

This evening I want to look with you at the well-known section at the close of Hebrews 4 – commencing at verse 14.

[*Read Hebrews 4. 14-16*]

The 'then' – 'seeing then' (or 'seeing therefore') – at the beginning of verse 14 takes us back to the section *at the end of chapter 2 and beginning of chapter 3*, where the writer spoke earlier of the Lord Jesus as a High Priest. And our passage, in part at least, is the writer's response to the taunts, the sneers, the jibes of non-Christian Jews – who were quick to argue that, in their eyes, Christianity was clearly lacking and deficient in that it offered *nothing to compare* with the elaborate ritual and ceremony of their great temple – that in particular it had no visible high priest with his sacred office, his splendid robes and his impressive ministries. 'Ah, but', the writer responds, we have something better - something *far better!* And I want to consider three points with you this evening – first, **what we do have**; second, **what we do not have**; and third, **what we have to do**.

1. What we do have

Seeing then that we have a great high priest

The word '**have**' or 'having' is *one* of the key words of the letter – as the writer encourages his readers by drawing their attention to some of the distinctive blessings which Christians possess and enjoy.¹ In chapter 6, he tells us that we are those who 'have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us: which hope we **have** as an anchor of the soul, both secure and firm, and which enters into that within the veil', 6. 18-19 – that our hope is anchored within the heavenly sanctuary. In chapter 10, he tells us that we **have** 'boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus', 10. 19. And again, in chapter 13 that 'We **have** an altar (probably a reference to the cross, viewed as the place of sacrifice) whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle', 13. 10.

He opens chapter 8 with the words, 'Now of the things which we have spoken this is the sum (this is the chief, the crowning, the principal point) – we **have** such an high priest, who is set on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens' – the expression 'such an high priest' throwing us back to the end of chapter 7, '*such* an high priest became us, who is {*in His character*} holy, harmless (the opposite of 'evil'), undefiled (free from all taint), {*in His glory and exaltation*} separated from sinners, and made higher than the heavens; {*and who, in His sacrifice*} does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people's, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself' 7. 26-2. This, the writer insists, is the kind of high priest which 'became us', which was 'fitted' to our need – which was 'suited' to us in every way – and this (in His character, glory and sacrifice) is the very kind of high priest we *have*.

And our high priest is '**great**'. Almost two years ago, the notice board at the Spanish Wells Gospel Chapel, after '11.00 am' declared, 'The Lord's super' – apartment dictionary = 'exceptional'. Well, my Lord is certainly that! The angel Gabriel told Mary, 'Call His name Jesus; He shall be **great**', Luke 1. 32. And He is great in every office He holds. He is a great **Prophet** (Nain, only son, widow, raised, fear seized all, glorified God, a *great prophet* is risen among us'), Luke 7. 16; He is a great **king** ('swear not at all ... neither by Jerusalem, because it is the city of the great **King**', Matt. 5. 35. And here, He is a great **high priest**. Indeed, our epistle more or less concludes with a further reference to His greatness, speaking as it does of 'the God of peace, who brought up out of the dead the **great** shepherd of the sheep ... our Lord Jesus', 13. 20.

So then, far from being badly off in comparison – these Christian converts had – and we have – what Judaism never had! It was estimated that there were about 100,000 Jewish **priests** in NT days. And Israel had many **chief priests** (members of the families of the various high priests). Over the history of the nation there had been over 80 **high priests** – though in more recent centuries many of those had not been of the proper line – had not been descended from Aaron. Over the previous 240 years or so (stretching back to the days of Antiochus Epiphanes and the Maccabees) there had been no less than 42 high priests – *five* had been appointed by Greek kings, *eight* by popular decree, *22* by Herod and his family, and the remaining *seven* by Roman procurators – with the office often going to the highest bidder. It was *not* a happy story. But – leaving aside these less worthy specimens – *even* Aaron himself – though called and appointed by God – had not been a **great** high priest. We have then a high priest who transcends all others ... who is more excellent and glorious than all!² And the writer now turns our attention from *what* He is to *where* He is and to *who* He is.

