! Nothing outside our control? We've just said we have our work cut out just trying to control our own and other people's sin—and we are not making much headway with that. How could we ever take charge of that marvellous purified world to come?'

Plus, there's another big problem in the way of that. Before any of us get anywhere near that wonderful world to come, and before it ever comes to be, we will all die. We will be dead.

I don't know how ready you are for death, or whether you ever think about it much, but it is something that we all face. For many of us, death could come sooner rather than later—we never know—we may already have lived most of the life we are going to get. That's a scary thought, isn't it? It is not just the business of dying, which may be unpleasant enough. But it is what it fronts us up with, about our lives. We get old, or something happens to us, and certain parts of our bodies start to shut down a bit, and we can't do what we used to be able to do, and it comes to the point where it takes a lot of our energy just to cope with the business of living—and that's not particularly comfortable, and may be downright painful—what does the car sticker say? 'Old age is not for wimps'! And we begin to wonder: What is it all for? What is the point of it? And, even more, What have we done with it? The approach of death brings the whole of our life under review, and shows it up for what it is—and for what it isn't, or hasn't been. The moment of death is a real judgment. People who have had near-death experiences say, 'The whole of my life flashed before my eyes'. And the thing is, there's nothing more that you can do about it. It is now out of your hands—if it ever was in your hands in the first place. There is nothing more you can do to put right or make up for anything you have done—if you ever could have. This is it—you are stuck with your life just as it has been, and now it is finished. Frightening.

We might long for a second chance. Some people like to think that they might come back as something else, and have another try at it. But I think we know we are kidding ourselves. If we did have another chance, given what we have made of this one, how do you think we'd go? The question would still remain. No: the writer to the Hebrews was being very perceptive, and very realistic, when he said in 9:27:

it is appointed for [human beings] to die once, and after that the judgment.

That is when we are before God, with our lives called to account. Of course, if we had lived perfect lives, this would not be an issue. If we had lived perfect lives, we could die in peace, content and satisfied before God with everything we have done. But that is not how we are. Paul the apostle says that for us death has a sting—something that makes it sharp and painful for us—and, he says, 'The sting of death is sin' (1 Cor. 15:56). It is sin that makes death sharp and painful for us. If it wasn't for our sin, death wouldn't be that way for us—if we needed to die at all. The Bible tells us that death and our sin are very much tied up together. Paul says in Romans 5:

sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all . . . sinned (Rom. 5:12).

And so, he says, 'death exercised dominion' (Rom. 5:17) through that sin—it came to dominate or have power over us—and 'sin exercised dominion in death' (Rom. 5:21)—we couldn't get free of it. Terrible.

And the writer to the Hebrews said that is not the worst of it. Sorry to be doing this to you, but we have to do this if we are going to hear what he is saying to us. He says that,

MATURITY: PURIFIED SONS AND DAUGHTERS

because of this—sin, and death, and judgment—that is how Satan, the devil, has his hold on us. Satan, that old serpent (see Rev. 12:9), that fallen rebellious angel who thinks he is God himself—or thinks he ought to be, and is working on it—he accuses us day and night of our sin before God (see Rev. 12:10). That is the meaning of his name—‘the Accuser’—and that is what he does. And as long as we are in the guilt of our sin, he’s got us. He can say: ‘See—this is what you are. And this is what you will be when you die, and face the judgment.’ So he puts the fear of death into us, and we are trapped by it, and in bondage to it. And he then gets us to do everything we can to try and free ourselves from that fear of death: either by putting it off or pretending it isn’t there—so we will be caught out by it when it happens—or by trying to do everything we can to try and put ourselves right in the face of it, so we will be even more condemned by it—anything but the one thing that can free us totally from the fear of death, that we will come to in a minute.

That is what Satan was doing with these Hebrews. Remember how we said last week that we all have a default mode—something that we think is familiar and safe and comfortable for us—that we revert to under pressure? And these Hebrews had been under pressure. They hadn’t died yet (Heb. 12:4), but they had faced death in persecution and dispossession (Heb. 10:32–34). And, in their weakness and weariness (Heb. 12:12–13), they had reverted to their default mode, which in their case was their old Jewish religion, and they hoped that maybe in doing the right things by their old Jewish religion—things that had done for them before but which could never do for them now that Jesus had come—by going back to doing these things they might be able to stave off this fear of death and judgment that they were faced with. And Satan had them where he wanted them. And the writer to the Hebrews is saying to them: No! Those things that you are doing now to save yourselves from the fear of death are themselves the very works of death. They are ‘dead works’ (Heb. 9:14)! The guilt of your sin is the guilt of your sin. Once that is there, nothing you do, no matter how good, can remove it. Not even the works of your Jewish religion (or of your Anglican or any other religion) can do that (see Heb. 10:1–4). They were never meant to. They were only ever meant to point you to Jesus, for you to believe in him.

And what has Jesus done? Jesus has *made purification for all your sins*.

How has he done that? Where were we? We were looking towards the coming world, which will operate in a totally purified way, and we saw that we human beings are the ones whom God has appointed to be in charge of that coming world. And we were asking: How could that ever be, since here we are encumbered with sin and death and the judgment of God, and the accusations of Satan? What has happened to that great plan and purpose of God for the coming totally purified world with us in charge of it? Well, says the writer to the Hebrews, it is still on track. God has seen to it that it will happen. And it will happen by the complete removal of sin and death and the judgment of God and the accusation of Satan.

He says in Hebrews 2:8, that we do not yet see everything in subjection to human beings. That is an understatement. He then goes on:

but we do see Jesus (Heb. 2:9).

Jesus is the one through whom God is going to remove sin and death and judgment and the power of Satan. Can he do that? Remember how the writer spent chapter 1 telling us how great Jesus is: ‘the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being’ (Heb 1:3); how closely he is related with God as Son to Father (1:5), above all the angels (1:6–7), on the very throne of God (1:8–9), reigning for ever over the whole creation (1:10–12), victorious over all enemies (1:13). You won’t find anyone in a better position to do it than he is.

MATURITY: PURIFIED SONS AND DAUGHTERS

We see Jesus, in the same position we are: 'for a little while . . . made lower than the angels' (Heb. 2:9). He is one with us, in our flesh and blood:

Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things . . . he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect (Heb. 2:14).

He took on and entered into the very flesh and blood in which we are subject to sin, death, judgment and accusation—he is there with us. How is he going to take them away? By taking them all on himself and suffering them for us to the full, until there is nothing left that needs to be suffered—till every avenue of sin and evil has been traversed and cleaned out by him and closed off for ever, by his death for us which is the death that is rightly ours:

so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone (Heb. 2:9).

For this he is 'crowned with glory and honour because of [*or, perhaps better, for*] the suffering of death'—all the resources of God that he needs to carry it through. The one weapon Satan has against us is the guilt of our sin. As long as that is there, and we are subject to it, he can accuse us of it, and hold us under bondage by the fear of death and judgment, and incite us to deadly self-justifying actions to try to free ourselves from it. But when Jesus takes us on with all our guilt and by suffering and dying with us and for us erases it for ever—'takes away the sin of the world'—then Satan has no more on us than he has on Jesus the holy and righteous one, and we are freed. This is the reason for Jesus' death, and the lasting effect of it:

so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death . . . so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people (Heb. 2:14–15, 17).

There we are: freed from the fearful power of death, by atonement made to take away all our sin.

Not that Jesus has then left us to it. He is with us and for us now in our testing situation:

Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested (Heb. 2:18).

All this is with a view to the full carrying out of God's good purpose for the coming world, where we will be one in glorious purity with our heavenly Father, and fully about His business:

It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, saying,

'I will proclaim your name
to my brothers and sisters,
in the midst of the
congregation I will praise you.'

— And again,

'I will put my trust in him.'

And again,

'Here am I and the children whom God has given me.' (Heb. 2:10–13).

MATURITY: PURIFIED SONS AND DAUGHTERS

Here we have the marvellous picture of a whole Family, with Jesus before the Father, of totally purified sons and daughters. How wonderful is that! And sure.

Knowing that, and believing it as a sure hope, secured for us by God in Jesus; and living this testing life in the light of that and of that alone—this is true maturity. Let that be where we are, by faith.

3. MATURITY: HEARING THE VOICE OF GOD

Hebrews 3:7–4:13

Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says,
‘Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion,
as on the day of testing in the wilderness,
where your ancestors put me to the test,
though they had seen my works 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.”
As in my anger I swore,
“They will not enter my rest.”’

Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partners of Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end. As it is said,

‘Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts as
in the rebellion.’

Now who were they who heard and yet were rebellious? Was it not all those who left Egypt under the leadership of Moses? But with whom was he angry forty years? Was it not those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, if not to those who were disobedient? So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.

Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest is still open, let us take care that none of you should seem to have failed to reach it. For indeed the good news came to us just as to them; but the message they heard did not benefit them, because it did not meet with faith in those who listened. For we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said, ‘As in my anger I swore, “They shall not enter my rest,”’ though his works were finished at the foundation of the world. For in one place it speaks about the seventh day as follows, ‘And God rested on the seventh day from all his works.’ And again in this place it says, ‘They shall not enter my rest.’ Since therefore it remains open for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, again he sets a certain day—‘today’—saying through David much later, in the words already quoted,

‘Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts.’

For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not speak later about another day. So then, a sabbath rest still remains for the people of God; for those who enter God’s rest also cease from their labours as God did from his. Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one may fall through such disobedience as theirs.

Indeed, the word of God is living and active, 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. 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.

Today in this third in our eight-week series on the letter to the Hebrews, we are talking about maturity as hearing the voice of God. I wonder if you have ever heard the voice of God.

When we lived at Coober Pedy in the 1980s, there was not much for the children to do on a warm Sunday afternoon. Except that, every hour or so, the little tourist bus would arrive, to show a group of tourists over our underground church that was dug into the side of a rocky hill. And our kids would go out and up the side of the hill to where the church’s air vents came out. The tour guide would take his little group into the church and turn the lights on and show them various features of the church according to a set spiel he had, which by

MATURITY: HEARING THE VOICE OF GOD

now our kids knew practically off by heart. He would take the tourists up to where the church's air vents were: two three-foot shafts going up through the ceiling over where the Lord's table was. On the top of each shaft was a weighted lid that could be closed when it rained (once every couple of years or so) by a rope that hung down the shaft. Just as the guide was about to reach up to the rope to demonstrate, the rope would disappear up the shaft out of his reach. And a voice would come down: 'This is God speaking!' And then it would say something like 'Repent!' or 'Why weren't you in church this morning?'

We may not hear the voice of God as coming down an airshaft, but nevertheless we can know that we are being spoken to by God. In fact, as human beings, we have been designed to hear God speaking with us, and to do what He tells us to do, and to say what He tells us to say. And God actually speaks with us, and makes Himself and His will known to us. The wise old book of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament concludes with these words:

Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole [duty] of everyone. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil (Eccl. 12:13–14).

There is actually no word for 'duty' in the original language. Literally it says, 'This is the whole of man', meaning that fearing God and keeping His commandments is the whole of what it means to be a human being—without remainder. As human beings, we are made to be commanded—by God! To hear God speaking to us, and to do and say what He says. That is all—and that is everything! If we could live doing all of that, and only that, what wonderful creatures we would be!

We were talking quite a bit last week about 'the coming world', where everything and everyone will have been purified. That's how it will be in the coming world, will it not? Hearing God speak with us, and only ever doing and saying all of what He says. A place of pure obedience and strong faith. This part of the letter to the Hebrews has a different name for this coming world: it calls it 'God's rest'—that with which God is perfectly contented and at peace. Just as God was in the beginning when He had finished all that He had made, and stood back and looked at it and said: This is all 'very good' (Gen. 1:31–2:3). That is how God will be in the coming world when all is pure—totally satisfied, and at rest.

