

Sermon: Sunday 10th October 2021

Hebrews 4:12-end & Mark 10:17-31

I don't know about you, but sometimes, I feel like we're in the middle of a war.

The combination of Covid and Brexit has led people to squabble; squabble over toilet rolls, squabble over fuel. It's led to panic and uncertainty. It's led to instability in our nation. It's brought out the worst, and the best side of human nature.

Our Churches have been at the centre of Safeguarding scandals and Safeguarding Sunday, aims to heighten our awareness of the best and the worst in human society and God calls us, He calls us all, to look out for the poor, the meek and the vulnerable. It is everyone's responsibility.

We remember – as it says in 1 Peter 5:8 *'Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour'*.

But he doesn't always roar, he's not always easy to spot but as it says in

John 10.10 *The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy;*

Ephesians 6:12 *'For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.'*

Yes, it feels like we're in a war. And my friends, in many ways we are.

Hebrews is a wartime letter. Clearly, a different type of war, a different time and culture, but I think we can learn a lot from the teaching in the book of Hebrews; things that resonates with us and will help us face the battle in front of us today.

Shall we pray:

Hebrews was written during the Jewish–Roman War, which raged from 66 AD to 73 AD. And those historians among you, will know that in 70AD, half way through this war, the temple of Jerusalem was demolished.

The war raged between the Romans and the Jews. One side rallied around the Roman emperor, the other side rallied around the high priest in Jerusalem, and the Jewish Christians were caught in the middle.

The Roman emperor claimed to be the pontifex maximus –the greatest priest in Rome, claiming to be the chief representative of the whole human race, before their gods. Those fighting on the Roman side were very clear who their high priest was: it was the emperor of Rome. At the start of the war, the Roman high priest was Julius Caesar, a fact recorded in many secular writings.

Those fighting on the Jewish side were equally clear. Their high priesthood had been created over 1,300 years before the birth of Julius Caesar. The Lord appointed Moses' brother Aaron at Mount Sinai to serve in the newly constructed Tabernacle as the high priest of Israel.

Aaron's descendants, down the generations, held the high priesthood, right until the Jewish exile to Babylon. After the return from exile the high priests became the leaders of the Jewish nation and the temple became the rallying point. When the future Emperor Titus sacked and destroyed Jerusalem and its Temple in 70 AD and two years after this letter was written. He made sure that he destroyed the office of High Priest, because he knew when the high priest was killed, the central power of the Jews was crushed.

There has not been a high priest of Israel since the Temple burned in 70 AD.

So, what about the Christians in Jerusalem?

Well, the writer of Hebrews sends some wonderful news into this wartime situation.

He says 'The word of the Lord is alive and active.'

The Jewish Christians do not need to take sides, since, neither the Roman emperor, nor the Temple ruler, is the true high priest at all.

Jesus is the real pontifex maximus. He alone is the Great High Priest. The Christians do not owe allegiance to either of the sides in the Jewish–Roman War. They owe allegiance to Jesus Christ alone.

In the war that whirls around us today – this too is the rallying call for us – When one faction says – don't get your jab it's evil and another says, it's all the government's fault for the lack of fuel – we trust in Jesus. When some say Safeguarding rules are a waste of time, they're not important and others put excessive rules in place that stifle all freedom – we look to Jesus. We don't take sides, we don't slag one off against another, we seek Jesus, we look to Jesus, our great high priest.

It's important to note that the writer is not merely saying that Jesus is a better high priest than Aaron. The writer is saying something far more radical.

The Jewish Christians already knew that Aaron was flawed (he made the golden calf after all.) We know that his descendants were no better (think of Eli) and that the current high priest in Jerusalem at that time, was, in the words of the historian Josephus, who knew him, "a man unworthy of the high priesthood... with the false face of an actor."

Jesus is not just a better than the high priests of Israel, Jesus has launched a new and better high priesthood altogether. Something far better has come. Something that is worth putting our trust in. Why does the writer say that Jesus is a better high priest? Because he has entered a better sanctuary.

Aaron and his descendants were the only people authorized to enter the sacred inner room of the Tabernacle and Temple. They were not permitted to bring anybody else inside this Most Holy Place with them.

Jesus, on the other hand, has entered the sanctuary of heaven, ascending to the Father's side where he sits enthroned in glory, and he can grant admission through his death and resurrection to **anyone** who puts their faith in him.

Through Jesus we have access to the very throne room of heaven.

Jesus has obtained for God's People, far better access, to a far better sanctuary, than any of the high priests in Jerusalem. The writer therefore shouts to us all, a better battle-cry above the din of the Jewish-Roman War: *"Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."*

And we can do that now, we can do that today. Will you say verse 16 with me if you are able?

'Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.'

But what about the word from Mark...God's alive and active word that says, *'it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich (or relies on other things) to enter the kingdom of God.'*

Well you see, we have to play our part, each one of us has to make that decision to follow Jesus.

Jesus saw the man's internal battle and loved him. He loves us and he promises a great reward to all those who give up all, to follow Jesus;
To those who gives up the squabbles, gives up the reliance on money on power, on sex.
Gives up the reliance on self and puts their whole trust in Jesus.

For those he promises a reward in this life as well as the next.
For the rich man this was impossible, and he went away sad.
But my friends, nothing is impossible with God; all things are possible with God.

And so, we know we are in a battle, a spiritual battle and we are called to:
To Trust in Jesus
To Stand firm in His promises
To Believe, that with Jesus we have access to the throne room of heaven, now.

Because Jesus has won the battle, so stay close to the real pontifex maximus.

Let us pray.