

A Better Revelation

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 16th of February 2003.

The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled A Better Revelation and is based on Hebrews chapter 1 verses 1 to 4.

The movement of our imagination, our own creation, something perhaps in our image. Spike Milligan once said that I pray fervently but I don't know who I'm praying to.

So will the real God please stand up? Now our problem is not that the real God is unknowable, that he's reclusive or private or silent.

Our problem if we're not sure what God is like is that we haven't listened to him. See what is critical is that God has spoken, that God has revealed himself and declared his hand, who he's like, what he's on about for this world and for us.

[1 : 15] God speaks. He's not mute. Years ago when I was young and my sister even younger, we were having dinner at my grandparents' house.

My uncle is a fairly shy man and the family story is that in the middle of the meal my uncle spoke and my sister who was quite young, maybe two or three, waved her arm or her fork or something and said, him speaks.

God is in the business of speaking. He's in the communication business and he does speak, he has spoken and still speaks to us.

And because God speaks, religion is not a free for all exercise in imagination. It's not a creative activity to try and dream up the best sort of God that we can imagine.

Because God speaks and tells us what he's like, we're not at liberty to make up what he's like. He's spoken and our job is to listen.

[2 : 20] He's declared his hand, he's told us what he's like, he's told us what his purposes are and our job is to listen. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews, you may like to have the passage open on page 970 in the Bibles, gets down to business straight away.

There's no sort of casual pleasantries in the opening verses. Dear church that I'm writing to, how are you? Hope you've escaped the bushfires. Have you had a nice summer holiday sort of stuff. And unlike most of the other letters in the New Testament, he doesn't tell us who he is.

My name's Fred. Doesn't tell us who he's writing to. Doesn't offer a little prayer of thanksgiving or some other prayer at the beginning like most of the other letters have. Indeed, from the opening words he gets right down into business, boots and all.

And his key opening point in the verses that we're looking at today is that God has spoken. He's not silent or mute. So the opening words, Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets.

But in these last days he has spoken to us by a son. God spoke. God has spoken. There's a contrast between verses 1 and 2.

[3 : 35] Long ago, verse 1 says, in these last days, verse 2. Long ago God spoke. In these last days he has spoken. Long ago God spoke to our ancestors.

In these last days God spoke to us. And long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and varied ways by the prophets. But in these last days God has spoken to us by a son.

Now verse 1 is in many ways summing up what we call the Old Testament, the first three quarters of the Bible, things that were written before Jesus was ever born on earth.

And the writer is saying that the Old Testament is God speaking. He's not dismissing the Old Testament and say, it's out of date, it's just made up, get rid of it, something new has happened, that's what's important.

He's not saying that. He's saying that the Old Testament is God speaking. He's speaking there by the prophets, by human mediators who received God's word and spoke it out to the people of God in the different ways, in different ages, through the period of the Old Testament, from about 2000 BC to about 300 BC.

[4 : 49] And it's long ago because even when this writer wrote this letter, a couple of decades or so after Jesus died on the cross, middle or later part of the first century AD, it was already a long time since the Old Testament was finished, 350 years or so.

And what he's writing in verse 1 is not a new claim. The readers of this letter would have probably understood it. And if you read the Old Testament yourself, it's obvious God speaks.

The very first page of the Bible, the very first page of the Old Testament, God speaks to create. The first people, Adam and Eve in the garden, God speaks to them. Then moving along to one of the first significant leaders of God's people, Abraham, God spoke to him and made him various promises, which actually become the controlling theme for the rest of the Old Testament.

A bit later on again, the key leader of God's people was Moses. To Abraham, God spoke promises. To Moses, God reiterated the promises and spoke fundamental laws about how God's people ought to live.

And that sums up the first part of the Old Testament. It's about God speaking promises and laws and various other things in different ways and to different people. And then subsequent to the people and Moses and the people in the land, we read what we think are history books, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings.

[6 : 11] The Jews called them the former prophets. God was still speaking through those books, recording what had happened through the history of the people of God.

And then you come to one of the great kings, David. To him, God spoke. New promises. Building on the earlier promises to Abraham, building on the laws given to Moses, the promises about a king, about a dynasty, and about an eternal future and Messiah in the end.

God spoke in many and varied ways, is what the writer said in verse 1. And if you read through the story of the Old Testament, it's clear that it's true. But there were some people who were clearly called prophets.

Abraham was regarded as a prophetic figure. Moses was called a prophet. But there were others who had a particular role as a prophet, receiving God's word and speaking it to God's people. The great ones, after whom there are books, people like Isaiah and Jeremiah and Daniel, but others for whom there was no book, but they're recorded in other books, like Elijah and Elisha and so on.

So, throughout the Old Testament, it is God speaking to his people in various ways, in many different ways, through history, through laws, through promises, through poetry, through psalms, through proverbs, through words of prophets and words of kings, words of priests and so on.

[7 : 33] Sometimes God speaks words of rebuke and chastisement because the people had gone astray. Other times he speaks words of comfort and encouragement because the people are a bit discouraged.

And throughout it all, in the many and varied ways in which God spoke, all the way through the Old Testament, from beginning to end, God was revealing who he was and his purposes for this world and his people.

So, in a sense, verse 1 is summing up the Old Testament and telling us not to dismiss it, not to gloss over it or throw it out, but rather that in it, God spoke and it's still God's word.

In fact, of all the letters in the New Testament, probably this one more than others, quotes the Old Testament as though God is still speaking through the Old Testament. It's not a word that's gone. It's a word that's still living and active.

But where the Old Testament is various and many different ways God's speaking, a bit piecemeal and a bit partial, God now, in these last days, the writer says in verse 2, has spoken to us by a son.

