

Sermon: From Rulebook to Relationship

Open Door sermon for 22nd Feb 2026

8 Here is the point of what we are saying: We have a high priest like that, who sits on the right side of God's throne in heaven. **2** Our high priest serves in the Most Holy Place. He serves in the true place of worship that was made by God, not by anyone here on earth.

3 Every high priest has the work of offering gifts and sacrifices to God. So our high priest must also offer something to God. **4** If our high priest were now living on earth, he would not be a priest. I say this because there are already priests here who follow the law by offering gifts to God. **5** The work that these priests do is really only a copy and a shadow of what is in heaven. That is why God warned Moses when he was ready to build the Holy Tent: "Be sure to make everything exactly like the pattern I showed you on the mountain."^[d] **6** But the work that has been given to Jesus is much greater than the work that was given to those priests. In the same way, the new agreement that Jesus brought from God to his people is much greater than the old one. And the new agreement is based on better promises. **7** If there was nothing wrong with the first agreement, then there would be no need for a second agreement. **8** But God found something wrong with the people. He said,

"The time is coming, says the Lord, when I will give a new agreement to the people of Israel and to the people of Judah.

9 It will not be like the agreement that I gave to their fathers.

That is the agreement I gave when I took them by the hand and led them out of Egypt. They did not continue following the agreement I gave them, and I turned away from them, says the Lord. **10** This is the new agreement I will give the people of Israel. I will give this agreement in the future, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their minds, and I will write my laws on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. **11** Never again will anyone have to teach their neighbours or their family to know the Lord. All people - the greatest and the least important - will know me.

12 And I will forgive the wrongs they have done, and I will not remember their sins."

13 God called this a new agreement, so he has made the first agreement old. And anything that is old and useless is ready to disappear.

This morning, we continue our journey through the letter to the Hebrews.

Last week, Kathryn helped us dwell on something deeply reassuring: that Jesus is not a temporary helper, not a distant religious figure, but our eternal High Priest - the one who never stops caring for us, never stops interceding for us, never steps away from us. And today Hebrews carries us gently one step further.

If Christ is that kind of priest - always present, always faithful - what exactly is he mediating on our behalf? What is it that Jesus holds open for us?

And, incidentally, it is entirely appropriate that we hear these words just as we stand at the edge of Lent, because Lent is so often misunderstood. It is not meant to be a season of spiritual strain, nor a time for religious performance. It is not a forty-day exercise in proving we are serious enough, disciplined enough, faithful enough.

At its heart, Lent is an invitation. An invitation to return. An invitation to make space. An invitation to allow God to work not only around us - but within us. And that is precisely the promise we hear today.

Hold up a large book or folder labelled "Instructions for Life."

Imagine if every relationship in your life worked like this...

Flip through the pages dramatically.

Page 42: *How to comfort someone who is upset*

Page 87: *How to recognise when someone loves you*

Page 112: *Correct response when someone says sorry*

That would be exhausting... and a bit tragic.

Hold up a family photo or gesture warmly.

Because real relationships don't work like that.

We do not learn love primarily by instruction.

Let me ask - did anyone here learn who their best friend is from a book?

You didn't study a manual called *How to Know Your Best Friend*. You just... knew them.

We recognise this in adult relationships too. The voice you know instantly. The mood you sense without words. The closeness that grows through presence.

Jeremiah, who the writer of Hebrews quotes, was speaking to a people who had received the Law - good, holy, God-given. And yet something wasn't working. Not because the Law was flawed, but because human hearts are fragile. So, God makes a staggering promise:

"I will put my laws in their minds, and write them on their hearts."

If God wrote one word on your heart, what might it be?

Love? Kindness? Courage? Peace?

This is the new covenant - the new deep promise God makes.

Let me be clear about what is happening here. God is not discarding the law. This is not a movement from law to no law, or from structure to chaos. It is a movement from external command to internal formation, from instruction to transformation, from distance to intimacy.

Hebrews tells us this covenant - this new promise - is mediated by Christ. Which means God does not lower the bar - God draws nearer. In Christ, we are not left trying harder to obey; we are drawn into the very life of God so that we might live it.

Hold up a rulebook.

Then place a hand on your chest.

The old covenant often felt like this - guidance outside us.

The new covenant is this - God's life within us.

But for many adults, faith quietly becomes a rulebook again.

Am I doing enough? Am I praying correctly? Am I a good enough Christian?

Why does everyone else seem better at this?

These questions creep in and they quietly produce spiritual fatigue, quiet guilt, and performance anxiety, but the new covenant says this: You are not managing a relationship with God - you are being drawn into one. God's promise is not: *try harder to obey*. God's promise is: *come closer and be changed*.

And at this point, I want to offer you another image.

Take out a soft bag filled with stuffed animals. Gently place one or two in view.

These may look like child's things - and in one sense, they are. But they speak a quiet, profound truth.

Because no child ever needed a manual to understand the comfort of their teddy. No one handed them a book and said: "When scared, turn to page 87: Hug teddy." They just knew. It wasn't taught. It was experienced.

That favourite animal became important not because someone explained it, but because it was *there* - at bedtime, on long journeys, in moments of fear or joy. It became beloved not by performance, but by presence.

And that's how God wants to be known.

Not by rote.

Not by formula.

Not by religious technique.

But by closeness. By trust. By experience.

To the children among us - and to the child in each of us - think about someone who loves you. How did you learn they loved you?

I bet it wasn't through lessons: But through presence. They were there when it mattered. They didn't just tell you; they showed you -a gain and again.

And God says: *That is how I want you to know me.*

There is something we need to be honest about. It is one thing to know about God - to learn facts, to read scripture, to memorise the right answers. It is another thing entirely to know God - to trust, to recognise, to walk with, to love.

I'm not saying that knowing about God doesn't matter - it does. Church matters. Scripture matters. Learning matters. Teaching nourishes relationship - but it can never replace it.

So let us stop and reflect.

The tragedy is not that we sometimes break rules. The tragedy is when we start to believe that God is primarily a rule-giver rather than a life-giver.

But God's dream - Jeremiah's dream - Hebrews' proclamation - is intimacy.

You see, Hebrews insists that Jesus mediates this covenant - this intimacy - and that means that God has not sent us a better instruction manual. God has come personally near.

Therefore, the invitation today is not: **Be better behaved Christians**. It's not: **Get faith right**. The invitation is this: *Step out of performance. Step into trust. Allow God to work within.*

Ask quietly:

So... where has faith started to feel like pressure rather than relationship?

Short silence.

No one teaches you how to recognise the voice of someone you love. You recognise it because you've lived with it.

And God says: *That is how I want you to know me.*

Pray quietly:

God of mercy,

who chooses closeness over distance,

write your life upon our hearts.

Where we feel pressure, bring rest.

Where we feel distance, draw near.

Where we feel uncertainty, plant trust.

Teach us not only to know about you,

but to know you.

Amen.