It makes sense, then, that if we are to enter that rest with God, we will need to be in an obedient faith-relationship with God. We will need now to be hearing and doing and saying what God says. The writer to the Hebrews used an example from their own history, by quoting Psalm 95. Psalm 95 looked back to the time when Israel was in the wilderness, after being brought out of slavery in Egypt by the mighty hand of God. They were intent on being rebellious and disobedient to God, by calling God to account and putting Him to the test. In their hearts they were far from God, and they refused to know His ways. That is why God had consigned them to remain in the wilderness for forty years, until pretty well that whole generation had died out. Ahead of them lay the promised land, where they would finally be able to settle and be at peace and, in the first place, they could have gone straight into it. But God had needed to say to that rebellious generation: 'They shall not enter my rest' (Psa. 95:11; see Num. 14). Psalm 95 was written several hundred years later in the time of king David when, obviously once again, the people of Israel were in danger of not hearing and doing and saying what God was telling them. Psalm 95 warns them:

*Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion,
as on the day of testing in the wilderness,
where your ancestors put me to the test,
though they had seen my works (Heb. 3:7–9).*

MATURITY: HEARING THE VOICE OF GOD

And now the writer of Psalm 95 is saying: 'Hear His voice today! Do not harden your hearts, as they did back then. Because, if you do not listen today and heed what God says, you too will not enter God's rest'. The writer to the Hebrews makes the point that Psalm 95 could not be talking about just entering God's rest in the promised land, because by the time it was written they were already in the promised land—Joshua had brought them in and settled them there all those years before. The 'rest' that Psalm 95 is talking about must be something else that still lies ahead. It is, in fact, the great rest that 'remains for the people of God' (Heb. 4:9): the total rest and satisfaction that God will have with us in the fully purified coming world. That can be entered only through an obedient faith-relationship with God that hears and obeys His word.

Just as the writer of Psalm 95 was saying in his own time, 'Hear God's voice', with a view to entering that coming world, so the writer of this letter to the Hebrews was saying to these Hebrews, in the light of all that God had done in Jesus Christ: 'Hear God's voice', with a view to entering that coming world, which Christ has now opened fully to us. He had a word for those Hebrews that they needed to hear. They had heard it before, when the gospel came to them, but now they had become discouraged, slack and sluggish. He was saying: 'Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it' (Heb. 2:1). Especially now that Christ has come. Nothing can go back to being the same, now that Christ has come.

One thing we need to be clear on is the difference between what we might call just plain obedience, and the obedience of faith. Faith is a loving and trusting relationship. It is possible to 'obey' someone whom you do not love or trust—you just do what you are told, so then you can say that you've done it. It's not heart-obedience. It is more like outward compliance, or 'toeing the line', or doing your duty. There does not have to be any love in it. Now, if you are in a loving and trusting relationship with someone, especially if that Someone is God, you will end up doing what they want. That is the obedience of faith, which is the true mature heartfelt obedience, and that is what the gospel brings us to, when we know the purification that has been made for all our sins.

With that in mind, let's look at all the references to 'faith' or 'believing' that occur in this part of the letter to the Hebrews. What is it, first of all, that has made us turn away from God? Is it disobedience? You could say yes, but Hebrews 3:12 puts it differently:

Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, *unbelieving* heart that turns away from the living God.

It does not say 'an evil, disobedient heart' but 'an evil, *unbelieving* heart'. That means that it will also be disobedient—but see where the emphasis lies. Disobedience is mentioned in 3:18 but again not as we might expect:

Now who were they who heard and yet were rebellious? Was it not all those who left Egypt under the leadership of Moses? But with whom was he angry forty years? Was it not those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, if not to those who were disobedient? So we see that they were unable to enter because of—

What might we expect: 'disobedience'? No—

they were unable to enter because of unbelief (Heb. 3:16–19).

Lack of faith. So it goes on to say in chapter 4:

MATURITY: HEARING THE VOICE OF GOD

the good news came to us just as to them; but the message they heard did not benefit them, because it did not meet with *faith* in those who listened (Heb. 4:2).

It does not say: 'it did not meet with obedience in those who listened'; but: 'it did not meet with *faith*'. This faith will issue in heartfelt loving obedience; but the faith-relationship is primary. So it goes on:

For we who have *believed* enter that rest (Heb. 4:3).

There was unbelief and faithlessness, which issued in disobedience, which meant that the people of Israel in earlier days did not enter that rest; but God by His mercy in Christ has appointed a way by which we may still enter that final rest that is the coming world, despite our former faithlessness and disobedience:

Since therefore it remains open for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, again he sets a certain day—'today'—saying through David much later, in the words already quoted,

'Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts' (Heb. 4:6–7).

So the writer to these Hebrews urges them, and us:

Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one may fall through such disobedience as theirs (Heb. 4:11).

How do we enter? By believing, in a loving and trusting faith-relationship with God who in Christ and his cross is merciful and faithful, in such a way that 'we hold our first confidence firm to the end' (Heb. 3:14).

Particularly as now in Christ a word has come—the word of the gospel that we heard last week, that all of our sins are forgiven, and the way in to the coming world is wide open for us—that word of the gospel is what we must now hear and believe and so obey. It is the word of Christ, the word of our 'great salvation' (Heb. 2:3), of the total purification made for sins.

When we are still in the guilt of our sins, what is our almost instinctive reaction when we hear those words: 'This is God speaking'? Oh, quick, what have I done wrong? How can I put it right? What should I really be doing? There is that drive in us to make ourselves right by somehow doing the right thing by some kind of code or other. We can put a stop to that, by saying: No—a great purification has been made for all sin. My guilt has been taken away by Christ on the cross, and there all my sins have been forgiven. There is nothing I could have done anyway to make up for any one of them. I will never try that way again. I believe in what God has done there in Christ, and I know the great mercy and love of God for me, and I will now trust God to show me His will, and to enable me gladly to follow in it all my life. We can accept the gospel, by faith, and by faith live in it.

If we refuse to do that, especially when the gospel has come to us so clearly, then we will still be in the guilt of our sin, even if we try to deny it. We will then be doomed to a life of trying to justify ourselves by doing the right thing according to whatever code of practice we adopt. This is the great danger that these Hebrews were in, to whom this letter was written. In their weakness and weariness under persecution they had lost the freshness of hearing and believing and obeying the gospel. The mindset of being in the guilt of their sins was creeping back, and the accusations of Satan were sounding a bit louder and, instead of going back to the gospel and hearing and believing and obeying it afresh, they were on the

MATURITY: HEARING THE VOICE OF GOD

way to going back to their former default mode and comfort zone—their old Jewish religion. That is why the writer of this letter is using the elements of their old Jewish religion—Psalm 95 and, as we shall see, the sacrifices, and Melchizedek, and so on—to show, firstly, the ineffectiveness of the practices of the old religion to bring them total and permanent forgiveness of sins (which they were never meant to do anyway), and secondly to show them how it points them on to Christ and his work in the gospel, who actually does that.

If we are talking about obedience, we need first of all to obey the gospel. What does that mean? At one stage in my ministry I used to visit the Anangu Pitjantjatjara lands in the far northwest of South Australia. In the old days the code of practice that pertained there was the aboriginal law or dreamtime stories and ceremonies and ways of life, strictly adhered to. The Christian gospel had come to that region, and many had become believers in Christ and known the forgiveness of all their sins. But the guilt-based mindset of doing the right thing to justify ourselves is never far from the surface in any of us, and there was a tendency there, if they did not go back to their old ways, of seeing the Christian gospel and ways of doing things as a kind of new law, by which, with the same law-mindset, you could justify yourself and allay your guilt by observing it. Plain obedience to a code of conduct, whatever code that might be, was still a very strong drive. When I spoke to some people there about obeying the gospel, they wondered what that might mean. I said, 'Obey the fact that you are forgiven'. That put it in a whole new light for some of them.

You see, when that word of the gospel comes, we are faced with a life-and-death choice. Either we can admit that we are helpless and deadly sinners, and accept the full and free forgiveness won for us once for all on the cross, and live from that; or we can try even harder to justify ourselves and free ourselves from guilt by doing the right thing—whatever that may mean for us—which will in fact only make our guilt much worse. Because now we have turned our back on the one thing that will finally free us from guilt forever and take us to God's rest in the coming world, and that is God's great mercy and love to us in Jesus Christ. The coming of the gospel will expose in us which way we are going to go.

I have known a church that was doing great things to serve and help a great number of people, and their whole life together was geared to doing that, and they had known rich blessings. Then at one of their gatherings, one of their leaders spoke a gospel word that had been given to him by the Lord—he knew he had to speak it—and it had to do with their life and work together being sustainable only through faith in Jesus Christ, and not by any reliance on their own doing of the right thing, however well they may have been doing it. That word was a penetrating word for them at that time, and everyone present was called by it to reassess where they were, and why they were there. And it split right them down the middle: there were those who accepted this word in humility and faith; and there were those who would not have a bar of it, and ended up leaving the church and taking others with them, in great hurt and sadness that the church was left reeling from for some time afterwards. That is when I realised again the truth of those words from Hebrews 4:12–13:

Indeed, the word of God is living and active, 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. 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.

This is the word that was coming to these Hebrews in this letter. That is the word that is coming to us here this morning. I urge that it meet with hearing by faith—that loving and trusting obedience of faith that knows and values beyond all things the great mercy and

MATURITY: HEARING THE VOICE OF GOD

steadfast love of our heavenly Father in His mighty Son Jesus Christ, and lives only ever from that—from Him—by faith.

4. MATURITY: AN ETERNAL SALVATION

Hebrews 6:13–7:3

When God made a promise to Abraham, because he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, 'I will surely bless you and multiply you.' And thus Abraham, having patiently endured, obtained the promise. Human beings, of course, swear by someone greater than themselves, and an oath given as confirmation puts an end to all dispute. In the same way, when God desired to show even more clearly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it by an oath, so that through two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible that God would prove false, we who have taken refuge might be strongly encouraged to seize the hope set before us. We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.

— This 'King Melchizedek of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham as he was returning from defeating the kings and blessed him'; and to him Abraham apportioned 'one-tenth of everything.' His name, in the first place, means 'king of righteousness'; next he is also king of Salem, that is, 'king of peace.' Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever.

I was talking with someone the other day. He was 53, and a friend of his who was 50 had just suddenly died of a heart attack. It had come as quite a shock to him. When people you know of your own age or younger start dying, then you know that you are now up amongst them. It starts to give you a different perspective on time, and on how permanent things are. This man I was talking to was saying how, when we were younger, we used to think we had all the time in the world. But now the years, even the decades, seem to fly past much more quickly than they used to, and time is now more precious. He used to work out with weights in his younger days, but he's now not as fit and able as he used to be. He'd heard that 'we lose 3kg of muscle every ten years after the age of 40'. This had made quite an impression on him. It seemed to be affecting his view of life.

Some people think the whole universe is like that. There are theories that seek to apply the laws of thermodynamics to the universe that claim that the whole system is gradually cooling down and grinding to a halt. I don't know how valid that is, and the changes are such that we would not notice them in our own lifetime, but this can be the application of the same mindset on a very large scale, and can affect our general mood.

I guess we all recognise that mindset that things are on decline, and nothing is quite as good now as it used to be. I think I had something of that mindset from quite a young age. I had two brothers older than I was—2–3 years between each of us—so they always did the good things before I did, like going to Melbourne, or going to the movies, or going out to cool places with friends—I was still too young. And by the time my turn came, it didn't seem as good for me as it had been for them. Even the church youth group: by the time I got into it, it didn't seem to be going as well as it had back in their day. Everything kind of tailed off, once I got there. Right or wrong, that's the mindset I got myself into—bit of self-pity there, do you think? And I can still slip back into it any time I want to.