(i) *Where He is. 'That is passed into the heavens'.*

Better translated 'passed through the heavens' – this is the same word as we find, for example, in John 4. 4, 'He must needs go *through* Samaria', and in 1 Cor. 16. 5, 'I will come to you, when I shall pass *through* Macedonia'.

Introducing the thought of our Lord's course and path through the heavens not only serves to explain why the Christian has no visible high priest. It also serves to set our great high priest apart from Aaron and his many

successors. On the Day of Atonement, *they* sacrificed both sin offerings and burnt offerings at the brazen altar, and then 'passed *through*' the court of the tabernacle, *through* the first veil, *through* the holy place, *through* the second veil, into the holy of holies to sprinkle blood both on and before the mercyseat.

But *our great high priest* towers over them all in that *He passed* – not through the various compartments of some earthly structure – whether tabernacle or temple, even *if* built according to God's pattern – but through the heavens – through both the atmosphere and the starry regions – and whatever else is out there. Chapter 9 speaks of *that* 'greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation', and adds, concerning the Lord Jesus, 'not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered *the Most Holy Place* once for all', v. 11. The writer returns to the same point in verse 24 of that chapter – 'Christ is *not* entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures (the patterns) of the true; but *into heaven itself*, now to appear in the presence of God for us' – that is, He has passed, not through the *shadow* but the *substance* – not through the *type* but the *reality* – into the immediate presence of God Himself.

What dignity then is His! – He is 'made higher than the heavens', Heb. 7. 26 – or, as Paul would doubtless have expressed it, 'ascending up *far* above all heavens', a lift from Eph. 4. 10.

(ii) *Who He is. 'Jesus the Son of God'*. By name 'Jesus'; by title 'Son of God'.

The original readers would have known that at the close of their OT there was a prominent high priest with the name 'Jesus' (in Hebrew Joshua) – repeatedly described as 'Joshua, the son of Josedach' – six times in all – Hag. 1. 1, 12, 14; 2. 2, 4; Zech. 6. 11. But Jesus, *our* high priest, is *not* the son of Josedach – nor does he ever wear filthy garments – nor ever need iniquity to pass from Him – as that Joshua/Jesus did, according to Zech. 3. 4.

Nor, for that matter, is *our* great high priest 'a son of Aaron' – for, as the writer says in chapter 7, 'it is evident that our Lord sprang out of *Juda*; of which tribe Moses spoke nothing concerning priesthood', Heb. 7. 14. Our great high priest is neither son of Josedach nor Aaron – *He* is no-one less than *the Son of God*.

His name – *Jesus* – stresses His humanity – brought out clearly and delightfully for us in chapter 2 – 'we see *Jesus*, who was made a little *lower* than the angels (on account of the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour) that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man', v. 9 – taking us back to His earthly history and experience. His title – *Son of God* – stresses His divine dignity and status – brought out for us in chapter 1 – the title 'son' occurring no less than four times – not there '*lower* than the angels' but '*so much better* than the angels' – 'for to which of the angels did he ever say, You are my Son?' But the Lord Jesus is not pointed out as Son in chapter 2 - amazingly, *we* are the sons in chapter 2, 'it became him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing *many sons* to glory, to make the captain (the author, pioneer, file-leader) of their salvation perfect through sufferings', 2. 10.

No other High Priest was ever called Great – no other high priest ever passed through the heavens – no other high priest carries the title 'Son of God'. Son of God! – note that title – and remember that, according to Heb. 1. 8-10, 'with regard to the Son', God says, 'You, Lord, in the beginning laid the foundation of the earth; and *the heavens* are the works of thine hands' – the what? – 'the heavens' – and the time came, the writer is saying, when the Son of God passed through *the very heavens* His *own* hands had once made.

