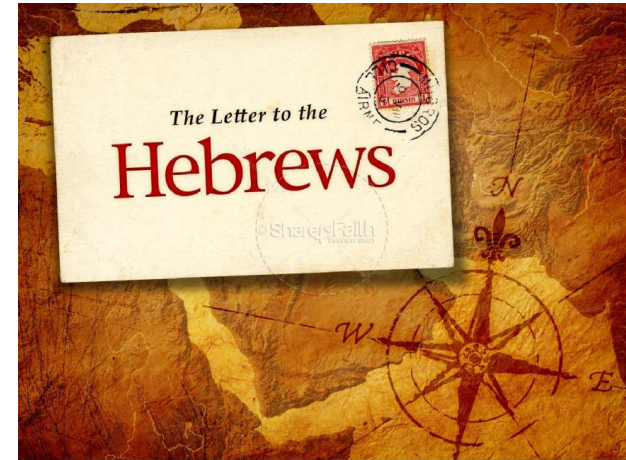


Daily Devotions  
*from the United Reformed Church*

The Letter to the Hebrews 2



Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> November – Saturday November

[Introduction](#)

This anonymous letter was given the title “to the Hebrews” in the second century. It uses the Old Testament texts and Jewish patterns of interpretation to show that Christ’s sacrifice fulfils God’s promises and brings the faithful to perfection. It offers a rich theology Christ’s priesthood and of his dual human and divine nature which means he can identify with human suffering. The author is unknown but a reference in 13:24 implies it was written in Italy.

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### Sunday 8th November Psalm 22

Reuben Watt, URC Youth Assembly Moderator

In the presence of your people  
I will praise your name  
for alone you are holy,  
enthroned on the praises  
of Israel.  
Let us celebrate your goodness  
and your steadfast love;  
may your name be exalted  
here on earth  
and in heaven above.

2 All who love you  
sing your praises  
and proclaim your power,  
for alone you are holy,  
enthroned on the praises  
of Israel.  
You have not ignored  
our suffering  
but have heard our cry;  
may your power be exalted  
here on earth and in heaven  
above.

3 All who seek your rule will praise you and be satisfied;  
for alone you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel.  
All the peoples of the nations will bow down to you;  
may your rule be exalted here on earth and in heaven above.

v1 Brent Chambers (b1948) v2&3 Bert Polman © 1977 Universal Music

## Reflection

Today's words come from a song which is based on Psalm 22. This Psalm is about a person who is crying out to God to save him from the taunts and torments of his enemies and then thanking God for rescuing him.

At the time of writing today's devotion, we were still in Lockdown and so by the time you are reading this, who knows what position we will be in? However, looking back during the worst parts of Lockdown it was very hard to hear the words of praise and adoration that is repeated in this Psalm. Praising God can be difficult to do when as we turn on our TVs, go on social media and see all the doom and gloom. It is hard to remember all of the good things God has done especially during Lockdown.

After going through a struggle either nationally or personally it is good to reflect and see what God has done. As Youth Assembly Moderator looking back over the struggle of lockdown, it has been great to see small 'pop up' churches come into form from ones directly organised by some members of URC Youth and other 'older' members of the URC. Scrolling through my Facebook feed on a Sunday morning has never been so full of churches advertising their church. This is such a great reason to praise God.

I really hope that you have found some positives from Lockdown no matter how small and remember, as Psalm 22 says "I will praise your name for alone you are holy". God doesn't leave us in a time of struggle, He hears our cry and is the one that carries us through.

Prayer

Lord,  
In times of hardship and trials,  
reveal to our hearts the victories you have won for us.  
In the presence of your people may we praise you  
God is great. God is good. Amen

[Monday 9th November Hebrews - The Certainty of God's Promise](#)

Fay Rowland, graduate researcher Wesley House, Cambridge, member  
Christ the King Church of England, Kettering

Hebrews 6: 13- 20

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 for ever according to the order of Melchizedek.