In our own thinking, we can have a myth of 'the good old days'—when we think things were better than they are now. There is probably quite a bit of selective memory in that. For instance: our church used to be bigger and more lively than it is now. That may be questionable—how do you measure what is happening in a group of people at any one time, especially from God's point of view—but we get used to thinking, 'Oh well, that's the way

MATURITY: AN ETERNAL SALVATION

it's always going to be, so let's just settle for that', and our spirits become more measured and subdued.

One of the manifestations of this may be in the moral area. We may have had certain moral standards which we have seen being eroded over the years, and we may have come to accept that. We may have held notions of the permanency of marriage, for instance, and of the keeping of the sexual relationship within marriage, until something has happened to us or to those close to us that has led us to depart from that stance and say, 'Well, what does it matter? And why bother to make the effort?' Especially if we have a background assumption that all these things are winding down anyway.

What I am saying is that with this subdued mindset we end up settling for so much less than God actually has for us. I think this is what had happened to the Hebrews to whom this letter was written. In chapter 5 the writer says they have become stuck on the basics of the old things rather than pressing on to the new things of Christ. They are like babies still on breast milk rather than older children on solid food. They need to go on to maturity. That is a matter of growing up, and we all need to do that. More seriously, in chapter 10 he says that this refusal to grow up and go on is really a lack of faith, without which we cannot be saved:

'... my righteous one will live by faith.

My soul takes no pleasure in anyone who shrinks back.'

But we are not among those who shrink back and so are lost, but among those who have faith and so are saved. (Heb. 10:38–39).

'Shrinking back' is a good description of what I am talking about. It is going backwards and getting smaller or more shrivelled. Why do we 'shrink back'? We shrink back when we have no hope. We shrink back when we have nothing more to look forward to. We shrink back when we think that what we have here is the measure of all things, and nothing is permanent, and everything is passing away. That is when we try to hang on to and settle for what we have here as all we are ever going to have, or when we end up simply not bothering any more.

That is the situation being addressed in this part of the letter to the Hebrews, and throughout the whole letter. And the writer addresses it by saying that things are not actually as you think they are. That if you think that way, then you have got it wrong, and you need to think again. He tells us that with God there is such a thing as an eternal salvation (Heb. 5:9), and that is what we have through faith in Christ, and so we had better live in it, and conduct our whole lives as if this is true and more sure than anything else.

He begins with the promise that God made to Abraham, that through Abraham and his offspring all the families of the earth would be blessed (see Gen 12:1–3). That is no small promise, especially when we consider that it would mean the removal of all sin and evil, and living in all the truth and the righteousness of God. How could we ever be sure of that? Well, the writer says, we can be sure of it first of all because God has promised it, and He has promised it on the basis of who He is as God, eternal from before the beginning and on after the end:

When God made a promise to Abraham, because he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, 'I will surely bless you and multiply you.' And thus Abraham, having patiently endured, obtained the promise (Heb. 6:13–15).

Now, if you were going to make a promise to someone, and it was a binding promise, and you wanted to ensure that there was nothing surer than this promise you are making, and that it definitely will be fulfilled, what would you say? How would you back it up? You

MATURITY: AN ETERNAL SALVATION

could say: 'I swear by Ayres Rock/Uluru that this will be so'. Well, you couldn't get something more sure and permanent in the whole of Australia than Ayres Rock/Uluru, could you? It is pretty solid, and it has been there a long time, and it will be there for a long time yet to come. But let me tell you something: Ayres Rock/Uluru is wearing away. It used to be bigger than it is now, and every hundred years or so it is getting a little bit smaller. So even Ayers Rock/ Uluru could not guarantee the permanency of your promise. It would have to be something better than that.

So if God makes a promise, is there something bigger and better than He is by which He could swear? No—that's the whole point:

When God made a promise to Abraham, because he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, 'I will surely bless you and multiply you.' . . . Human beings, of course, swear by someone greater than themselves, and an oath given as confirmation puts an end to all dispute. In the same way, when God desired to show even more clearly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it by an oath, so that through two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible that God would prove false, we who have taken refuge might be strongly encouraged to seize the hope set before us (Heb 6:13–14, 16–18).

So Abraham was able to accept that promise from God, and his own part in it. And, says the writer to the Hebrews, so can we.

But for us God has done something more than just promise on the basis of His own eternal nature, sure as that is. God has given us Jesus, His eternal Son, in our flesh, as the means by which this promise comes true: the removal of all sin and evil, and the establishment of all God's righteousness:

We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek (Heb. 6:19–20).

To open this up to these Hebrews, the writer digs in to their Old Testament heritage—the very thing that they were shrinking back to in their attempt to settle for what they thought was familiar and safe. This very heritage, he says, does not let you do this. It points and urges you on to the so much more that God has for you. If we are going on to maturity, he says, we really need to understand about Melchizedek.

Now, we may think that the last thing we need to know if we want to grow in maturity is all about Melchizedek—whoever he is! But we, no less than those Hebrews, need to know the one to whom this Melchizedek was pointing, our Lord Jesus, **if** we are to come out of the malaise of our subdued and faithless mindset.

So who is Melchizedek, and why is he important?

This 'King Melchizedek of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham as he was returning from defeating the kings and blessed him'; and to him Abraham apportioned 'one-tenth of everything'. His name, in the first place, means 'king of righteousness'; next he is also king of Salem, that is, 'king of peace.' Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever. (Heb. 7:1–3).

Melchizedek appears in the story of Abraham in Genesis 14. An alliance of five kings had invaded Sodom and Gomorrah, and had taken captive Abraham's nephew Lot and his family and belongings. Abraham set out and, with a little army of 318 men, routed the forces of these five kings and rescued Lot and his family and goods. The king of Sodom was very grateful to Abraham, and went out to meet him, and they met near where Jerusalem now is,

MATURITY: AN ETERNAL SALVATION

and the king of Jerusalem at that time happened to be Melchizedek, and he gave hospitality to them as they met there:

And King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High. He blessed him and said, 'Blessed be Abram by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!' And Abram gave him one tenth of everything (Gen. 14:18–20).

That is all we know about Melchizedek. He kind of comes out of the blue. Normally we would expect to hear of significant figures in the Old Testament where they came from, and who their parents and family were, how they were born, and when they died. With Melchizedek, there is none of that. He is a priest of the one true God who made all things (even though he is not of the people of Israel), and he blesses Abraham, and Abraham highly honours him.

So what is so significant for these Hebrews, and for us, about Melchizedek? There is one other mention of Melchizedek in the whole of the Old Testament, and that is in Psalm 110. Psalm 110 is a psalm of David written about God's promised Messiah, and in it God says to this Messiah:

You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek (Psalm 110:4).

That is the link between Melchizedek and God's Messiah Jesus (see Heb. 5:6, 10; 7:17, 21). The writer to the Hebrews makes full use of the little we know about Melchizedek to show us the greatness and the fullness and the permanency of what God has done in Jesus. We really need to read right through from the end of chapter 4 to the end of chapter 8 to get all of it, but here is some of what he says:

His name, in the first place, means 'king of righteousness'; next he is also king of Salem, that is, 'king of peace.' (Heb. 7:2)

Peace, with God, in ourselves, and with others, comes in the taking away of sin and the removal of all evil, and in the establishment of all God's righteousness. This God has done in Jesus in the action of the cross.

Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever . . . one who has become a priest, not through a legal requirement concerning physical descent, but through the power of an indestructible life. For it is attested of him, 'You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek' (Heb. 7:3, 16–17).

Here is no temporary provision for the alleviation of guilt. In the Old Testament God provided sacrifices by which you could make atonement for your sins. You could offer your sacrifice and feel better for a while, but then you still had to come back later and do it again, and again. Here is given a permanent access to God in righteousness and holiness:

he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently he is able for all time to save [or able to save completely] those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them (Heb. 7:24–25).

This makes Jesus greater than any of the provisions made in the Old Testament for access to God, under certain conditions, through the priesthood of the tribe of Levi:

MATURITY: AN ETERNAL SALVATION

See how great he is! Even Abraham the patriarch gave him a tenth of the spoils. And those descendants of Levi who receive the priestly office have a commandment in the law to collect tithes [*or* a tenth] from the people, that is, from their kindred, though these also are descended from Abraham. But this man, who does not belong to their ancestry, collected tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had received the promises. It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior. In the one case, tithes are received by those who are mortal; in the other, by one of whom it is testified that he lives. One might even say that Levi himself, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, for he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him (Heb. 7:4–10).

This also means that the sacrifice that he has offered does not have to be repeated again and again, but is effective for all time. We will hear more about that sacrifice and its significance next week. The point that is being made this week is that the one we have in Jesus, while being very much one of us, one who is able to sympathise with our weaknesses and has been tested as we are (see Heb. 4:15), yet he is not part of our sinful mindset that experiences all things as winding down or passing away. He is above all that, and is able to take us on from there:

For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he has no need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for those of the people; this he did once for all when he offered himself. For the law appoints as high priests those who are subject to weakness, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever (Heb. 7:26–28).

Where does that leave us, with regard to the morbid mindset we were talking about at the beginning? We can maintain our morbid mindset, and even derive some perverse pleasure from it, if that is what we want. But it will never give us settled peace and joy. Or we can believe in Jesus, as the Son of God, our great high priest, who lives for ever, whose work of blessing is full and complete and permanent, and in him we can know a peace that passes understanding, and a hope that does not fade or become corrupted, and a settled joy that refuses to go away, whatever the present circumstances. We can have in Jesus 'the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him' (Heb. 5:9).

5. MATURITY: SANCTIFIED THROUGH A SINGLE OFFERING

Hebrews 9:24–10:18

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. 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; 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. And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment, 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.

— Since the law has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered year after year, make perfect those who approach. Otherwise, would they not have ceased being offered, since the worshipers, cleansed once for all, would no longer have any consciousness of sin? But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sin year after year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said,

‘Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired,
but a body you have prepared for me;
in burnt offerings and sin offerings
you have taken no pleasure.

Then I said, “See, God, I have come to do your will, O God”
(in the scroll of the book it is written of me).”

When he said above, ‘You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings’ (these are offered according to the law), then he added, ‘See, I have come to do your will.’ He abolishes the first in order to establish the second. And it is by God’s will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, ‘he sat down at the right hand of God,’ and since then has been waiting ‘until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet.’ For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us, for after saying,

‘This is the covenant that I will make with them
after those days, says the Lord:
I will put my laws in their hearts,
and I will write them on their minds,’

he also adds,

‘I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.’

Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.

I am going to begin this morning with a statement: ‘A Christian is . . .’—I wonder how you would complete that statement. It could be completed in a number of ways:

A Christian is a person who believes in Jesus Christ.

A Christian is someone who comes to church.

A Christian is someone who tries to live a good life.

All of those would be true in one way or another. But what I am going to say this morning is: ‘A Christian is someone who knows and trusts that a single sacrifice has been made for sins’.

Let’s look at some of the statements that are made about that in this part of the letter to the Hebrews:

he [Christ] has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself (Heb. 9:26).

MATURITY: SANCTIFIED THROUGH A SINGLE OFFERING

it is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all (Heb. 10:10).

when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, 'he sat down at the right hand of God' (Heb. 10:12).

For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified (Heb. 10:14).

Is that what is at the heart of our faith and your life as a Christian person? Is that what governs our attitude to life? Is that what determines how we go about what we say and do each day, and each week? Is this single offering for sin at the background of all that we are? If so, it will make an enormous difference to how we are in life, with ourselves and with other people. We are saying today: Maturity is having been sanctified through a single offering.

