

Hebrews 10: 19-25

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[0 : 0 0] Let us pray. Grant, Lord, we ask that your word may be our rule, your spirit may be our teacher, and your greater glory, our supreme concern, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Well, thank you, Martin, for the invitation to come and preach today, and thank you all for your welcome and also generous hospitality. It's a joy to come and visit Glasgow.

The reason for this visit may be something that one or two of you are asking in your mind, and really it's to support and offer encouragement to Martin and Cathy as they embark on important new ministry here at St Silas with you.

The diocese of Blackburn, where they were before, is, I have to say, very sad to have lost them. In fact, we did all that we could to hold on to them and to prevent them coming here or considering other possibilities.

But God prevailed, and this door opened, and it's right that they're here, and we've come to offer our support and encouragement to them as they begin this ministry.

[1 : 1 1] Our loss is your gain. So that's the reason for a visit, really. It's a kind of handing of Martin and Cathy over, because they've been with us, and now we're handing them on.

It's a little bit after the time, but it's a sense of passing them on to you for your care and your keeping. And the reading for today from the letter to the Hebrews gives us some helpful ways in which we can do that.

The letter to the Hebrews is often called the Salad Epistle. Do any of you know why it's called the Salad Epistle? It's full of let-uses. Well done. Very good.

Okay. Oh, dear. That's a bad one, isn't it? All right. And in fact, in our reading, there were five let-uses at the beginning, five let-us statements, each inviting and persuading the reader to keep going in the faith, in spite of troubles, persecution, in spite of the temptation to give up.

It's a letter about persevering in the faith right through to the end. And so determination and resilience are signs of genuine faith.

[2 : 2 5] It's important to finish well as well as to start well. So we find ourselves, I think, in being the people of God in the West these days in rather challenging times.

The authority and the interpretation of Scripture is being challenged in many circles within the church these days. And I think it's important that we stand up, we stand by, and we stand for this unique revelation that God has given of who he is and what he's done and what he requires.

I always preach with an open Bible in my hand in order to make the point that I'm not passing on my thoughts, but seeking to teach what I have found within Scripture so that we can hear what God is wanting us to hear.

And nothing could be more important in the light of the tragic events of this week in Italy or on the beaches around our country.

None of us should assume or presume that there will be a tomorrow. In the past, we used to say about a future arrangement, DV or Deo Valenti or God willing.

[3 : 44] We don't hear that very often these days. In fact, it sounds rather pious if we were to say it. But it makes a point and should be part of our witness.

Acknowledging that however much we may think we control our lives, in fact, circumstances reveal that we do not. Life is full of surprises and the unexpected and none of us knows what is round the next corner.

And so in the light of that, it's important for us to hear what God has to say to us. And up to this point in the letter to the Hebrews, the writer has offered an exposition of the gospel. And he comes in verse 19 of chapter 10 to a therefore.

And every time we come across a therefore in the Bible, we must ask what it's there for. Because there's a reason that it's there. And that is because of all that's gone before.

And so chapter 10 and verse 19 is a turning point in this letter to the Hebrews. And there's always that important link between doctrine and belief on the one hand and behaviour and practice on the other.

[4 : 56] We believe this, this and this. Therefore, and that's Hebrews chapter 10 and verse 19. Up to this point, he's explained that the gospel is about what God has done for us in Christ.

It's not so much primarily what we have done for God, but rather what he, graciously in Christ, has done for us. And if you read carefully through chapter 10, you'll see a number of references to the sacrifice that Jesus made once for all upon the cross.

As a sacrifice for the sins of the world. And then the conclusion that God is able then to say, I will remember their sins no more.

There's something unique about the cross of Calvary that is the good news of what God has done for us in Christ. And having explained that in great detail, he then says, well, if that's the case, certain things follow.

And it's those certain things that follow. I want us just to ponder on for a few moments this morning. From Hebrews 10, 19 to 25. First is, the gospel invites us to be confident in our relationship with God.

[6 : 12] He's been explaining, as I've said, how the sacrifice of Jesus has opened up a new and a living way into the presence of God. It's what he calls here a holy place.

And in light of what Jesus has done, a way to be in relationship with God has now been opened up that was not possible before.