Reflection

Having dealt with love in the previous section, the writer to the Hebrews turns to faith and hope.

These three are intimately connected, with love being the ground from

is only when they are encouraged by others that they may have the confidence to step forward and to offer those gifts to God and to the community. So coffee time needs to become encouragement time too. That way, those with unrecognised gifts can discover both the gifts and the confidence to use them.

Prayer

Living and loving God, we praise you that we can stand before you in the confidence that through Christ we have been forgiven. We ask you now to grant us the discernment to know what you would have us do and the confidence to step forward in your name and to do it. Thanks be to God  
Amen.

through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

### Reflection

Paul had confidence born of faith. Confidence built on Christ. That's surely one of the reasons that his ministry was as wide ranging and impactful as it was. It's no wonder that he urges others to have that same confidence.

Nevertheless, confidence alone is no guarantee of the quality of anyone's faith, or the quality of their message. After all, the false prophets, to whom Paul alludes elsewhere, probably also displayed a similar confidence. However, Paul reminds the Hebrews that the right sort of confidence and the right sort of message should provoke them to love and good deeds. They can see from the fruit growing within their community, or the lack of it, whether or not the confidence is warranted. Paul also tells the Hebrews to meet together. One of the many good reasons for doing this is so that they can discern together the worth of any message. Whilst an individual can be led astray by a new and exciting preacher, the community as a whole will more easily discern a false apostle. In other words, when we get back to having coffee after worship, we should also return to the old, old ways of discussing the sermon over the biscuits. This will allow us to absorb all that has been said that is good and to discard anything not so good.

Paul then prompts the Hebrews to encourage one another. So often those with the strongest gifts do not recognise them for what they are. It

which faith and hope spring. Faith being "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

Abraham is the great example of this – promised a son when he and his wife were both beyond child-bearing age and holding firm to that promise until he saw its fulfilment in Isaac.

But hold on a minute, what about that business with Ishmael? I'm not saying that I'd have done any better, but Abraham slipped up rather when he tried to make God's promise come true by himself. Of course, you can follow his logic. Sarah was too old, and any children by Sarah's servant would still be Abraham's. Perhaps that's what God meant all along?

But no. God's route for Abraham was not the clearly way-marked path across broad meadows, but through deep canyons of seeming impossibility. When his own methods of fulfilling the promise had failed, Abraham was left with just one option: faith.

Abraham was forced to rely on God, and maybe that's why God left it so long before Isaac was born. Sometimes we need to have our own solutions stripped away before we are ready to look at God's. Looking back at the start of this year and the changes wrought by coronavirus, many of us have had things that we relied upon stripped away. Our routines have changed beyond recognition. School has changed, work has changed, even church has changed. Some of us have lost livelihoods, health or tragically, loved ones.

We may feel as lost as Abraham, shipwrecked in a storm grasping only to an unreasonable promise. But hope in God is not a piece of floating driftwood. It is fastened to the bedrock of the earth, and well worth holding on to.

## Prayer

God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,  
thank you that even the great heroes of faith are fallible humans like me.  
Thank you that you cope with our failures and patiently restore us.  
Help us to see beyond our own plans to the greater plans of yours  
and to place our hope always in you. Amen.

### [Tuesday 10th November Hebrews - Melchizedek](#)

The Rev'd John Proctor is a retired minister and member of Downing Place URC in Cambridge

#### Hebrews 7: 1 - 10

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 for ever.

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 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.

Many contemporary people struggle with ideas of sacrifice generally - not just about ideas of sacrifice in religious worship. A culture which is based on credit means we can have what we want whenever we want it. Gone are the days of our grandparents where they'd save up for things before buying them. The idea of sacrificing something in our lives or in our interests for the good of another or the greater good of society is long gone. But for 10 weeks we stood on our doorsteps and clapped appreciation for people who work in the NHS for little recognition and even less money. Maybe the idea of sacrifice still resonates.