Let's see how this relates to what we have done so far in this eight-week series on the Letter to the Hebrews. First we saw that maturity is knowing Jesus as he really is, in his surpassing greatness. Today we will see that his greatness is constituted primarily by this single sacrifice that he has made. In the second week we saw the great purification Christ made on the cross for all sins, and how necessary that was in God's purpose for His coming world, where sin, evil and death will be no more, and we will have come to our full maturity as purified sons and daughters of God. We come back to this today, in seeing how this enables us to live maturely in the present time. In the third week we heard how maturity is hearing the voice of God, especially when He is telling us to repent and believe the gospel—that divisive word that commands us to obey the reality that all our sins are forgiven—and so enter God's rest, all that He is well pleased with in the coming world. Today we will see what we are caught up in when we refuse to obey the reality of that forgiveness. And last week we saw that, in the face of our staying below par and settling for less than God has for us, because we have a sinful mindset that it is all winding down anyway, God has provided an eternal Son, and an eternal salvation. We will see again today how that puts in the shade all the things we revert to as partial attempts to deal with our morbid malaise.

'For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified' (Heb. 10:14). What kind of life do you live if you do not believe that, or do not live as if it is true? A life that is always a bit on edge, and never quite secure. I have someone who rings me up from time to time. She is a Christian believer, concerned always to do the right thing, but from time to time something happens—usually something she has done—which throws her, and makes her wonder if she is really in salvation, or whether she has blown it big time. I guess we all have moments like that. When I speak with her, it always it comes back to this single offering for sins. Has what you have done, right or wrong, been covered by Christ's single offering for sin? Do you believe that, and are you trusting in that alone? Not that we take it lightly, as if we can do what we like, and that lets us off the hook. The very fact that she is concerned that what she has done might cause her to lose her salvation means that she takes God's holiness and righteousness utterly seriously. But God has taken His holiness and righteousness even more seriously in giving no less than His own Son to be the sacrifice for our sins: 'it is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all' (Heb. 10:10). Is that our hope and trust? Is that the one thing we always come back to? She is getting quite good at it now. When she rings now, she pretty well answers her own question along those lines. She is just checking with me, and I am happy to encourage her. She is coming to maturity.

Our relationships with each other can become so tenuous, and tentative. Especially when we are not sure of ourselves, and we are all the time looking to the other person for

MATURITY: SANCTIFIED THROUGH A SINGLE OFFERING

approval, to know how we are going. One little word, or one little action out of place that we regret, or one-less-than-thrilled response from the other person, and the whole relationship is thrown into jeopardy—we don't know where we stand. I am not always at my best first thing in the morning, or when I am tired, or when I am under pressure or preoccupied by something, and so I can sometimes give the impression to those I live and work with, even just by the set of my face at the time, that I am not impressed by them, and that there is something wrong with our relationship. That is not to excuse any thoughtlessness or grumpiness or rudeness on my part. There is and never has been any excuse for sin. But the fact is that none of us are quite up to scratch in our relationships with each other all the time. Does that mean our relationships are thereby harmed or broken? It does if our relationships are dependent on whether or not we always do the right thing. But it could be that there is something deeper that underlies our relationships, that has more to do with God than with us, and that depends on this single sacrifice for sins—yours and mine included. I had occasion to say to one of my work colleagues recently: 'We have an eternal relationship, that is secured by an everlasting covenant. Within that, if there is something that I am not pleased about, that I think you ought to know, I will let you know, and we will sort it out. But don't ever think that our relationship can be broken, or even dented, by anything you or I do wrong, or don't do right.' On what basis can I say that? '[Christ] has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself' (Heb. 9:26), and 'it is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all' (Heb. 10:10).

The implications of this for our marriage relationships are obvious. I have found that marriage is a gift from God, that God does not take away 'until death do us part'. We can be true to that gift, or we can be false to it, or we can be careless with it, but the gift remains always there. When there has been a lapse, it is rectified by returning to the gift, and finding that by God's grace it is still there, and as whole as it ever was. There may be need for some apology or compensation and making up and change of behaviour on our part. But that is not what reconstitutes the relationship. Those things are made possible by the reality that the relationship is still there, regardless of what we have or have not done. The relationship is there by the gift of God, not by our making, and it is secured by the 'single sacrifice for sins' completed by Christ when 'he sat down at the right hand of God' (Heb. 10:12). I always say to couples I am preparing for marriage: 'The one thing I have needed to know to be a good husband to my wife and father to my children is the great forgiveness of God—first for myself, and then also for the others—so that none of us are stuck with any of our mistakes or failings or the damage they may have caused. Our marriages are part of the eternal marriage of the Bride and the Lamb, the union of Christ with his church, and can in practice be living demonstrations of that grace and faithfulness.

Speaking of doing the right thing, the Hebrews to whom this letter was written had plenty to fall back on as far as that was concerned. That was part of their problem. They had the whole of the Old Testament, with all of its rich worship and the provision of a very full sacrificial system, to fall back on, if they wanted to use that to do the right thing. You'd think that in doing that they couldn't put a foot wrong—because it had all been prescribed by God! So if you were ever a little bit unsure of yourself—as every sinner is, and rightly so—then you could just make sure that you were keeping all the right observances of the Old Testament law, and you'd be set! The only problem with that is that God never intended His good law to be used in that way. God never gave us His law so we could secure our relationship with Him by keeping it. He had already brought us into relationship with Himself by forging a covenant between Himself and us. That covenant was going to be secured for all

MATURITY: SANCTIFIED THROUGH A SINGLE OFFERING

time and eternity when Jesus said, 'this is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins' (Matt. 26:28), and went to the cross to effect it. God's law was only ever intended to point us to this already-secured relationship, and to spell out how we are to live within it. So the writer to the Hebrews says:

Since the law has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered year after year, make perfect those who approach. Otherwise, would they not have ceased being offered, since the worshipers, cleansed once for all, would no longer have any consciousness of sin? But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sin year after year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins (Heb. 10:1-4).

Martin Luther said something to the effect that the letter to the Hebrews is the end of all human religion. That would include not just Jewish religion, but also, if we can call it that, all Anglican religion. As we know, Anglican religion comes in a number of different forms. There is evangelical religion, and high church religion, and middle-of-the-road prayer book religion, then there is old prayer book, or new prayer book, and there is traditional, and there is contemporary, formal or informal, and all the other variations on the theme. I travel around, and I have seen all of them, and been part of all of them. Sometimes we feel obliged to try to make people change from one to the other, so that we get it 'right' rather than 'wrong'. I wonder why we do that. It could sometimes be that, in our sinfulness, we think we have to somehow get it 'right' to be more 'in' with God. God is not fooled by any such attempts, even if we are. If we expended the same amount of energy on making sure that we are all trusting only in the one single sacrifice for sins, however that is expressed, we may all be better off.

However we do it, think about the part of the service where we confess our sins and receive assurance of God's forgiveness. What are we doing there? The way we do it may encourage us to think that each week we have built up a debit account of sin, and that by confessing our sins and receiving absolution we are clearing our account back to zero, ready for it to be built up again. As if the whole of sin could be dealt with by a few well-chosen words and the wave of a hand! Sometimes people say, 'Keep short accounts with God'. Is that what we are doing—receiving God's forgiveness in regular weekly instalments? The emphasis there is on our action of confessing and receiving. Is that what gets our sins forgiven? Well, no, if we bring to it what this part of the letter to the Hebrews is saying: 'by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified' (Heb. 10:14). All our sins—past, present and future—have been judged and dealt with and forgiven forever in that single sacrifice for sins. That is why we are now able to confess them—because we know He has taken them away.

If we think it is our action of confessing and receiving absolution that gets our sins forgiven, then it is like what the writer to the Hebrews says about the sacrifices of the Old Testament, now that Christ has come. They were meant to point to the complete forgiveness of sins in him, but the very fact that they had to be repeated again and again shows that they could never of themselves bring the complete forgiveness of sins:

Otherwise, would they not have ceased being offered, since the worshipers, cleansed once for all, would no longer have any consciousness of sin? (Heb. 10:2).

In the very fact that they had to be repeated there is, on the contrary, 'a reminder of sin year after year' (Heb. 10:3).

Jesus did not take the wine and say: 'Do this as a reminder of sin'. What he said was:

MATURITY: SANCTIFIED THROUGH A SINGLE OFFERING

this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the *forgiveness* of sins . . . Do this . . . in remembrance of *me* (Matt. 26:28; 1 Cor:11:25).

If forgiveness comes to us by virtue of what we do week after week, then all we are faced with week after week is 'a reminder of sin'. That can be what comes to characterise some Christian services. No wonder then we get heavy and subdued by that, and all sorts of problems break out. But what we actually come together for is a living and present remembrance of the one who has taken away our sins forever 'by a single sacrifice for sins' (Heb. 10:12).

That takes care of all human attempts at religion, in any sense of trying to make it up to God. God in His mercy has forestalled us, and done for us what we could never have done for ourselves anyway. In chapter 8 the writer to the Hebrews quotes at length part of Jeremiah 31: 1-4 about the new covenant that God would make with His unfaithful people. Here in chapter 10 he quotes it again, where God says:

I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.

And he says:

Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin (Heb. 10:17–18).

Anything further that is done or offered on our part ostensibly for the forgiveness of sins is a denial and a refusal of that magnificent gift, and its effect is to cut us off from Christ (compare Gal. 5:4).

One thing follows from that. As human beings, we have been designed and structured to do the will of God. This we have stopped doing—in fact we have taken up doing the opposite. Jesus has come, as the true human being, and has done the will of God. Fortunately for us, that will of God is for our sanctification—our being made holy to belong to God. The writer quotes Psalm 40, as from the mouth of Christ:

when Christ came into the world, he said,
 'Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired,
 but a body you have prepared for me;
in burnt offerings and sin offerings
 you have taken no pleasure.

Then I said, "See, God, I have come to do your will, O God"
(in the scroll of the book it is written of me)."

When he said above, 'You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings' (these are offered according to the law), then he added, 'See, I have come to do your will.' He abolishes the first in order to establish the second. And it is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all (Heb. 10:5–10).

This total forgiveness cleanses and restores us and takes us on to that original design. In Christ, we can actually do the will of God—according to the quote from Jeremiah 31:

This is the covenant that I will make with them
after those days, says the Lord:
 I will put my laws in their hearts,
and I will write them on their minds (Heb. 10:16).

So that we can be in the doing of it. Not by any effort on our part that is any credit to us, but as we hold on to Christ by faith (see Deut. 30:11–14; Rom. 10:3–13).

MATURITY: SANCTIFIED THROUGH A SINGLE OFFERING

It also means we now have much to look forward to. Jesus said:

Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life (John 5:24).

Because our sin has already been judged in the one great single sacrifice for sins, we who believe now have nothing to fear from the coming judgment:

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 (Heb. 9:28).

What we have to look forward to by faith in him, we shall see more of next week. Meanwhile, as we eagerly wait for him, we can get on with life, fully forgiven and cleansed sins, and freed from all fear.

6. MATURITY: THE ASSURANCE OF THINGS HOPED FOR

Hebrews 10:36–11:16

For you need endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.

— For yet ‘in a very little while,
the one who is coming will come and will not delay;
but my righteous one will live by faith.
My soul takes no pleasure in anyone who shrinks back.’

But we are not among those who shrink back and so are lost, but among those who have faith and so are saved.

— Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

— By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's. Through this he received approval as righteous, God himself giving approval to his gifts; he died, but through his faith he still speaks. By faith Enoch was taken so that he did not experience death; and ‘he was not found, because God had taken him.’ For it was attested before he was taken away that ‘he had pleased God.’ And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household; by this he condemned the world and became an heir to the righteousness that is in accordance with faith. By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, ‘as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.’ All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

Today we are going to talk about faith. The reading from Hebrews has a classic definition of faith:

faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen (Heb. 11:1).