And so he says, let us draw near to God. What has been made possible through his death on the cross should not be left unused or unwanted.

Let's take advantage of that new and living way. Let's come into the presence of God to worship him, to listen to his word and to pray, sometimes on our own and sometimes with others.

And it is the great privilege of every Christian to be able to enter that most holy of places. The very presence of almighty God, our creator, our redeemer and the judge of all the world.

[7 : 25] And to do so, he says here, with full assurance of faith. This, of course, is one of the big changes from the Old Testament to the New Testament.

Whereas it was only the high priest who went only once a year into the holy of holies in the temple. Jesus' death tore the separating curtain in two from top to bottom.

You know why it was from top to bottom? If it was from bottom to top, somebody could have said, we did it. But it was from top to bottom. God did it. It was the work of Christ. So that we might come into the presence of God.

And all people might have that open access. So it's not just something for clergy, for people on the staff at a church, or any particular kind of person. But all are now able to draw near to God and enter that most holy place.

And that's what we do when we pray. We enter that most holy place. Talking to our Father who is in heaven. And as church today faces, I believe, some major challenges to some of our core beliefs.

[8 : 38] Church life might seem, for some of us, rather daunting. Uncharted territory. It may feel somewhat unsettling within the life of the church. We may actually find we face criticism or ridicule for holding to scriptural teaching.

Well, the answer lies here. Let us draw near to God with a full assurance of faith. We can have direct access to him through that new and living way.

So we must be, and we're invited to be, confident in our relationship with God. I believe that lack of assurance is one of the key weaknesses of the church today.

We're invited to be sure that our sins are forgiven. We're invited to be sure that we're on the narrow road to heaven. We're invited to be sure that we have already received the gift of eternal life here.

We don't get that gift when we die. We receive it now, when we believe in Jesus. And we're invited to be sure of these things. So it's not a question of hoping that we might make it in the end.

[9 : 52] Because the deal is done now. We don't sing the hymn anymore, but it's got great words. Some of you will know it, those of an older generation.

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine. Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine. Heir of salvation, purchase of God, born of his spirit, washed in his blood.

The verbs are all in the past tense. Because it's all been done. That's our story. That's our song. That's our song. Praising our Saviour all the day long.

Heather and I had the privilege recently of going to the Keswick Convention. We were at week two. And I've met one person already who was at week two. And one of the speakers at week two told the story of Richard Bewes, whose wife died not long after he retired as rector of All Souls Langham Place in London.

And he was asked soon after her death how he was coping, having retired and then been bereaved. And he replied with these words, Well, emotionally, I'm all at sea.

[11 : 00] But doctrinally, I'm anchored. He was sure of the great truths of the Christian faith and was confident in his relationship with Almighty God.

And how will that be seen? Well, it'll be seen in the way that we pray and in our confidence in our praying. It's the importance of prayer, of drawing near to God with full assurance of faith.

And I think we've got a lot within the church life to learn about praying in that kind of confident way of bringing our request before God's throne of grace.

I think it was Tennyson who said, More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of. I'm sure that's true. If only we were to pray more and draw near with confidence into the presence of God, then things might be different.

Satan laughs at our words. He mocks at our toil. But he trembles when we pray. And therefore, we've got to be so confident in our relationship with God that we're people who take prayer seriously, going into that holy place and talking to the creator of the universe.

[12 : 20] The gospel invites us to be confident in our relationship with God. The second thing is the gospel invites us to keep focused on our Christian hope.

The writer here encourages his persecuted readers to hold tightly or unswervingly, without deviation, to the Christian hope.

To be so grasped by it that it grasps us. The writer is saying it might be tough now. You're having a hard time as Christians. But it's worth holding on.

Because the hope we profess, that we say we believe in, is just too wonderful for words. So they should not let themselves get distracted or disillusioned, but keep going and do so by holding tightly to the hope of the gospel.

Because he who made the promise, says the writer, is faithful. God is a gentleman. And he always keeps his word. The gospel invites us to keep focused on our Christian hope.

[13 : 29] And I think too often we, as church, get bogged down in the things in this life and here and now and fail to keep our eyes fixed on what God has promised, which is elsewhere, which is far better, and where there are no civil wars or conflicts between different people groups, where there's no more pain or suffering, no more earthquakes and tragic mass funerals, no more oppression, no more sexual abuse, no more death.