2. What we do not have

We have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities

Why the double negative? Not only, I guess, as a device – a way – to underline and emphasize the positive – that we *do* have a high priest who *is able* to be touched – which it certainly does ... but to meet head on the fairly obvious objection that, *if* our Great High Priest is as great, as glorious and as dignified as the writer claimed – both in terms of *status* – His divine nature – and in terms of *distance* – His heavenly situation, then, surely and necessarily, He must be remote and inaccessible – at such a distance from us that we can't really expect Him to take any keen interest in us – nor, for that matter, can we believe that He is capable of any fellow-feeling with us. Ah, but, the writer insists, He is *not* detached, unfeeling and indifferent – He is not *out of touch* with us.

Yes, He has changed His *place*, but He has not changed His *nature* as man. Yes, He has changed His *position*, but He has not changed His *affection* and concern for each one of us.

'***Touched with the feeling***' translates a single word from which we derive our English word 'sympathy', and which would be rendered literally 'suffer-with'. The *exact* word occurs elsewhere in the NT only in chapter 10, 'For you suffered together with – you sympathised with – those in bonds, and took joyfully the spoiling of your goods (*possessions*), knowing in yourselves that ye have in heaven a better and an enduring substance (*possession*)',

10. 34. The word describes that which is felt by *one person* who has known and has experienced the same as that through which *another person* is passing.

To the Greeks, one of the chief attributes of God was 'apatheia', the inability to feel anything – the inability to be affected by anything. I read of one teacher in England who asked, 'Johnny, what's the meaning of the word 'apathy?' Johnny responded instantly, 'I don't know, Miss – and what's more, I don't care'. Without realising it, Johnny had it exactly – that is apathy.

Thank God, our great high priest isn't like that – He *does* know and He *does* care – He is able to sympathize.

His request, 'watch with me' in the Garden of Gethsemane, recorded in Matthew 26. 38, reveals *His* desire in the days of His flesh for *the sympathy of those He loved* – in the words of David's Psalm 69, He could say, 'I looked for some to take pity, but there were none; and for comforters, but I found none', v. 20. But *now* He extends *His sympathy to those He loves* – He is touched with the feeling of our infirmities – 'of our weaknesses' – not of course 'of our sins' – as the writer makes clear in his expression 'apart from sin'.

I think it would be worth us taking a few moments to distinguish our Lord's present work as *our great high priest* from His present work as *our 'advocate'* – of which the apostle John wrote – 'if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: and he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the whole world', 1 John 2. 1. Please note that the issue *there* is that of our *sins* – it is a question of *God's provision for the sinning Christian*. Because the work of Jesus Christ our *advocate* is concerned with our sins, it therefore rests foursquare on His death, the sacrifice by which He appeased and settled the wrath of God.

But our Lord's work as our *high priest* is concerned – *not* with our *sins* – *but* with our weaknesses, our infirmities and trials – and rests, *not* on His death, but on *His life* – partly His life *here on earth*, His personal experiences of trial and temptation – on account of which He is able to succour or help us – as the writer says at the end of chapter 2, 'in that he himself has suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted', v. 18 – and to sympathise with us. He is able to *succour* and to *sympathise*. That is, in the symbolic language of the OT, He bears and carries us – known by name – both on His *breast* and on His *shoulder*, Exod. 28.12, 29.³

But His work as our high priest rests on His life, *not only* in respect of *His life here on earth*, but also in respect of *His present, unending life* – 'He is able', the writer says in 7. 25, 'also to save them to the uttermost (save them entirely, completely, all the way through) that come to God by him, seeing *He ever lives* to make intercession for them'.

I recall the time when Eli the priest saw Samuel's mother Hannah praying – 'Eli watched her mouth. Now Hannah spoke in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard. Therefore Eli *thought* she was drunk', 1 Sam. 1. 12-13. But our High priest never jumps to conclusions – He never forms a wrong judgement – He never makes a mistake. He always understands – fully and accurately.