So, having heard that definition, can we now say that we know what faith is, and so we can now have it? ‘Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen’—so, there you are: go and have faith! I’m not sure that it works that way. I don’t think that is the way faith comes. We need something or someone to have faith in, and a faith-relationship with that in which we believe. To settle only for a definition of faith would be to have faith in a definition, and I think in most situations we are going to need more than a definition to save us. Or it could be having faith in ourselves, that we understand what faith is; and I’m not sure that is any more reliable in the long run.

How could we ever understand what something like faith really is? We know when we’re in it, but we can’t really say what it is. Proverbs 30:18–19 says:

Three things are too wonderful for me;

MATURITY: THE ASSURANCE OF THINGS HOPED FOR

four I do not understand:
the way of an eagle in the sky,
the way of a snake on a rock,
the way of a ship on the high seas,
and the way of a man with a girl.

The first three are wonderful mysteries. How does an eagle fly, and what's going on in its head? How does a snake walk on a rock without legs? How does a ship sail on the sea? After they have done it, they leave no trail, and you can't tell where they've been. The fourth one is quite unfathomable: how do you ever work out what is going on between a man and a woman? If we can't comprehend that, how do we ever expect to understand the complex depths of the relationship between a person and God? Some things, believe it or not, are beyond our understanding or comprehension. We are going to need something more than a definition, and something better than trusting in our own great powers of comprehension.

Plus we can hear a definition like that, and misread it. We may read it this way:

faith is the assurance of things *hoped for*, the conviction of things *not seen*. do you need to have Heb 11:1 again?

We can put those two things together, and what do we come up with? Faith is hoping for what you don't see—hoping for the best, even though you can't see it at the time. I wonder how much the faith of many in our churches amounts to just that: hoping for the best, even though we can't see it. At a human level, we may regard that as somehow virtuous, or even heroic—being able to believe that way, against all the odds. Sometimes that is how faith is presented to us, as something we can do: 'Believe, even though you can't see it—that is how you will get results'. Not only in churches, it would seem, but also in motivational business seminars. Let's see how that stands up.

What was the situation being addressed by the writer of this letter to the Hebrews? We find it in the section that immediately precedes this in chapter 10:

But recall those earlier days when, after you had been enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion for those who were in prison, and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves possessed something better and more lasting. Do not, therefore, abandon that confidence of yours; it brings a great reward. For you need endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised (Heb. 10:32–36).

These Hebrew believers in Jesus had been subjected to persecution, dispossession of property, and imprisonment. At first they had remained strong in faith, but then it had got them down and, looking for something more familiar and comfortable, they had reverted to their old Jewish religion.

Now we, thankfully, have not been subjected to that kind of persecution. But other things happen to us. We get cancer. One of our children dies. We lose a husband or a wife, through death, or through relationship breakdown. Our job is on the line. We suffer a mental illness. How is our faith then? If it has been just hoping for the best, even though you can't see it at the time, it may be wearing a bit thin. It may just give up completely. That is why sometimes people who have been coming to church for years, and have perhaps held responsible positions in the church, when one of these things happens to them, suddenly pack it all in, and won't have a bar of it any more, because they think that God, if He is there at all, has let them down. Their faith, it seems, has never got much further than themselves.

MATURITY: THE ASSURANCE OF THINGS HOPED FOR

The Hebrews that this letter was written to look like they were close to that kind of position. This is why the writer was telling them what faith really is, to encourage them in it. And we can be encouraged in the same way.

What he brings them is something very different from just hoping for the best. Listen to the definition again:

faith is the *assurance* of things hoped for, the *conviction* of things not seen (Heb. 11:1).

Faith is something we are *sure* of. It is something that we are quite *convinced* about. Not because we have stirred ourselves up to it, but because something has happened to us. We know God. God has come, and has made Himself known to us.

Faith is knowing God as He really is, in what He has done, and is doing, and will do. We know and trust God in that, because God has come and shown it to us, and has made known to us that we are a part of what He is doing. We trust Him and relate with Him in all of that, and we know we have good reason to trust Him and relate with Him, because He has shown us that He is utterly reliable in Himself, and in what He is doing.

One of the people the writer refers to a lot in chapter 11 is Abraham. Abraham did not start out as a great believer in God. That is not why God chose him. Abraham was a pagan, and a worshipper of idols (see Josh. 24:2). But we are told: 'The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham' (Acts 7:2). That is something we can't make happen. When it does happen, it is not something that we will forget in a hurry. We are told in Genesis 15 how Abraham came to faith. God said to Abraham in a vision: 'Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great'. Abraham responded by complaining to God that the offspring God had told him about still had not happened, and made it clear that he didn't think it ever would. What did God do? Say to Himself, 'Oh well, looks like Abraham does not have much faith in Me—I'll come back later, or maybe try someone else. No—God took Abraham outside and told him to look at the night sky, and count the stars, if he was able to. This was not in the city, mind you—this was like in the outback, where the night sky is crammed full of stars. And God said, 'That's how many descendants you are going to have' (see Gen. 15:1–6).

What was God doing with Abraham? God was showing Abraham something of what God was doing in His plan and purpose for all that He has made: it is God's settled intention that He is going to have at the end of time an uncountable family of His children who will be holy and blameless before Him in love, shining like stars in the heavens (see Rev. 7:9; Eph. 1:4–5; Dan. 12:3). It was not that one night Abraham was looking wistfully up at the stars and thought, 'I wonder if that's how many children I'm going to have?' or even, 'I wish . . .!' How would you ever come up with a thought like that anyway? No—this was a revelation from God. God was saying to Abraham: 'This is what I am going to do—and you are going to be a part of it!' A revelation like that stays with you once it has happened, and doesn't go away easily. We're told: 'Abraham believed God'. It's almost as if he didn't have any choice about it! I suppose hypothetically he could have refused—but why would you ever want to, with a revelation like that?

That is how faith comes: God reveals Himself to us in some aspect of what He is doing, has done, or will do in His plan and purpose for the whole creation (which is always in connection with His Son), and God shows us what our involvement in that is to be, and we accept it. We believe God—we find ourselves in a faith-relationship with God—deep, complex and wonderful. We can never know what faith is, theoretically, from the outside. We can only know what faith is by being in it—by believing.

MATURITY: THE ASSURANCE OF THINGS HOPED FOR

You may be thinking, 'I haven't had an experience like Abraham'. That is probably because you are not Abraham—you are who you are! Whether Abraham or not, Paul the apostle says in Romans 10:17: 'faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ'. We hear God speaking to us in His word through Christ, and we know that we have been spoken to by God, and we are obedient to what we hear. That's faith.

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going (Heb. 11:8).

We make much of that 'not knowing where he was going', don't we? 'How noble is that—if only we could be like Abraham! Launch out into the darkness!' Read(or ing instead of and) on and you'll see that Abraham knew very well where he was going. God had shown him the stars! Abraham had seen by God's revelation the great family of God that is coming, that he was already a part of; what is called here the great 'city' of people, that is substantial and lasting, 'whose architect and builder is God' (Heb. 11:10). That is where Abraham was heading. That is why he was prepared to go anywhere God took him in the short term, whether he knew where it was in the short term or not:

By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise (Heb. 11:9).

Getting his family to Canaan wasn't what kept Abraham going. He had already seen way beyond that. That was only 'for a time'—even if it was for the next few generations, or even for the next few hundred years:

For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old--and Sarah herself was barren--because he considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, 'as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.' (Heb. 11:10–12).

You see: 'faith is the *assurance* of things hoped for, the *conviction* of things not seen (Heb. 11:1). That is very different from what we call 'a leap into the dark'. In the Bible the darkness is always the darkness of *unbelief*, of the refusal to be in a faith-relationship with God. That is when our 'senseless minds' are 'darkened' (Rom. 1:21); that is when we do not know what is what, even though we think we do (see Rom. 1:22; 1 Cor. 1:18ff). No—faith in God is stepping out into the light, onto the solid ground. What we can know of God is real to us—a little later in this chapter it speaks of Moses who by faith 'endured as *seeing* him who is invisible' (Heb. 11:27 RSV).

Some of us may be thinking: 'Well, I have heard the word, but I haven't been given the gift of faith'. You are right in saying that faith is a gift from God, but wrong in saying that you haven't been given it if you have heard the word. Inherent in the word of command that comes from God is the given ability to do what it says. Abraham was shown what will be, and in that revelation Abraham was given the faith to believe it. Isn't that how the creation came into being? God's spoken word brought into visibility and action and reality what had previously been invisible:

By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible (Heb. 11:3).

MATURITY: THE ASSURANCE OF THINGS HOPED FOR

God said, 'Let there be . . .', and there was (see Gen. 1). That's how it will be when He brings our dead bodies back to life in the resurrection (see Heb. 11:17–19)—which is why, when we are in faith, we do not need to be put out, even by death. That is how it is when God speaks to us the revelation in Christ that brings us to faith—we are brought out of the death of refusal and unbelief into the true life of faith. The **writer** of this letter has a warning for these Hebrews **in** this shaky situation: 'See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking' (Heb. 12:25). Don't stay in the refusal. Believe, and be in faith.

Particularly because, when we are in faith, we have something else which is worth more than all the stars in heaven. When we are in the faith-relationship with God, we have God's approval. We are in His good pleasure. God is pleased with us.

Think back to Genesis 15, when God showed Abraham the stars and how many descendents he was going to have, and Abraham believed God. There was something from God that came along with that:

he believed the **LORD**; and the **LORD** reckoned it to him as righteousness (Gen. 15:6).

How was that? Did God say, 'Oh, good boy, Abraham, for believing in me'? Was Abraham's obedient action of believing what made him righteous in God's sight? Hardly. We have already seen that any ability we have to believe and obey comes from God in the revealing and commanding word that He speaks to us. There was no righteousness in Abraham. As we have seen, in himself Abraham was an idolater and a refuser of faith—as we are—and Abraham's faith came, as it does with us, by the choice and the merciful action of God. The 'righteousness' referred to here does not come from Abraham, but from the one in whom Abraham believes. That is why it is said, 'the **LORD** reckoned it to him as righteousness'. Abraham's righteousness is by God's reckoning, not by Abraham's, or ours.

How could this be? Well, think what Abraham was now coming into: the uncountable family of God's children who will be holy and blameless before Him in love, shining like stars in the heavens. His own involvement in that is what Abraham was giving his assent to when he believed God. 'Holy and blameless before Him in love' means 'righteousness'. How in God's family do we sinners, Abraham included, get to be righteous before God? We've spoken of this a couple of times already in this series, but it covers and belongs to every session. We are righteous before God—He is pleased with us and we are in His good pleasure—on account of the great one who has made purification for our sins: Jesus, the Son of God, who died on a cross and in himself took away the sins of the world—our sins are reckoned to him, and his righteousness is reckoned to us. That is what Abraham was letting himself and his descendents in for when he believed God. As we said, God's revelation regarding His purpose for creation is never apart from His Son.

That is the way it has always been with sinners who believe. Abel offered a sacrifice to God that God accepted—God was pleased with Abel. His brother Cain and his offering, even though Cain went through the same outward actions as Abel had, was not acceptable to God. Here in Hebrews 11 we are told why: Abel offered his sacrifice 'by faith'. Abel knew the promise of God that a Saviour would come to crush all evil (Gen. 3:15), and he believed and trusted God for that, and so was in on that righteousness of God by God's saving gift, and was pleasing to God. Cain's inner attitude was shown by his later complaints and murderous actions: he was still refusing God's forgiveness and salvation, despite God's repeated offer and warnings. Enoch had a close and wonderful faith-relationship with God, by which he pleased God—so much so that one day God took Enoch home to the reward directly, without Enoch having to die! The sinner Noah also received from God a revelation

MATURITY: THE ASSURANCE OF THINGS HOPED FOR

of a coming event, and acted upon it by faith, and so was saved, not just from the flood, but also from his sin into the promised righteousness of God.