As we say in the creed, we look for the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. As Christians, we are pilgrims on a journey.

I remember when I was a student, that's far too long ago to remember in the last century, but we used to have t-shirts which said on the front, just passing through. Because our home's not here.

We're just passing through as Christian people, because our hope is elsewhere. It's not here. We're looking to that real home that God has prepared for those who put their trust in Christ.

And it's so easy to lose sight of that horizon, because there's so much in our Western society which challenges that belief and conviction. So, keeping a focus on our Christian hope is so important.

[14 : 52] The story is told of the Christian preacher, Dick Shepherd, that at his funeral, at the end of the address that was given, the preacher simply said, here endeth the first lesson.

Because the second lesson is just beginning. It's somewhere else, and somewhere much better. That's our Christian hope. Well, there's the story of that elderly Christian in the West Country, who wrote to a friend who he'd known for many years, and couldn't write very much, so he just put three words on the postcard.

And the three words were, see you there. That's our hope. We will meet with one another, and be with Christ. And we're to keep focused upon that Christian hope in such a way that we hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.

So the Gospel invites us to keep that kind of focus on our Christian hope. And then one other. The Gospel invites us to be committed to the fellowship of believers.

Verses 24 and 25. They are key verses about being a Christian community. The temptation for those early persecuted Christians was to give up on acts of serving others, to retreat into their shells, to look after themselves, and to stop meeting together.

[16 : 17] But the writer here encourages them to do two things. The first was to spur one another to keep active, to help others, to love the needy, to do what they could to make a difference to other people's lives.

To spur one another on. In fact, the Greek word in the original means to provoke or to exasperate one another. It's quite a dramatic word. And when we meet, we're to provoke one another to good deeds, as he says here in verse 24.

Spur one another towards love and good deeds. One of the purposes of being church is that we challenge one another to hear and to obey God's call upon our lives, to do something new in Christian service, to begin something that we never thought possible.

And we're invited today to spur one another on here at St Silas to new and needed acts of service. And of course, we all need that encouragement and that challenge because there's a massive work to do in terms of our service and in terms of our evangelism.

Somebody's imagined the scene that they think might have taken place after Jesus went back to heaven. And the angels wanted to know what had been going on on earth for those 33 years.

[17 : 43] I'm not quite sure how angels who are outside of time knew about 33 years, but don't let's go there. And Gabriel was deputed to go and have a chat with Jesus. And the conversation went something like this.

Master, you died for the whole world down there, didn't you? Yes, said Jesus. And then Gabriel said, well, you must have suffered as he looked at the scars in Jesus' hands. And Jesus replied, well, yes, it was a very difficult time.

And then Gabriel said, well, do they all know about it? And Jesus said, well, there's only just a few in Palestine. They're the only ones who know. So Gabriel said, well, what's the plan?

He said, well, I've asked Peter and Andrew and James and John and a few others to make it the business of their lives to tell others about what has happened and for those others to tell others so the news gets spread and everybody gets to hear of my love and of my death.

At which point Gabriel scratched a wing and paused and thought for a moment and then said, well, suppose Peter and John and Andrew and James fail and they don't pass on the message.

[18 : 50] What's your plan then? What about the people of Glasgow in 2016? Well, what's the plan for them? And Jesus replied to Gabriel, Gabriel, I haven't made other plans.

I'm counting on my friends. And we're to provoke, to exasperate one another, to challenge one another in order to do the work that God has called us to.

And we all need that kind of challenge. And that's one of the reasons that the writer here gives to us for meeting together so that we can spur one another on to deeds of service.

And the second is slightly more gentle and a bit more, a bit easier, is that we might encourage one another in our faith. Because of the troubles of those early Christians, some were choosing to miss meeting with other believers, no longer making it a priority and going perhaps once a month or going perhaps once a fortnight.

And the writer here says, let us not give up meeting together. Let us encourage one another. Christian fellowship is a key part of God's plan for the well-being of every Christian.

[20 : 07] We need each other for the sake of encouragement and especially when the going is tough. It was John Wesley, when a young man still believed, still was rather confused in his faith, that he formed a plan to go away by himself and live in a hut on the moors and live alone with God.