We are all called to participate in Jesus' sacrifice to offer ourselves to the Creator along with Jesus. We are all called to give sacrificially of our time, our talents, and our money - not as offerings for sin but as a way of changing both ourselves and our world. We are called to point to a different understanding of how to live that, through sacrifice, the Kingdom will come.

Lord Jesus,  
you offered yourself on the wood of the Cross,  
that we might find freedom -  
from sin,  
destruction,  
and alienation.  
Help us to live sacrificially,  
that we might point to a world of different values,  
even your coming Kingdom. Amen.

### [Saturday 21st November Hebrews - Confidence in Christ's Blood](#)

The Rev'd Jacky Embrey, minister in the Bolton and Salford Missional Partnership

#### Hebrews 10: 19-25

Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us

The Rev'd Andy Braunston serves with four churches in and around Glasgow.

Hebrews 10: 11 - 18

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.

#### Reflection

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews compares and contrasts the daily sacrificial offerings in the Temple with the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross for the sins of the world. In the Temple sin offerings were made each day - and the writer thinks they were ineffective despite being commanded in the Law - but Jesus' offering of himself to the Father is effective and was offered just once.

Many contemporary Christians struggle with these ideas of sacrifice for the atonement from sin - the images certainly come from a different world view and a different understanding of faith than is often the case now. But then the URC believes that every time we celebrate Holy Communion we "show forth Christ's sacrifice on the Cross" making it present in the here and now (a variant of older ideas linking the Eucharist with sacrifice).

#### Reflection

Hebrews calls Jesus 'high priest' but wants to distinguish him from the priests of the Jewish temple. Melchizedek offers a different template for priesthood. So Jesus is 'high priest of the order of Melchizedek' (6:20).

Melchizedek contributes only briefly to the Old Testament. He greets Abraham in Genesis 14. He crops up, almost in passing, in Psalm 110. Yet these two snippets of scripture help the writer of Hebrews in three ways.

First, Melchizedek was king and priest rolled into one. In Hebrews, Jesus is that too, a royal leader and a gentle pastor, a figure of both power and compassion.

Second, Melchizedek is timeless. He steps into Genesis from the ether, without notice, background or ancestry. He vanishes just as abruptly. We never see him die. So by linking Jesus to Melchizedek, Hebrews suggests that his roots too are beyond time in eternity. Jesus too is a priest whose ministry will never end.

Third, Melchizedek was honoured by Abraham. Abraham in turn was ancestor of the priestly tribe of Levi, who for their part received tithes from the people of Israel. Yet their forefather Abraham actually paid tithes to Melchizedek. Melchizedek was, you might say, priest to the priests. He brought the blessing of God at the very start of the nation's life.

The first readers of Hebrews would 'get' these arguments. But even if we do not share their standpoint, we may still learn from the approach of this letter. For Hebrews tries to reach beyond familiar patterns, to present Jesus. And we too shall only make proper sense of Jesus if we think outside the box. We cannot contain him in the categories and precedents of history, nor in the standards and stereotypes of earth. He is utterly one of a kind, and one with God.

## Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,  
outside our boxes,  
beyond our history,  
bursting the place where we buried you,  
we turn to you for blessing,  
for your powerful and tender touch,  
for your living presence  
in the demands, duties and difficulties  
of our days and years. Amen.

[Wednesday 11th November](#) [Another like Melchizedek](#)

The Rev'd Julian Macro, retired Minister, member of Verwood URC

Hebrews 7: 11 - 19

Now if perfection had been attainable through the levitical priesthood—for the people received the law under this priesthood—what further need would there have been to speak of another priest arising according to the order of Melchizedek, rather than one according to the order of Aaron? For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well. Now the one of whom these things are spoken belonged to another tribe, from which no one has ever served at the altar. For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests.

It is even more obvious when another priest arises, resembling Melchizedek, 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 for ever,  
according to the order of Melchizedek.’

body of Jesus Christ once for all.