'But was in all points tempted (tried, afflicted) like as we are'.

In the context, with an eye to the circumstances of the readers of the letter, the writer no doubt had in mind particularly that the Lord Jesus faced very powerful forces aimed at drawing Him aside from His work and mission – from doing the will of God.

The writer is saying, 'Yes, He *is now* where none of us have yet been, that is true – but He *has been* where we *are now*' – turning our attention from *where He is in the present* to *where He has been in the past*. For He has not only passed *through the heavens* but He previously passed *through experiences of severest testing and trial* while on earth.

We have then a great high priest who has graduated from the college of suffering and who is certainly *not* remote and distant. Notwithstanding His divine nature and His upward path to the very highest heaven, He has an unrivalled, an unmatched, capacity to sympathise with all His people in their many trials and troubles.

'In all respects according to our likeness'. It goes without saying, of course, that the Lord Jesus did not experience in detail every possible external temptation which men and women face – which temptations vary, of course, according to whether a person is married or single, is powerful or weak, is wealthy or poor, and so on. But He *did* experience the whole range of temptations and trials which pressure His people to deviate from the will of God – which pressure them to give in and to throw in the towel as Christians.

He knew, and He knows, what it is *to suffer pain and to feel sorrow*. He knew, and He knows, what it is *to be poor*. He knew, and He knows, what it is *to be weary*. He knew, and He knows, what it is *to be hungry*. He knew, and He knows, what it is *to be rejected*. He knew, and He knows, what it is *to share a home with unbelievers* – for His own brothers did not then believe in Him, John 7. 5. He knew, and He knows, what it is *to be alone*. He knew, and

He knows, what it is *to be reproached*. He knew, and He knows, what it is *to be deserted by friends*. He knew, and He knows, what it is *to be attacked by Satan* – and how!

Our great high priest is able to view all such testings *through the eyes of the one being tested*. [Sister in Doncaster – miss relationship in heaven, John 19. 26; Dennis – attack on integrity, falsely accused of deceiving others, Luke 23. 2; 1 Pet. 2. 22-23.]

Without sin

Literally 'apart from sin'. The writer emphasises that, *if* the Lord Jesus was altogether *like* us *in our trials*, He was altogether *unlike* us *in our sin*. Sin didn't exist in Him. The lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life never defiled *His* pure soul. There was nothing in Him to which the Devil could appeal. Satan found no burnable material for his fiery darts – the ruler of this world came and had nothing in Him, John 14. 30.

The identical expression occurs in an entirely different connection at the end of chapter 9 - 'Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and to them that look for him shall He appear the second time *without sin* unto salvation', 9. 28 – without having anything at all to do then with the removing of sin! There the writer stresses that *the work of the cross* was a one-time event – a single sacrifice that took care of my sins forever. That is, the expression is used by the writer to safeguard both the truth of our Lord's *sinless Person* and the truth of His *finished work*.

3. What we have to do

Let us

This is one of 13 times the words are found in this letter – easy remember, one for each chapter. Note that the writer joins himself with his readers – and the tense properly is, 'Let us *keep on* holding fast/let us *keep on* drawing near'.

Let us hold fast our profession

Let us grasp, let us cling to, take firm hold of – our confession – of the open declaration of our faith. Just as we once held fast to the hope set out in the gospel – we are described in 6. 18 as those 'who have fled for refuge to *lay hold* (same word) upon the hope set before us', 6. 18.

Let us therefore come boldly

Since we have such a High Priest in the presence of God for us, let us not only *go on*, 6. 1, and let us not only *go out* – to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach, 13. 13 - but let us *go in*.

'Let us come' – let us approach – let us draw near – a word common in the Greek Old Testament, often used of coming before God to worship. It is another of the key words of the letter – 'Wherefore he is able also to save them entirely *that come* unto God by him, seeing He ever lives to make intercession for them', 7. 25; 'Let us *draw near* with a true heart in full assurance of faith', 10. 22.