And an older and at that time, wiser Christian said to him, God knows nothing of solitary religion. We're meant to work and to be with each other and to share in that fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

And there's a reason for meeting together. But it's not always easy, is it? I'm sure you know the little ditty. To dwell above with saints in love, oh my, that will be glory.

To dwell below with saints we know. Now that's a different story. Because we're not terribly easy. But it's all part of Christian family and the fellowship of the Spirit to encourage one another in the work that God has called us to do.

And it's so easy on a Sunday or perhaps a Saturday, if we're thinking ahead, to say, oh, nobody will notice if I don't turn up. I'm sure I won't be missed if I don't show my face.

[21 : 27] They'll manage quite well without me on this Sunday or for the next month or so. And all those wonderful staff members and those volunteers, they do all the stuff. That dedicated vestry.

I can just step back. I don't need to be there. It's so easy to be tempted to think that way. But actually we all need to be here as often as we can to encourage one another.

God sees not only our priorities in terms of how we spend our time, but also our hidden and unseen motives and intentions. And it's not only that which should prompt us to keep our attendance and involvement a priority.

It's part of our witness to visitors who may come here on a Sunday to St Silas. And it's important that the visitor, the first-timer, sees that St Silas is very much a going concern.

What happens if others decide to stay away and the numbers go down? Might our attendance here one Sunday be just what somebody else really needs?

[22 : 35] We might have that chat over coffee with somebody, which is the very reason for being here, to offer encouragement. So one of the chief purposes of fellowship, of meeting together, is for that mutual encouragement.

And the trouble with our consumer culture is that we look more to get than to give. And that influences how we view church.

Because so often we can view being here on Sunday as to what will I get out of it, of being there, rather than what can I give to God and to one another.

That's to be the attitude that we're to have as we gather for an occasion like this. What can I give? Not what am I going to get. Did I like the songs? Did I agree with the prayers? Did I like the vicar, the rector, whatever he's called?

What can I give? That's the question. So we can encourage one another. That's so important. It was Michael Griffiths, that great Christian missionary, who said, the church is not a third-class waiting room where we twiddle our thumbs while we wait for first-class accommodation in heaven.

[23 : 43] There's work to do, and it is that of encouragement. We often talk about the two great commandments. Love God, love neighbour. Actually, the Bible tells us there are three great commandments.

Love God, love our neighbour, and love one another. And loving neighbour is different from that third commandment of loving one another. Jesus, on the night on which he was betrayed, said to his disciples, you've got to love one another because you're going to need each other.

It's going to be tough when I've gone. It's not going to be easy. So you've got to love one another. So there are three great commandments, and therefore we need to be committed to the fellowship of Christian believers.

So how do we conclude? Well, as we prepare, and of course, the reading finishes with those words, all the more, as you see the day approaching, referring to the return of Christ.

Verse 25, as we prepare for that unknown day, the future approaching day of Christ's return, let's see this invitation of the gospel to be confident in our relationship with God, to keep focused on our Christian hope, and to be committed to one another as Christians.

[25 : 03] And I believe that if that is true of your life here at St Silas, it will be evidence of your grasp of the once-for-all sacrifice that Jesus made 2,000 years ago, and will make you more and more into the kind of community that the Holy Spirit will use to grow the kingdom of God, to build the church, and to bring glory to our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

So let's now, for a moment, draw near to God in full assurance of faith, and ask for that to be so. Let us pray. Father, we thank you so much for the invitations that come to us from the gospel.

We're thrilled to read of those let-uses in this letter to the Hebrews. And we see them as such an encouragement and challenge to us. and so we draw aside just this moment into that most holy place.

We praise you for the privilege of being able to go through the torn curtain and come into that holy of holies and stand before your throne of grace.

Perhaps not to stand, but to kneel humbly, gratefully, and thankfully. And asking that you would help us in our life as your people in this place to be confident in our relationship with you and to so trust you that we are committed to one another in working out your purposes for our lives in this place.

[26 : 59] Lord, as Father, we pray the privilege of seeing those things that we utter anxiously, nervously before your throne come to pass in our midst that this place and this community of your people be one that you use greatly in your service for the proclamation of the good news of Christ.

For we ask it in his name. Amen.