

## OD Talk Hebrews Introduction and Chapter 1

So, it is the beginning of a new calendar year and the start of a new school term. Today at Open Door we begin a new series looking at the Letter to the Hebrews.

Some of the verses and passages may be familiar to you – if you have been involved with Boy's Brigade or SYG the verse in Chapter 6 about your anchor holding will be one you know; other familiar verses might be clouds of witnesses, great high priest, faith being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see – words that sometime appears in our liturgy that we say or in songs or hymns

I have heard Hebrews describes as being something of a 'marmite' book of the Bible – you either love it with all the different imagery and ideas or you might find some of the language complicated and dense and some of directions about living a Christian life difficult. That is OK. The prayer of the ministry team is that as we journey through this letter together this new year, we would all learn something new, gain new insights about God, Jesus and faith and also find encouragement on our respective journeys of faith

So, let's start with a bit of an introduction to the letter: Who wrote this letter?

Historically it was attributed to St Pual as you can see from this page for the beginning of Hebrews in this 1611 edition of The King James Bible.

However, the style of writing is very different from that of Paul's letters and most commentators agree that was not written by Paul. Some people have suggested the writer might have been Apollos a well-known early Christian preacher who is mentioned in Acts as 'an eloquent man' who 'burned with passion', although there is little other evidence that this is the case. Other names that have been suggested include Clement of Rome, Barnabas,

Luke, Priscilla and Silvanus. But the long and short of it is, we simply don't know.

This also means we know very little about when the book was written, it has been estimated that it was probably somewhere between the early 60's CE and 95 CE, but again there are a range of opinions.

We also don't know who the original recipients of this letter were. The number of references to the Hebrew Bible, or what we know as the Old Testament, may have led to the conclusion that these were people of Jewish background. They may well have been converts from Judaism, but whoever they were, Jew, or Gentile, or a mixture of both, they definitely share the same Christian commitment as the author.

Where they were located is another thorny issue, it is possibly Rome, as there is a reference in Hebrews 13: 24 to those of Italy, but they might have been in Jerusalem or Colossae or elsewhere.

So, we don't really know who wrote it, when it was written, who the original audience was, or where the author was when he wrote.

But we can say that the author was a well-educated Jewish Christian with knowledge of the Hebrew Bible and there are influences of Paul's theology in the letter. The author knew his audience and is able to give them news of Timothy who we presume is Paul's companion who is mentioned elsewhere in Acts.

This epistle or letter gives lots of links between the Old and New Testaments which can help us to understand how they are interconnected and the author quotes at least 35 times. Have a look at a Bible with footnotes and you can see where the quotes in Hebrews are from.

But we can also state that the author uses an excellent rhetoric style including different allusions, metaphors as well as all those Old Testament references. Some have even gone so far as to describe Hebrews as a literary masterpiece.

The opening words in the original Greek and excuse my extremely rudimentary Greek pronunciation, are

*Polymeros kai polytropos palai*

You can hear the alliteration (all those letter p) and the musicality of the words. Whilst the text might look like a letter, when it is read aloud, we realise that it was a sermon, or an exhortation that was supposed to have been listened to because it is full of beautifully crafted words and phrases. A rather long sermon admittedly, but with words that were meant to be chewed over and pondered upon and then lead to action

So rather than refer to the author we might do better to refer to the author as the preacher as some commentators do

But most importantly this letter is Christocentric – it is all about Jesus. It focuses on who Jesus really is, and Jesus' supremacy. Jesus is superior to angels (Heb 1-2) and Moses (Heb 3). The preacher uses the words better, more and greater to describe Jesus more than 25 times in this letter.

The preacher also talks a lot about Jesus' 'High Priestly Ministry' (Heb 4 and 7) and his death as the superior sacrifice (Heb 9)

Whoever his audience was, they were tired and struggling with their faith, they were possibly people who had undergone persecution. The preacher encouraged them, and us, not to fall away (Heb 5-6) and to have a deeper understanding (Heb 5:11-13).

There is also the Challenge to his listeners to live by faith – (Heb 11) and not to not to be complacent (Heb 6:4-12 and 12:11-12) but instead, to run with endurance

There is a lot in Hebrews and during the term we will dig a bit deeper into a number of those different topics and ideas

But let's go back to the beginning of the letter with those beautiful Greek words

*Polymeros kai polytropos palai*

Or in translation God speaks in many and various ways

God is depicted not as some passive, silent, distant being, but instead as one who speaks, argues, converses, encourages, tells stories, and connects heaven and earth; and has been doing so since the beginning of the universe. God is a speaking God and has spoken in many different ways throughout human history. God has spoken through the ancestors and the prophets; people who we remembered as we lit the advent candles on our wreath not so very long ago before Christmas.

But, says the preacher in Hebrews, God has spoken in these last days through his son – this is the ultimate expression of all God has to say. This is not to say that everyone who has gone before is nothing, far from it, it is just that Jesus is the most important.

Jesus is the heir of all things, not just the land and the nations, he is the creator and sustainer of the universe. Through Christ sin has been dealt with and forgiveness is possible. Jesus is a reflection of God's Glory; an imprint of what God is like; it is through Christ that we see and understand God most clearly. Jesus is God's word, the word made flesh.

Jesus is a revelation, a revealing, which is very appropriate at this time of year since in the church we are still in the season of Epiphany, and Epiphany is all about revealing and revelation. Jesus reveals God to us and to all of humanity

So our challenge at the beginning of this new year is to get to know more about Jesus by spending time in His presence through prayer and study of the scriptures, in worship and meeting with him in bread and wine. May we hear God speak to us as we read the Bible, as we wait in silence, in nature, through those we meet and through all the mundane activities of everyday life. And as we listen may we all discover more of God's love, mercy and grace.