And so the moment Abraham believed, he was in on this righteousness from God—even though it was still 2,000 years before Christ would come. And for us, 2,000 years after Christ has come, it is the same. We believe in the revelation God has spoken to us in Christ, we are beneficiaries of God's great righteousness in Christ, we are in the uncountable children of God's great righteous family.

This is what more than keeps us going, in the face of all difficulties and reversals, in knowing and holding to the will of God, against all odds. This is what the Hebrews needed, to whom this letter was written, and this is what they got:

Do not, therefore, abandon that confidence of yours; it brings a great reward. For you need endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.

For yet 'in a very little while,

the one who is coming will come and will not delay;

— but my righteous one will live by faith.

My soul takes no pleasure in anyone who shrinks back.'

— But we are not among those who shrink back and so are lost, but among those who have faith and so are saved (Heb. 10:35–39).

This is how it has always been. Even before sin came into the world, we were only ever meant to relate with God by faith. Everything is from God, including whatever righteousness we are meant to have—we relate with God in love and trust for all of that. How else could we live but by faith? Knowing all that comes with it, how else would we ever want to live?

7. MATURITY: A FATHER'S DISCIPLINE

Hebrews 11:39–12:13

Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

— Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And you have forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as children—

‘My child, do not regard
lightly the discipline of the Lord,
or lose heart when you are
punished by him;

— for the Lord disciplines those
whom he loves,
and chastises every child
whom he accepts.’

Endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline? If you do not have that discipline in which all children share, then you are illegitimate and not his children. Moreover, we had human parents to discipline us, and we respected them. Should we not be even more willing to be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share his holiness. Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.

Over these weeks that we have been reading through this letter to the Hebrews, I wonder have we found ourselves getting to know these Christian brothers and sisters that this letter was written to all those hundreds of years ago, even though we have not met them? Have we sensed something of what they were going through? Have we felt some sympathy for them, and perhaps have been identifying with them to a certain extent? Would that be true?

Their situation comes out very clearly in this part of the letter. They are in danger of becoming weary and of losing heart (see Heb. 12:3). Their hands are drooping, their knees are weak, and their feet are lame (see Heb. 12:12–13). Hands are what we do things with; but their hands are drooping—they feel that they are not able to do much or achieve anything very worthwhile. We have strong knees so that we can stand up straight; but their knees are **weak**—they feel that they are not able to stand tall, or to keep it up. We use our feet to go places; but their feet are lame—they feel that they are not able to make much progress, or that, if they do, it will only make things worse. So they go back, or stay where they are, keep their heads down, and hope for the best.

We've seen that this has been their situation right through this letter, and we have heard some of the wonderful things the writer of this letter has reminded them of, to get them out of it: the greatness and supremacy of Jesus; the purification he has made for all our sins; the voice of God speaking to us every day of the love and mercy and grace of the gospel, that we are obliged to hear; the sure and eternal nature and effectiveness of our great high priest Jesus—our ‘Melchizedek’—and of the salvation that is ours in him; the single offering he has made, that needs no religious repetition on our part; and the sureness and certainty of our

MATURITY: A FATHER'S DISCIPLINE

hope, that we have from God by faith. All these wonderful things are more than antidotes to their chronic malaise that they had got themselves into under pressure, and that we get ourselves into from time to time.

But the time comes, with all of that being true, that we need to say to people: now get over it, and get on with it! That is what our writer is doing in this part of the letter. At one point, he is almost brutal. He says, 'You're not dead yet!' He puts it more nicely than that:

In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood (Heb. 12:4).

It amounts to the same thing: You're not dead yet, so get on with it!

He gives them here three things to encourage them—and we can be encouraged by them too:

- We are not alone—there are plenty of others in this with us.
- We have Jesus, who has prepared the way and seen it through to the end for us.
- We have a Father in heaven, who is dealing with us personally, in love and discipline, in everything that is happening in our lives.

Let's take those one at a time.

Firstly, we are not alone. There are plenty of others with us in this. Sometimes people say when something difficult is happening: 'Oh well, there's always someone worse off than yourself!' I find that cold comfort. It's like saying, 'We're all in the same boat—and the boat is sinking!' Not a lot of hope or helpfulness there. This is saying something different. Paul the apostle said: 'No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone' (1 Cor. 10:13). Jesus said: 'If they persecuted me, they will persecute you' (John 15:20). Here in Hebrews, those who are with us are actually doing something with us. They are called 'a great cloud of witnesses':

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us (Heb. 12:1).

The picture I used to have of that was like being in the Olympic stadium running the 3,000 metres, and there are all the witnesses in the stands, maybe even all those who have done it before us, cheering us on. I've come to see that is not how it is at all. That is a very self-centred, even grandiose, picture. We have to ask what the witnesses are witnessing to. And it may not be us at all. In the Bible, witnesses are always those who bear witness to the mighty acts of God. And that is what this great cloud of witnesses are doing. They are telling us about what God has done. They are giving their testimony to what they know of God in their lives and in their sufferings. And they are pointing us to Jesus.

The reference is, of course, to those we have just looked at in chapter 11: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, and so on—all those who looked by faith to God and to what He would do to bring the world to come, where all their hopes were fixed, and who suffered deprivation and persecution in this world as a result. They are telling us that it is worth it, and the reward is sure.

One of them, from the Christian era, is Polycarp. Have you heard of Polycarp? We need to read church history, and biographies of the saints, and missionaries, and get from them the encouragement they have for us. Polycarp was an old man among the Christians at Smyrna in Asia Minor. This is from an account written in 156 A.D.:

The proconsul . . . said to him, 'Swear [by the genius of Caesar] and I will release you! Curse Christ!'

MATURITY: A FATHER'S DISCIPLINE

And Polycarp answered, 'Eighty-six years I have served him, and he has never done me any harm. How could I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?'

They took him out to burn him alive, which he went to with great dignity and serenity. He is witnessing to us in his life and with his death of the worthwhile faithfulness of our King and Saviour Jesus Christ.

We are told something else about the Old Testament people of faith. They died, encouraged and commended in their faith, without having received the promise they were believing in and hoping for, that was still to come. We are told the amazing reason for that, according to God's purposes. They will not be able to take up the promise, until we are there with them. Because the promise of the coming world is for us no less than for them. God is going to bring us all to it together. They will not be complete in it, until we have joined them:

Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect (Heb. 11:39-40).

Fancy Abraham waiting for us before he could be complete and perfect in God's plan! That is what we are a part of. How encouraging is that?

Plus, look at the one they are pointing us to. This is the second point of encouragement:

looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith (Heb. 12:2).

This follows the great list in chapter 11 of those who had faith. Jesus is not just another example of faith. Jesus is our faith from beginning to end. He is the one our faith is in, from start to finish. Even all those who had faith, who came before Jesus, were actually trusting him in one way or another, and aligning themselves with him. One of those was Moses, who abandoned the pleasures of being an Egyptian prince in the household of Pharaoh to identify himself with the abused Hebrew slaves. But who does the writer say Moses was suffering for?

He considered abuse suffered for the Christ [or the Messiah] to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking ahead to the reward (Heb. 11:26).

It is saying that Moses did that because he already had his eye on the coming Messiah, and on all the promises of God that would be fulfilled in him. Indeed, we are told that the Father had His eye on the Son and his sacrifice as the centrepiece of His plan for creation before the foundation of the world. The apostle Peter says:

You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish. He was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake. Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God (1 Pet. 1:18-21).

Jesus is the one who makes our faith in God possible, and brings it through to its conclusion and reward.

So Jesus is called here 'the pioneer and perfecter of our faith'. The pioneer is one who hacks his way through the jungle and builds bridges over the rivers to make a road for the rest of the troops to follow. That's what the pioneer detachments in the army do. That's the sort of thing we used to do when we did 'pioneering' in the Boy Scouts. Jesus has come and has

MATURITY: A FATHER'S DISCIPLINE

hacked his way through the jungle of human sin and evil, even to the pits, and made his way through and out of them, for us to follow. And the perfecter of something is the one who puts the finishing touches in place, who brings the whole project to its completion. Jesus is both pioneer and perfecter. He has done the lot. That is why we follow him by faith, all the way that he has opened and completed for us.

One of the things Jesus shows us is how to conduct ourselves in suffering and adverse circumstances. So it was especially important for these Hebrews in their situation to look to Jesus for that:

looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart (Heb. 12:2–3).

What do we get from looking at Jesus in his suffering? It is not how he just stoically put up with it and bore it. We see what was driving him and carrying him through it. What was 'the joy that was set before him'? Not just his personal vindication in ending up at the right hand of the throne of God. It was what we saw back in chapter 2. The joy that was set before Jesus by which he endured the cross was the work of 'bringing many children to glory' (Heb. 2:10). It was: 'Here am I and the children whom God has given me' (Heb. 2:13). It was us, and all those of faith, peopling the world that is to come. With that set before us, already pioneered and perfected by Christ, we can endure and prevail with all those who have held to the faith that he has wrought. (You know what 'wrought iron' is: iron that has been bent into shape. This is 'wrought faith', faith that has been bent into shape by Jesus.)

The third thing that the writer gives these Hebrews to encourage them out of the doldrums is perhaps the best of all: We have a Father in heaven, who is dealing with us personally, in love and discipline, in everything that is happening in our lives. That is the best thing we can ever know. Here's what he says:

And you have forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as children—

'My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
or lose heart when you are punished by him;

— for the Lord disciplines those whom he loves, and chastises every child whom he accepts.'
(Heb. 12:5–6).

When difficult things happen to us, it makes a world of difference to us if we know what is happening, and why. We get an undiagnosed pain, and we go to the doctor, and he or she gives it a name—even a Latin name—and suddenly we feel much better about it. Especially if there is a treatment for it—we know what it is that we have got, and we know what can be done about it. The pain is exactly the same as it was before, but somehow it already feels better. And a lot of that has to do with our trust in the doctor, as the one who is reliable, and can say what is best for us—even if it is going to involve radical surgery.

So, what a difference it makes to us to find out that what is happening to us is not the result of chance, or adverse circumstances, or some malign influence, but is the loving and disciplining action of God our heavenly Father. If bad things are going to happen to me, I think I would much rather have them coming from the hands of my heavenly Father, than from the hands of anyone or anything else.

Of course, that is assuming that I know God as my heavenly Father, who loves me, and works in all things for our good (as in Rom. 8:28). I will know that if it has come to me that 'did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us', and so 'with him also give

MATURITY: A FATHER'S DISCIPLINE

us everything else' (Rom. 8:32). If God loved His Son more than He loved us, He would have held back His Son from the cross, and been happy for all of us to go to hell. But the fact that he gave His Son for us shows us that God loves us no less than He loves His own Son, and all that He would do for His Son He will do for us.

Some people, out of a concern to present God in a good light, seek to insulate God from the bad things that happen. 'God doesn't make bad things happen', they say. 'He loves us too much for that. When bad things happen, of course He rescues us from them. But He doesn't make them happen.' So who does make them happen? The devil? Human evil? That may well be so. Or blind forces, such as 'chance', or 'destiny', or 'karma'? Well, then does God have no control over all these things? Has He not made them all? Does God not order all things according to the purposes of His will (see Eph. 1:11)? As I said, if bad things are going to happen to me, I think I would much rather have them coming from the hands of my heavenly Father, than from the hands of anyone or anything else.