## Reflection

It seems to me that the writer is telling all that the never-ending following of the Law as the years go by; approaching God, making offerings and seeking forgiveness, will not make them – or us perfect because if that were so – and perfection without sin is the ultimate goal – then having sins forgiven once for all, would negate the need to keep asking. They and we would be left only with the memory of the first time that we were forgiven. An echo of a past event only. The result would be that there would be no further need to enter God’s presence and obey the Law for would they not be cleansed and perfect already? Now Christ has entered the world, and all is changed. The Lord takes away the Old Testament to establish the New, “by the body of Jesus Christ”. The incarnation had its foundation in the love of God. It was the beginning of the Lord’s own self-sacrifice in fulfilment of the will of His Father, that leads all the way to the cross and there, if we accept His sacrifice and let Him into our hearts and lives, God will sanctify us and make us clean again for all time.

## Prayer

Lord Jesus,  
Our hearts cry out to you today.  
We acknowledge you as our Lord and our God.  
And yet we know that today and on every other day  
We have not listened to you or done your will.  
Again and again we did not carry through what you asked of us.  
Forgive us.  
Help us to see clearly what you are asking us to do.  
Help us to follow you, listening always to your voice in our lives.  
We can then reflect your love  
And become more perfect in your eyes. Amen.



## Prayer

Steady us, Lord Jesus, in the sureness of your love.  
Forgive us for our frailty and fickleness, for our difficulty with the once for alls in our own lives.  
And help us rejoice in your once for all sacrifice,  
and look forward to your return, Amen.

### Thursday 19th November Hebrews - The Old Sacrifices Ineffective

Ann Barton, Lay leader and member of Whittlesford URC in the Eastern Synod

#### Hebrews 10: 1 - 10

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 worshippers, 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

There is, on the one hand, the abrogation of an earlier commandment because it was weak and ineffectual (for the law made nothing perfect); there is, on the other hand, the introduction of a better hope, through which we approach God.

#### Reflection

Today is “Armistice Day” marking the end of fighting in Europe in 1918. While there was great rejoicing then the fact that WW2 started some twenty years later showed what little success there was in establishing a just and lasting peace. There was much tinkering with the old order but little desire for radical change to the ways in which nations treated each other and so the high hopes of so many were dashed.

I write as the Covid-19 virus continues to take its toll on human life and people in the UK wonder when or whether life will return to normal, while wanting the “new normal” to be quite different. Will that be so? How ready and willing are we for radical change?

Those to whom the Letter to the Hebrews was written will have been steeped in the traditions of Judaism, with a tribal-based priesthood and established laws regulating all aspects of life. But as our author points out, “If perfection had been obtained through the Levitical priesthood ... what further need would there have been to speak of another priest..?” The role in their early history of the shadowy figure of Melchizedek who came to bless their ancestor Abraham, though unconnected with their tribal traditions, was taken as a clear indication of the need to break with the accepted, established order, so pointing to Jesus as the true High Priest who alone could lead to perfection and the “better hope, through which we approach God.”

Such changes as followed the 1918 Armistice did not lead to a better world because leaders, and those they led, were not ready to make truly radical changes and, for example, adopt the Sermon on the Mount as the basis for living – so how ready and willing are we for the radical change

we now need?

Prayer

Almighty God, we praise You that in Jesus we have a better hope and invitation to Walk in his Way. Forgive us that we so easily fall into old ways, contributing to the unrest of the world; discriminating against those we consider different; relying on weapons of terror to uphold peace; showing less concern for the needs of others than we should want shown to us in our need. Help and strengthen our resolve, we pray:

Amen

[Thursday 12th November Christ's Unchanging Priesthood](#)

The Rev'd Julian Templeton, Minister, St John's URC, New Barnet

Hebrews 7: 20-25

This was confirmed with an oath; for others who became priests took their office without an oath, but this one became a priest with an oath, because of the one who said to him,

'The Lord has sworn  
and will not change his mind,  
"You are a priest for ever"' —

accordingly Jesus has also become the guarantee of a better covenant.