I fear that today we miss much of the impact such words would have had on the original readers. What a spectacular privilege! In the Old Testament, even an Israelite – if of the wrong tribe – or even if of the right tribe and of the wrong family – would incur the death penalty for venturing into the *earthly* counterpart of the heavenly sanctuary. God said to Aaron, 'I have given your priest's office to you as ... a gift; and the stranger that comes near shall be put to death', Num. 18. 7. And *we*, remember, are gentiles!

'Boldly' – the word of chapter 10 – 'Having therefore, brethren, *boldness* to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus', 10. 19. Not, of course, that we dare swagger, arrogantly, brazenly, flippantly into God's presence ... as though it is entirely natural for human beings to meet God – as if it is no big deal to encounter the Lord of the universe. But we *do* come with confidence – with 'openness of speech', literally – with the liberty to speak freely. This is the word in 'I spoke *openly* to the world', John 18. 20, and in 'He spoke that saying *openly*', Mark 8. 32 (of His suffering). That is, we do not come cringing, but with confidence – free to speak out all that is *in* and *on* our hearts.

To the throne of grace

What a beautiful expression! First to remember that there *is* a throne – that all is controlled – that there is an unshakeable centre of power and authority in the universe. It is the 'throne of the Majesty in the heavens', 8. 1.

We read in Revelation 4 of a time when lightnings, voices (that is, noises/rumblings) and thunders will proceed – will issue – from God's throne. In Revelation 4 the throne is active – about to assert itself – about to erupt – in judgement. The flashes of lightning, and crashes of thunder pealing from the throne, are heralds and warnings of impending judgement for the earth. I guess we would think twice about drawing near to *such* a throne.

But here it is a 'throne of grace' – a *gracious* throne – a *grace-supplying* throne. I read recently that the Lord Jesus went to the cross more willingly than we do to the throne of grace! Shame on us!

that we may obtain mercy

To 'receive' literally – not to 'obtain' in the sense of to 'secure' – as if mercy is something difficult to get. We 'receive' it – when we come, He holds it out to us, as it were. And we '**find grace**' – it is there waiting for us. 'Grace' – favour, strength, counsel, direction, support, to help us in all the various duties and trials of life. In drawing near to *this* throne we receive *mercy for our failures and mistakes*; and find *grace for timely help for our trials and troubles*.

'**Help**' – what a lovely word. For we *all* need help – and I have no doubt those of us need it most who realize it least.

'**In time of need**' – a single word, translated elsewhere (i) '*convenient*' - 'when a *convenient* day was come ... Herod on his birthday made a supper to his lords', Mark 6. 21; (ii) '*opportunity*' – 'from that time he sought *opportunity* to betray him', Matt. 26. 16; and (iii) '*in season*' – 'be instant (at hand, available) *in season*, out of season', 2 Tim. 4. 2. At this throne then, we find grace which provides *convenient/opportune/in season* help – provides help at exactly the right moment. In the time of temptation, trial, perplexity, sorrow or loss, 'we find grace to help *just when we need it*'.

What a happy, what a blessed people we are. So let us keep on holding fast to our Christian confession and let us keep on drawing near to God's grace-supplying throne.

Footnotes

¹ <http://www.stempublishing.com/authors/davison/WEHAVEHB.html>.

² A high priest is a relative term, involving others of lesser degree, yet in this Epistle the saints are never referred to as priests. The reason would appear to be that their attention should be concentrated on the One who represents them in the presence of God, rather than an explanation of their privileges as priests. Peter and John bring before the saints the truth of their being priests, yet never refer to our Lord as being High Priest.

³ Six of their names were engraved on an onyx on one shoulder, and six on an onyx on his other shoulder according to their *birth*. On the breastplate their names were engraved on different stones, and this time according to their *tribes*. This in type suggested both the strength and the affections of the priest who represented them in the presence of God.