You see, if we think otherwise, our God is too small—He can't handle the difficult things. Even with our own children we do better than that. Given that our children are not perfect all the time—as we ourselves are not—we do not think that it is best just to indulge our children all the time, whatever they want. We discipline them. We don't always do it consistently or well. Sometimes we just lose our cool. But are we then going to say that God should not do that with us? Especially since God does not lose His cool, but always acts, on the large scale, consistently and well. So the writer brings something very positive to these Hebrews when he says:

Endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline? If you do not have that discipline in which all children share, then you are illegitimate and not his children. Moreover, we had human parents to discipline us, and we respected them. Should we not be even more willing to be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share his holiness (Heb. 12:7–10).

The writer here is not giving an explanation or a rationale. When we are going through difficult things we need more than just an explanation or a rationale. He is telling us something very positive about being in trusting relationship with our heavenly Father in these difficult things: 'be subject to the Father of spirits and live'!

Of course, it is never easy at the time, and we won't always see it that way, but that is all the more reason why we need to take these words to heart at times when we can receive them:

Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it (Heb. 12:11).

Of course, if any of us still have a bit of a thing against God, and if we still haven't repented of our sins and come into His great forgiveness, and if we are still trying to justify ourselves by doing all sorts of things to get ourselves right without coming to God—if that is where we are, then we will use anything difficult that happens as a black mark against God, that will justify our continued resistance to His grace. Sometimes children try that with their parents. But how silly and shortsighted is that? Not a lot of encouragement in that.

Let us be encouraged rather by these three things that the writer gives to these Hebrews, and to us:

- We are not alone—there are plenty of others in this with us.
- We have Jesus, who has prepared the way and seen it through to the end for us.

MATURITY: A FATHER'S DISCIPLINE

- We have a Father in heaven, who is dealing with us personally, in love and discipline, in everything that is happening in our lives.

And so:

Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed (Heb. 12:12–13).

8. MATURITY: A FATHER'S DISCIPLINE

Hebrews 11:39–12:13

Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

— Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And you have forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as children—

‘My child, do not regard
lightly the discipline of the Lord,
or lose heart when you are
punished by him;

— for the Lord disciplines those
whom he loves,
and chastises every child
whom he accepts.’

Endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline? If you do not have that discipline in which all children share, then you are illegitimate and not his children. Moreover, we had human parents to discipline us, and we respected them. Should we not be even more willing to be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share his holiness. Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.

Over these weeks that we have been reading through this letter to the Hebrews, I wonder have we found ourselves getting to know these Christian brothers and sisters that this letter was written to all those hundreds of years ago, even though we have not met them? Have we sensed something of what they were going through? Have we felt some sympathy for them, and perhaps have been identifying with them to a certain extent? Would that be true?

Their situation comes out very clearly in this part of the letter. They are in danger of becoming weary and of losing heart (see Heb. 12:3). Their hands are drooping, their knees are weak, and their feet are lame (see Heb. 12:12–13). Hands are what we do things with; but their hands are drooping—they feel that they are not able to do much or achieve anything very worthwhile. We have strong knees so that we can stand up straight; but their knees are **weak**—they feel that they are not able to stand tall, or to keep it up. We use our feet to go places; but their feet are lame—they feel that they are not able to make much progress, or that, if they do, it will only make things worse. So they go back, or stay where they are, keep their heads down, and hope for the best.

We've seen that this has been their situation right through this letter, and we have heard some of the wonderful things the writer of this letter has reminded them of, to get them out of it: the greatness and supremacy of Jesus; the purification he has made for all our sins; the voice of God speaking to us every day of the love and mercy and grace of the gospel, that we are obliged to hear; the sure and eternal nature and effectiveness of our great high priest Jesus—our 'Melchizedek'—and of the salvation that is ours in him; the single offering he has made, that needs no religious repetition on our part; and the sureness and certainty of our

MATURITY: A FATHER'S DISCIPLINE

hope, that we have from God by faith. All these wonderful things are more than antidotes to their chronic malaise that they had got themselves into under pressure, and that we get ourselves into from time to time.

But the time comes, with all of that being true, that we need to say to people: now get over it, and get on with it! That is what our writer is doing in this part of the letter. At one point, he is almost brutal. He says, 'You're not dead yet!' He puts it more nicely than that:

In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood (Heb. 12:4).

It amounts to the same thing: You're not dead yet, so get on with it!

He gives them here three things to encourage them—and we can be encouraged by them too:

- We are not alone—there are plenty of others in this with us.
- We have Jesus, who has prepared the way and seen it through to the end for us.
- We have a Father in heaven, who is dealing with us personally, in love and discipline, in everything that is happening in our lives.

Let's take those one at a time.

Firstly, we are not alone. There are plenty of others with us in this. Sometimes people say when something difficult is happening: 'Oh well, there's always someone worse off than yourself!' I find that cold comfort. It's like saying, 'We're all in the same boat—and the boat is sinking!' Not a lot of hope or helpfulness there. This is saying something different. Paul the apostle said: 'No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone' (1 Cor. 10:13). Jesus said: 'If they persecuted me, they will persecute you' (John 15:20). Here in Hebrews, those who are with us are actually doing something with us. They are called 'a great cloud of witnesses':

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us (Heb. 12:1).

The picture I used to have of that was like being in the Olympic stadium running the 3,000 metres, and there are all the witnesses in the stands, maybe even all those who have done it before us, cheering us on. I've come to see that is not how it is at all. That is a very self-centred, even grandiose, picture. We have to ask what the witnesses are witnessing to. And it may not be us at all. In the Bible, witnesses are always those who bear witness to the mighty acts of God. And that is what this great cloud of witnesses are doing. They are telling us about what God has done. They are giving their testimony to what they know of God in their lives and in their sufferings. And they are pointing us to Jesus.

The reference is, of course, to those we have just looked at in chapter 11: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, and so on—all those who looked by faith to God and to what He would do to bring the world to come, where all their hopes were fixed, and who suffered deprivation and persecution in this world as a result. They are telling us that it is worth it, and the reward is sure.

One of them, from the Christian era, is Polycarp. Have you heard of Polycarp? We need to read church history, and biographies of the saints, and missionaries, and get from them the encouragement they have for us. Polycarp was an old man among the Christians at Smyrna in Asia Minor. This is from an account written in 156 A.D.:

The proconsul . . . said to him, 'Swear [by the genius of Caesar] and I will release you! Curse Christ!'

MATURITY: A FATHER'S DISCIPLINE

And Polycarp answered, 'Eighty-six years I have served him, and he has never done me any harm. How could I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?'

They took him out to burn him alive, which he went to with great dignity and serenity. He is witnessing to us in his life and with his death of the worthwhile faithfulness of our King and Saviour Jesus Christ.

We are told something else about the Old Testament people of faith. They died, encouraged and commended in their faith, without having received the promise they were believing in and hoping for, that was still to come. We are told the amazing reason for that, according to God's purposes. They will not be able to take up the promise, until we are there with them. Because the promise of the coming world is for us no less than for them. God is going to bring us all to it together. They will not be complete in it, until we have joined them:

Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect (Heb. 11:39-40).

Fancy Abraham waiting for us before he could be complete and perfect in God's plan! That is what we are a part of. How encouraging is that?

Plus, look at the one they are pointing us to. This is the second point of encouragement:

looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith (Heb. 12:2).

This follows the great list in chapter 11 of those who had faith. Jesus is not just another example of faith. Jesus is our faith from beginning to end. He is the one our faith is in, from start to finish. Even all those who had faith, who came before Jesus, were actually trusting him in one way or another, and aligning themselves with him. One of those was Moses, who abandoned the pleasures of being an Egyptian prince in the household of Pharaoh to identify himself with the abused Hebrew slaves. But who does the writer say Moses was suffering for?

He considered abuse suffered for the Christ [or the Messiah] to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking ahead to the reward (Heb. 11:26).

It is saying that Moses did that because he already had his eye on the coming Messiah, and on all the promises of God that would be fulfilled in him. Indeed, we are told that the Father had His eye on the Son and his sacrifice as the centrepiece of His plan for creation before the foundation of the world. The apostle Peter says:

You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish. He was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake. Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God (1 Pet. 1:18-21).

Jesus is the one who makes our faith in God possible, and brings it through to its conclusion and reward.

So Jesus is called here 'the pioneer and perfecter of our faith'. The pioneer is one who hacks his way through the jungle and builds bridges over the rivers to make a road for the rest of the troops to follow. That's what the pioneer detachments in the army do. That's the sort of thing we used to do when we did 'pioneering' in the Boy Scouts. Jesus has come and has

MATURITY: A FATHER'S DISCIPLINE

hacked his way through the jungle of human sin and evil, even to the pits, and made his way through and out of them, for us to follow. And the perfecter of something is the one who puts the finishing touches in place, who brings the whole project to its completion. Jesus is both pioneer and perfecter. He has done the lot. That is why we follow him by faith, all the way that he has opened and completed for us.

One of the things Jesus shows us is how to conduct ourselves in suffering and adverse circumstances. So it was especially important for these Hebrews in their situation to look to Jesus for that:

looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart (Heb. 12:2-3).

What do we get from looking at Jesus in his suffering? It is not how he just stoically put up with it and bore it. We see what was driving him and carrying him through it. What was 'the joy that was set before him'? Not just his personal vindication in ending up at the right hand of the throne of God. It was what we saw back in chapter 2. The joy that was set before Jesus by which he endured the cross was the work of 'bringing many children to glory' (Heb. 2:10). It was: 'Here am I and the children whom God has given me' (Heb. 2:13). It was us, and all those of faith, peopling the world that is to come. With that set before us, already pioneered and perfected by Christ, we can endure and prevail with all those who have held to the faith that he has wrought. (You know what 'wrought iron' is: iron that has been bent into shape. This is 'wrought faith', faith that has been bent into shape by Jesus.)

The third thing that the writer gives these Hebrews to encourage them out of the doldrums is perhaps the best of all: We have a Father in heaven, who is dealing with us personally, in love and discipline, in everything that is happening in our lives. That is the best thing we can ever know. Here's what he says:

And you have forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as children—
 'My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
 or lose heart when you are punished by him;
— for the Lord disciplines those whom he loves, and chastises every child whom he accepts.'
(Heb. 12:5-6).

When difficult things happen to us, it makes a world of difference to us if we know what is happening, and why. We get an undiagnosed pain, and we go to the doctor, and he or she gives it a name—even a Latin name—and suddenly we feel much better about it. Especially if there is a treatment for it—we know what it is that we have got, and we know what can be done about it. The pain is exactly the same as it was before, but somehow it already feels better. And a lot of that has to do with our trust in the doctor, as the one who is reliable, and can say what is best for us—even if it is going to involve radical surgery.

So, what a difference it makes to us to find out that what is happening to us is not the result of chance, or adverse circumstances, or some malign influence, but is the loving and disciplining action of God our heavenly Father. If bad things are going to happen to me, I think I would much rather have them coming from the hands of my heavenly Father, than from the hands of anyone or anything else.

Of course, that is assuming that I know God as my heavenly Father, who loves me, and works in all things for our good (as in Rom. 8:28). I will know that if it has come to me that 'did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us', and so 'with him also give

MATURITY: A FATHER'S DISCIPLINE

us everything else' (Rom. 8:32). If God loved His Son more than He loved us, He would have held back His Son from the cross, and been happy for all of us to go to hell. But the fact that he gave His Son for us shows us that God loves us no less than He loves His own Son, and all that He would do for His Son He will do for us.

Some people, out of a concern to present God in a good light, seek to insulate God from the bad things that happen. 'God doesn't make bad things happen', they say. 'He loves us too much for that. When bad things happen, of course He rescues us from them. But He doesn't make them happen.' So who does make them happen? The devil? Human evil? That may well be so. Or blind forces, such as 'chance', or 'destiny', or 'karma'? Well, then does God have no control over all these things? Has He not made them all? Does God not order all things according to the purposes of His will (see Eph. 1:11)? As I said, if bad things are going to happen to me, I think I would much rather have them coming from the hands of my heavenly Father, than from the hands of anyone or anything else.