Furthermore, the former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office; but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues for ever. Consequently he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

Reflection

In this reflection, and in the reflections tomorrow and the day after, I

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 judgement, 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.

Reflection

'Once for all.' There is such a wealth of hope in these words. In our human lives, we launch out on the really meaningful things in our lives once for all, and when we make these commitments we mean them. But we are human, and weak, and fail. Marriage entered into with such hope and shining eyes too often falls apart into unbearable unhappiness, and separation and divorce follow on from that once for all promise.

Sometimes the very words betray the fact that we do not believe in 'once for all'. A mother at the end of her tether telling a wayward child that she's telling him for the last time, once for all... but in her heart she knows as she speaks the words that it won't be the last time.

In our transient world, there seems to be no permanence, no 'once for all' that we can truly believe in. Which is why the Gospel is so wonderful. Counter-cultural. A God who says what he means and does what he says he'll do. A God who does the amazing cosmos-transforming thing once for all and it really is once for all.

There is a sufficiency about Christ that marks him out from all the changing uncertainties of humanity. And how we need his unchangingness to cling onto. Not as something in past history but as something for the now, and something for the future. For if we can be confident in his once for all sacrifice, we can be equally confident that he will return again for those who wait for him.

accessible while we are constrained in human bodies. In contrast to the crematorium curtain that hides the coffin before it is destroyed, this curtain is thrown open to reveal the full life ahead. Without that, the writer reminds us, the Holy Place is a con.

But the Good News comes at a price. The blood of animal sacrifices was a different sort of hint of what was to come. God did not require Abraham to shed the blood of his son Isaac; for the time being a ram would serve. Yet animal sacrifices were never going to be enough to establish our relationship with God as fully as God desired. Only when his own Son's blood was shed was the Holy of Holies opened to all.

Prayer

Lord God

We thank you for the Holy Places that we cherish.

May we tend them so that others might find their refuge and hear their challenge.

We thank you for the special moments when we have known you close to us.

May they equip us for the hard parts of today.

We thank you for your Son's sacrifice to open the curtain.

May I live as someone who knows your gift. Amen.

[Wednesday 18th November Hebrews - Christ's Sacrifice Takes Away Sin](#)

Dorothy Courtis, Lay Preacher, Thurso URC

Hebrews 9:23 - 28

Thus it was necessary for the sketches of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves need better sacrifices than these. 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

invite you to listen to three voices from our Reformed tradition and hear what they have to say about Christ's priesthood. The first voice is that of John Calvin (1509-64) who was born and educated in France and became the influential Reformer of Geneva.

In his commentary on the Letter to the Hebrews, Calvin says that the highest human good is to be united with God, who is the fountain of life and of all good things. However, it is often our sense of unworthiness that prevents us from approaching God. What we need, therefore, is someone who will reassure us and vouch for our worthiness. This is what Christ our perpetual high priest does. But why is he qualified to do this? The author of Hebrews has already told us "we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin." (4:15) Jesus has lived a truly human life with its ups and downs, its strengths and weaknesses; yet he also placed no sinful obstacle to prevent the flow of God's grace through him. Therefore, Calvin writes that Jesus is qualified to be our Mediator who stretches out his hand and leads us to approach God's presence.

Jesus takes us by the hand and introduces us to the One before whose burning holiness we instinctively shrink back. Yet Jesus introduces us as those who are saved by his gracious action, and also does something distinctively priestly: intercedes on our behalf in order that we find favour with God. Calvin writes that Jesus is both our intercessor and advocate who turns the Father's eyes away from our sins and toward his righteousness. Our approach to God's throne that at first filled us with dread is instead filled with grace and kindness (Institutes 2.16.16).

Prayer

O God of burning holiness,

sometimes I shrink from your presence.

Help me to grasp the hand that Jesus offers;

the hand of my high priest and intercessor and advocate.

In his strong grasp I dare to believe  
that my true self is not diminished by sin  
but enlarged by grace.  
By that same grace,  
help me to share Jesus's good news with others. Amen

Friday 13th November [The Perfect Heavenly High Priest](#)  
The Rev'd Julian Templeton, Minister, St John's URC, New Barnet

Hebrews 7: 26 - 28

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 for ever.

Reflection

The second voice from our Reformed tradition that I invite you to listen to is Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834). Influenced by the German Romantic movement, Schleiermacher was a preacher and theologian who tried to make religion believable to people with modern assumptions. With his definition of religion as 'the feeling of absolute dependence on God', he is regarded by some as the founder of modern theology.

What was singularly important to Schleiermacher about the earthly Jesus was his unbroken consciousness of God and relationship with God. By virtue of this, Christ remains the advocate on behalf of the entire human race. Like a high priest, Christ brings our prayers before God and delivers divine blessings to us. At the same time, though, Christ is the end of

purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!

For this reason he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, because a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant. Where a will is involved, the death of the one who made it must be established. For a will takes effect only at death, since it is not in force as long as the one who made it is alive. Hence not even the first covenant was inaugurated without blood. For when every commandment had been told to all the people by Moses in accordance with the law, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the scroll itself and all the people, saying, 'This is the blood of the covenant that God has ordained for you.' And in the same way he sprinkled with the blood both the tent and all the vessels used in worship. Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.

Reflection

Ponder the image of the Holy Place from which there is the awesome possibility of being allowed into the Holy of Holies.

Maybe the Holy Place is a loved place of worship. We give it time, energy and money because it matters to the congregation and is a sign of the presence of God in the community. But we also remember those precious moments when, although sat in a very familiar place, some music, or a Bible verse, or an especially rich silence took us beyond the familiar into a stunning sense of the Emmanuel - God with us - that felt like a glimpse of the Holy of Holies. The memory sustains us when church life is difficult or simply tedious.

Such memories may also help us believe that the best of this life, even the Holy moments, are only the merest of hints of what God has in store when we go beyond the curtain of Death; go into the Holy of Holies, not

[Tuesday 17th November Hebrews - The Earthly and Heavenly Sanctuaries](#)

John Ellis is Synod Area Leader for West Kent and East Sussex and Secretary of Capel United Church

Hebrews 9: 1 - 22

Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly sanctuary. For a tent was constructed, the first one, in which were the lampstand, the table, and the bread of the Presence; this is called the Holy Place. Behind the second curtain was a tent called the Holy of Holies. In it stood the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant overlaid on all sides with gold, in which there were a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron's rod that budded, and the tablets of the covenant; above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy-seat. Of these things we cannot speak now in detail.

Such preparations having been made, the priests go continually into the first tent to carry out their ritual duties; but only the high priest goes into the second, and he but once a year, and not without taking the blood that he offers for himself and for the sins committed unintentionally by the people. By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the sanctuary has not yet been disclosed as long as the first tent is still standing. This is a symbol of the present time, during which gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshipper, but deal only with food and drink and various baptisms, regulations for the body imposed until the time comes to set things right.

But when Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation), he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God,

individual human priesthood traditionally understood. Christ passes his priestly activity to the communal body of the faithful in such a way that Christians as a whole are called a priestly people. The Church's mission is to be Christ's advocate to the entire human race (Christian Faith, §104.5-6).

One of the most powerful parts of the Gospel message we advocate is the belief that Christ offered himself as an atoning sacrifice for sin "once for all." The Cross towers over all disputes about who did what to whom, claiming that the price has been paid, reparation has been made, and redemption has been achieved for all who embrace it. We embrace redemption when we let go of our grievances, and our achievements, and lay them at the foot of the Cross. Christ's perfect once-for-all self-sacrifice on the Cross reduces our grievance and achievement tally to zero. This is not, or ought not to be, license to neglect justice. It is rather the permission to regard oneself and others as equally loved and redeemed sinners in the sight of God. Schleiermacher believed that we need to feel redemption—affectively—in order to believe and experience it. Redemption necessarily involves heart and head and body.