You see, if we think otherwise, our God is too small—He can't handle the difficult things. Even with our own children we do better than that. Given that our children are not perfect all the time—as we ourselves are not—we do not think that it is best just to indulge our children all the time, whatever they want. We discipline them. We don't always do it consistently or well. Sometimes we just lose our cool. But are we then going to say that God should not do that with us? Especially since God does not lose His cool, but always acts, on the large scale, consistently and well. So the writer brings something very positive to these Hebrews when he says:

Endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline? If you do not have that discipline in which all children share, then you are illegitimate and not his children. Moreover, we had human parents to discipline us, and we respected them. Should we not be even more willing to be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share his holiness (Heb. 12:7–10).

The writer here is not giving an explanation or a rationale. When we are going through difficult things we need more than just an explanation or a rationale. He is telling us something very positive about being in trusting relationship with our heavenly Father in these difficult things: 'be subject to the Father of spirits and live'!

Of course, it is never easy at the time, and we won't always see it that way, but that is all the more reason why we need to take these words to heart at times when we can receive them:

Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it (Heb. 12:11).

Of course, if any of us still have a bit of a thing against God, and if we still haven't repented of our sins and come into His great forgiveness, and if we are still trying to justify ourselves by doing all sorts of things to get ourselves right without coming to God—if that is where we are, then we will use anything difficult that happens as a black mark against God, that will justify our continued resistance to His grace. Sometimes children try that with their parents. But how silly and shortsighted is that? Not a lot of encouragement in that.

Let us be encouraged rather by these three things that the writer gives to these Hebrews, and to us:

- We are not alone—there are plenty of others in this with us.
- We have Jesus, who has prepared the way and seen it through to the end for us.

MATURITY: A FATHER'S DISCIPLINE

- We have a Father in heaven, who is dealing with us personally, in love and discipline, in everything that is happening in our lives.

And so:

Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed (Heb. 12:12–13).

9. MATURITY: MUTUAL LOVE

Hebrews 12:14–13:8

Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and through it many become defiled. See to it that no one becomes like Esau, an immoral and godless person, who sold his birthright for a single meal. You know that later, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, even though he sought the blessing with tears.

— You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. (For they could not endure the order that was given, 'If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death.' Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, 'I tremble with fear.') But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking; for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven! At that time his voice shook the earth; but now he has promised, 'Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven.' This phrase, 'Yet once more,' indicates the removal of what is shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire.

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. Let marriage be held in honour by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you.' So we can say with confidence,

'The Lord is my helper;

I will not be afraid.

What can anyone do to me?'

— Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

Here we are at the last of our eight-week series on the Letter to the Hebrews, and where have we come to?

The writer tells these Hebrews where they have come to. But first he tells them where they haven't come to:

You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them (Heb. 12:18–19).

Where was that? That was Mount Sinai, where God came and gave them His law—the 'ten commandments'. This is what the Hebrews had gone back to, in their opting for comfort and security and familiarity. The writer is saying: the one place you have not come back to is Mount Sinai.

Why is that? Is there something wrong with God's law? Not at all. God's law is always the good expression of God as He is in Himself, as He is in His love towards us, and as we are to be towards God and towards one another. So there is nothing wrong with God's

MATURITY: MUTUAL LOVE

law. But if we are sinners, who have not kept God's law—and that goes for all of us—then no amount of trying to keep God's law after that is going to save us. All God's law can do after that is show us where we have gone wrong, and condemn us for it. Once we have become sinners—and that goes for all of us—God's law is a fearful thing. The Hebrews were a mob of sinners when they first heard God's law at Sinai. That is why it was such a terrifying experience for them:

a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. (For they could not endure the order that was given, 'If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death.' Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, 'I tremble with fear') (Heb. 12:18–21).

(For Moses was a sinner as well.)

So why would these Hebrews have wanted to go back there to the law of God? Well, I guess they figured that, if we are sinners and have broken God's law, maybe we can make it up now by keeping it—if we now keep it really really well. It can't work that way—we have already said that once we have broken God's law, no amount of trying to keep it after that is going to make it right. We are going to need something else better than that to save us now. Something outside ourselves. But such is our fleshly pride that, if we think that there's any chance of us doing it ourselves, we'll try to go that way, whatever it may cost, even if it kills us, before we ask for any outside help. If we think there is the slightest possibility that we ourselves can keep the law of God and make things right by doing that, then we will try to keep doing that as long as there is any breath left in our body. We have to totally deceive ourselves to do it—but we're good at that. We will even face the 'blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest', and put a brave face on it, before we give in and ask to be saved.

As long as we are doing that, of course, we are refusing everything that God has done to save us, and we are using God's own law to do that, which goes completely against everything that God is on about in His law, and only makes the matter much worse. God never gave us His law so we could do that with it—use it against Him, to refuse what He has done to save us. And so we are condemned all the more. Early in this letter the writer warned these Hebrews that if the law 'was valid, and every transgression or disobedience received a just penalty, how can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?' (Heb. 2:2–3). The writer is saying: that is where you are headed if you are looking to your own keeping of God's law to save you now. Do not go back there.

Besides, he says—because he is talking to people who have actually believed in Jesus:

who have once been enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come (Heb. 6:4–5)

—you have already come, he says, to another place. Where have we come to, if our faith is in Jesus, who has 'made purification for sins' (Heb. 1:3)?

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem (Heb. 12:22).

We find ourselves now in the great company of God's people, who already belong to God's purified coming world—we are now tasting 'the powers of the age to come'! You have come:

to innumerable angels in festal gathering (Heb. 12:22).

MATURITY: MUTUAL LOVE

We are surrounded by mobs of angels, who are all celebrating. What is it that makes for 'joy in the presence of the angels of God'? 'One sinner who repents' (Luke 15:10)! The angels are overjoyed at what God has done when they see that we have given up trying to do it ourselves and have accepted God's great saving act in Christ. Not only that, but you have come:

to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven (Heb. 12:23).

Who is the firstborn? The one who receives the inheritance. Who is God's firstborn? His one and only Son Jesus. We have come into the inheritance of the one and only firstborn Son of God! Because, on the cross, God has shown that He loves us no less than He loves His own firstborn Son, and so all that is his is ours. 'All things are yours'! (See Rom. 8:32; 1 Cor. 3:21–25).

So where have we come? You have come:

to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect (Heb. 12:23).

'To God the judge of all'—isn't that getting back to the scariness of Mount Sinai? Not if we are before God as 'the spirits of the righteous made perfect'—because listen to what the Judge says to us then: 'your guilt is taken away, and your sin forgiven' (Isa. 6:7 RSV). 'You are my beloved child, with whom I am well pleased' (as in Luke 3:22).

How is all this possible? It is because we have come:

to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (Heb. 12:24).

Abel was murdered by his brother (see Gen. 4:8–10). As the old hymn says:

Abel's blood for vengeance
Pleaded to the skies

—that is the best the law can do for us, once we have broken it—

But the blood of Jesus
For our pardon cries.¹

He has 'made purification for sins' (Heb. 1:3).

That is where we have come. Once we have come there, we can never go back—not without ending up in an even worse position:

See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking; for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven! (Heb. 12:25).

But where we have come is more wonderful and more lasting than anywhere else. It is the only solid ground anywhere in the universe. Outside of that is only the 'lake of fire' (Rev. 20:14–15):

At that time his voice shook the earth; but now he has promised, 'Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven.' This phrase, 'Yet once more,' indicates the removal of what is shaken—that

¹ Tr. Edward Caswall. 'Glory be to Jesus', *New Creation Hymn Book* 66.

MATURITY: MUTUAL LOVE

is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire (Heb. 12:26–29).

There is something very practical that comes out of all of this, and this is the final aspect of maturity that we are looking at in this letter today: it is mutual love. At Hebrews 12:14 he says:

Pursue peace with everyone

and at 13:1 he says:

Let mutual love continue.

What has that got to do with what we have just been talking about, and how does it follow? What we have just been talking about is the enormous love of God that has come to us in His great salvation and the forgiveness of all our sins. That is where we have come to. It follows now that we operate always and only in and out of all of that in our relationships with each other. Has someone done something to offend or hurt you? Is what they have done as bad as what we have all done against God and received total forgiveness for? If God's total forgiveness is what we are in, can we withhold one little bit of forgiveness from any other person? If this is the great love that we are in from God, are we saying that there is not enough love for us to love every other person in the world? See how it follows? Not just logically, but in real experience. We find that we are in that love and forgiveness, and we find that we can have it for others, and that we want to.

What gets in the way of that? It doesn't only say, 'Pursue peace with everyone'. It also says:

and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord (Heb. 12:14).

'Holiness' is all that God is, that He imparts to us, that we might be with Him in all that He is doing. What gets in the way of total forgiveness and love for each other is settling for less than all that God has for us. That is what Jacob's brother Esau did. What could he have had? Esau could have had the full blessing and inheritance of God, promised to his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac. What did Esau opt for instead? Something to fill his belly:

See to it that no one becomes like Esau, an immoral and godless person, who sold his birthright for a single meal. You know that later, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, even though he sought the blessing with tears (Heb. 12:16–17).

To settle for something less than all that God has given to us, as these Hebrews were tempted to do, means we are back into trying to do things for ourselves and get what we can for ourselves, and that is poisonous for relationships with each other, because that is when we begin to fear that there won't be enough to go round, and we start to look after ourselves before we look after each other. That is what the writer calls a 'root of bitterness'. The antidote to that is to ensure that everyone comes into all that God has for us, and never settles for anything less:

See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and through it many become defiled (Heb. 12:15).

MATURITY: MUTUAL LOVE

So here we are, all in the great grace of God, knowing the totality of His forgiveness and the fullness of His love. How do we 'pursue peace with everyone', and how do we 'let mutual love continue'? It sounds like it could be all very general and nice and aery-faery. But the writer to these Hebrews prevents it from ever becoming that, by showing how it works out in five very practical ways:

hospitality—having people in our homes;
being one with those who are suffering imprisonment and torture for their faith;
being faithful in marriage;
being free from the love of money; and
being mindful of our church leaders.

That spells it out, and earths it in very practical ways, does it not? This is what it means to be mature in mutual love.

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it (Heb. 13:2).

The reference here is probably to the time Abraham served a meal to three men who came to his tent. They turned out to be messengers from God—maybe even God Himself (see Gen. 18:1–19:1). Having other people in our home is of that order, and that significance.

Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured (Heb. 13:2).

'Those who are in prison' and 'being tortured' are likely to be fellow Christians suffering for their faith (as in Heb. 10:32–34). There is no shortage of people to whom that is happening in our world today. It is not for us to dissociate ourselves from them, just because at the moment it is not happening to them and not to us. We are part of the same body.

Let marriage be held in honour by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers (Heb. 13:4).

You can't get any closer in living together than with husband and wife. If love and forgiveness and faithfulness are not happening big-time there, where else can we expect them to happen?

Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have (Heb. 13:5).

Concern about and attachment to money is one of the easiest ways we can slip back into just looking after ourselves and settling for so much less than all that God has for us. It is basically a lack of trust in God, and a refusal to believe that He will see us through:

for he has said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you.' So we can say with confidence,
 'The Lord is my helper;
 I will not be afraid.
 What can anyone do to me?' (Heb. 13:5–6).

And finally, in the area of mature mutual love, are the ones who are responsible for continually reminding us of these things:

Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith (Heb. 13:7).

MATURITY: MUTUAL LOVE

And here is one of those leaders, signing off here for the time being. But not before pointing you again to the one from whom it all comes:

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever (Heb. 13:8).

God bless you all.