Prayer

O God our Redeemer,  
we sometimes find it difficult to let go of our grievances and achievements.  
In such times, set before us the once-for-all offering of Jesus.  
Let his perfect God-consciousness reset our grievance and achievement tally to zero, and liberate us in heart and head and action to share his blessedness. Amen

[Saturday 14th November Hebrews - The New Priesthood](#)

The Rev'd Julian Templeton, Minister, St John's URC, New Barnet

Hebrews 8: 1 - 5

Now the main point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high

priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a minister in the sanctuary and the true tent that the Lord, and not any mortal, has set up. For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; hence it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer. Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. They offer worship in a sanctuary that is a sketch and shadow of the heavenly one; for Moses, when he was about to erect the tent, was warned, 'See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain.'

### Reflection

The third voice from our Reformed tradition that I invite you to listen to is Karl Barth (1886-1968). Born in Basel and educated in Switzerland and Germany, Barth emphasised that God is wholly other than humans often imagine God to be. His monumental Church Dogmatics expounds at great length the God who loves us in freedom in Jesus Christ.

I take it that we have all experienced discord or bad feeling toward someone close due to a sharp disagreement. When this happens, it affects everything, and we long to make things right again. But who makes the first move to patch things up when both you and they feel equally aggrieved; when both you and they judge and feel judged?

Under the sub-heading of Jesus Christ as the Judge judged in our place, Barth considers Christ also as the great High Priest sacrificed in our place. Like Calvin and Schleiermacher before him, Barth employs the threefold office of priest, king, and prophet to interpret Christ's mission and significance. Suppose we understand sin as discord between us and God; sacrifice is the attempt to restore harmony to our relationship. Jesus is both our great High Priest who offers that sacrifice and is the once-for-all Sacrifice; he is both Priest and Lamb of God. Like the ancient High Priest, Jesus represents all people unable to live harmoniously due to discordance in their relationship with God. But unlike the ancient High

enabled by the presence of the mediator - the writer of Hebrews quotes Jeremiah, picking up threads of the Old Testament for those familiar with it, and establishing a longer pedigree for those new to Jesus's thought.

We need a new improved covenant because the old one wasn't working - that relationship had broken down through inability of humanity to keep the terms. The new arrangement had been talked about by the latter prophets is being put in place with Jesus. It is still on offer - we too can leave the slavery of our Egypt. God comes close through this new living way.

As we continue to work out how to be God's people today, let us not return to what is obsolete but jettison what is no longer helpful and let the Spirit of Jesus lead us into a deeper relationship with God.

"Past put behind us, for the future take us,  
Lord of the years to live for. Christ alone."

### Prayer

Lord, in these times of change,  
help us to embody your promises  
and explore what they mean for us today.  
As we ponder anew how to be your people,  
draw close to us and enable our hearts and minds  
to be renewed by your Spirit.  
For Jesus' sake and for the transformation of the world  
Amen

I will put my laws in their minds,  
and write them on their hearts,  
and I will be their God,  
and they shall be my people.  
And they shall not teach one another  
or say to each other, "Know the Lord",  
for they shall all know me,  
from the least of them to the greatest.  
For I will be merciful towards their iniquities,  
and I will remember their sins no more.'

In speaking of 'a new covenant', he has made the first one obsolete. And what is obsolete and growing old will soon disappear.

### Reflection

As a child I remember being struck by a particular prayer that spoke of Jesus as our mediator and advocate. As one of three sisters there was often a need for mediation at home.

A mediator is one who brings people together, who fosters understanding and brings about reconciliation by helping parties to find common ground. For humanity Jesus as mediator brings about the promise of a new covenant.

We are used to advertising that offers us 'new improved versions' of goods that still have value and worth. It seems that built-in obsolescence is the hidden basis to spur economic growth. Most things are not built to last.

However God's New Improved Offer is a genuine development - it offers something better for all God's people. We are being invited to have a deeper renewed relationship with God.

This Covenant transferred from tablets of stone to hearts and minds is

Priest, Jesus as the great High Priest in the heavenly sanctuary is able to plead the perfect offering of his own life. Jesus freely offers his own wholly attuned human life to restore us and the whole Creation to harmony with God (Church Dogmatics, IV/1, 274-8).

If we are to be priestly people attuned to Jesus's atoning sacrifice, we are called to sacrifice our pride and make the first move to patch things up. This applies not only to our relationships with other people but also to our relationship with Creation.

### Prayer

O God who loves in freedom,  
I have confessed 'Jesus is Lord',  
yet when it comes to disputes with others  
I too often confess my own point-of-view as final.  
Attune me to Jesus's sacrifice of self,  
help me to be the bigger person who says "sorry" first,  
help me to create harmony with other people and with Creation  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

### [Sunday 15th November Psalm 23](#)

Gordon Woods, Elder, St. Columba's URC, Oxford

My shepherd will supply my need: Jehovah is His name; In pastures fresh He makes me feed, Beside the living stream.	2: He brings my wandering spirit back When I forsake His ways, And leads me, for His mercy's sake, In paths of truth and grace.
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3: When I walk through the  
shades of death  
Thy presence is my stay;  
One word of Thy supporting  
breath  
Drives all my fears away.

4: Thy hand in sight of all my foes,  
Doth still my table spread;  
My cup with blessings overflows,  
Thine oil anoints my head.

5: The sure provisions of my God  
Attend me all my days;  
O may Thy house be mine abode,  
And all my work be praise!

6: There would I find a settled  
rest,  
While others go and come;  
No more a stranger, nor a guest,  
But like a child at home.

*Isaac Watts*

## Reflection

This, perhaps more than any other Psalm, is likely to have associations for all of us - weddings, funerals, the Vicar of Dibley, fill in your own memories! This particular setting reminds me of the great Carolyn Brock, who programmed it in a concert marking the 250th anniversary of Isaac Watts' death in 1998. Carolyn was a musician who could make people sing better just by stepping into a room! If you don't feel up to the full Virgil Thomson, then a simplified harmonisation of the tune Resignation can be found in Common Ground, Church Hymnary 4 etc as a setting for Psalm 63.

In his excellent recent book 'Living with the Psalms' (SPCK, 2020), John Bell points out that as well as the image of the Lord as a shepherd, who would typically be male, the Psalmist uses a more female image for God when describing God spreading a table, as that might be a task more usually done by women. This becomes more poignant for me when I consider Isaac Watts' addition in the closing lines 'No more a stranger, nor a guest, but like a child at home'. Do we now have God as father and mother, making a home for us, the singers, God's children?

I write this reflection in mid-July, several months into lockdown, and I for one am hugely missing singing in company with others; singing along to zoom or a podcast just isn't the same. Being able to sing together once more will be a homecoming of another sort, and I look forward to singing the Psalms in worship again, joining the saints across the ages in using these ancient texts to reflect on our relationship with God.

## Prayer

God our father, God our mother,  
We give thanks for the comfort you bring us when times are hard.  
We give thanks for the blessings we enjoy, and the guidance you give us when we listen for your voice.  
We pray that we may be generous in the comfort we give others, and the blessings we share.  
And that all your children may feel at home in your love.

Amen.

[Monday 16th November Hebrews - Christ our Mediator](#)

The Rev'd Viv Henderson is Minister of Minehead URC & a mental health chaplain with Elysium Healthcare in Wellington

Hebrews 8: 6 - 13

But Jesus has now obtained a more excellent ministry, and to that degree he is the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted through better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no need to look for a second one.

God finds fault with them when he says:

'The days are surely coming, says the Lord,  
when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel  
and with the house of Judah;  
not like the covenant that I made with their ancestors,  
on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land  
of Egypt;  
for they did not continue in my covenant,  
and so I had no concern for them, says the Lord.  
This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel  
after those days, says the Lord: 17