[8 : 43] A final, full, definitive word from God. The final revelation of God, who he is, his character, his purposes and plans for this universe.

In the past, bits and pieces through history. But now by a son, the final and definitive word of God, his son, Jesus Christ. You see, what the writer is telling us here, as the Bible tells us in other places and in different ways, God is revealed fully in Jesus Christ.

You see, God's not unknowable. He's not mute. He tells us who he is and he tells us most clearly in Jesus Christ because Jesus Christ makes God known. And God is not reclusive because God in Jesus Christ comes down to earth, gets his hands dirty in the mess and quagmire of this fallen world, revealing God and his purposes and plans.

God is not hidden because Jesus Christ is God come out into the open for us to see and hear. And in a sense, Christianity stands or falls on this point.

If Jesus Christ is not the definitive revelation of God, we are fools for being here today and we are wasting our time completely.

[10 : 05] But if Jesus is the final, full and definitive word from God, then we are fools not to listen to him and to follow him and obey him.

Because in Jesus Christ, God says everything that he needs to say and in Jesus Christ, God says everything that we need to hear. There's no more that we need to know about God other than what God has spoken in Jesus Christ.

So what is it in particular about Jesus Christ then that God has revealed? Well, the writer of this letter goes on to list seven extraordinary things about Jesus Christ.

Verse 2, the second half, lists the first and second of them. Firstly, God appointed Jesus Christ heir of all things. That is that all things will belong to Jesus Christ.

He will inherit them all at the end of time. It's telling us that Christianity is a universal religion. That is everything that you can imagine in this universe comes under Jesus Christ.

[11 : 14] That is there's not a portion of the world that's Christian and a portion that's something else and a portion that's something else again. But everything comes under Jesus Christ. He'll inherit the lot.

And that's not unfair because as the next claim about Jesus says, through Jesus God also created the worlds. So that everything that's made that will be possessed by Jesus at the end actually belongs to him because Jesus was involved in the creating of it.

When God created the world, Jesus was creating the world. And it's right that in the end all things will belong to Jesus Christ. So if we want to understand the universe and the meaning of life, we must consider Jesus Christ through whom God created it all and who in the end will inherit it all.

But there's more about Jesus Christ. The third claim at the beginning of verse 3 is that he's the reflection of God's glory. Now I'm not very good with the stars and sun and moon and all this sort of stuff but my simple understanding is that the moon reflects the light of the sun.

So when you look up into the night sky and you see the moon and it seems to be glowing, it's not actually glowing apparently, it's the light from the sun. I don't quite understand how that works but I presume it's a bit like a mirror.

[12 : 34] So when we look at the moon, it's as though it's reflecting light from the sun down onto earth. Now at one level, that's true about Jesus but actually the word that's used for reflection here is a stronger word than that.

It's not just that Jesus is like a passive mirror so the glory of God shines onto him and bounces off onto this world. The word is stronger because the glory of God actually emanates from Jesus.

He's the radiance, if you like, of God's glory. It's not just that he somehow is the conduit for it to bounce off him onto the world but that through Jesus Christ the glory of God actually comes to this world.

He is the light of the world after all. That's a very strong claim to make about Jesus Christ that the glorious, dazzling splendour of God comes to us from him.

An astonishing statement to make about Jesus Christ. You can get no closer identification of Jesus with God than that sort of statement.

[13 : 34] Indeed, it's built upon by the next and fourth claim that he's the exact imprint of God's very being. Perhaps the way we would say it is he's the spitting image of God.

Not just thinking about physical appearance but in God's very being, his nature, his character, his divinity, Jesus is the spitting image. If you want to see God, look at Jesus Christ.

If you want to know about God, look at Jesus Christ. If you want to see what God's like, look at Jesus Christ. It's all you need to see and all you need to know. The fifth claim about Jesus Christ at the end of, towards the end of verse 3 is that he sustains all things by his powerful word.

Sometimes people think that God's a bit like a watchmaker. He makes a watch, he winds it up, he puts it on the shelf and off it goes ticking. And God's remote, hands free. But the world's not like that.

God has made the world but he keeps sustaining it. And just as when God made the world, Jesus was making the world in God, so too Jesus is sustaining the world by his powerful word.

[14 : 40] The reason this world's still going today is not because of the United Nations. It's because God is sustaining it in Jesus Christ by his word. And for as long as God wants to sustain the world, he will and Jesus will.

Now there are five amazing claims about Jesus that are in a sense always true and always real. Jesus is always sustaining the world. He's always the radiance of God's glory.

He's always the exact imprint of God. But now the mood changes with the sixth claim. Because now it's not something that is in a sense ongoing true about the general character and person of Jesus.

Now there is one specific act of Jesus that is in mind. The end of verse 3, he made purification for sins.

That's the sixth claim. Jesus died on a cross is what it's saying. And he died on a cross to deal with the sin of the world. Notice how the writer isn't worried about his virgin birth or about his growing up as an adult or his humanity really.

[15 : 48] He's not worried in effect by his teaching or healing. He's not saying they're unimportant. But the most important thing about Jesus Christ on earth is that he died on a cross for the sin of the world.

The cross of Christ is the key event. And it's the key event by which God has spoken. Because on the cross of Christ, when he hung on that cross to die for sin, he reveals the very heart of God more clearly than anywhere else we can ever see it.

It's as though somehow on the cross, Jesus had torn open God's chest to expose his heart to the world. A bleeding heart where we see mercy of God for forgiveness, to offer forgiveness for sins to humans.

But a heart that is nonetheless holy and upright and righteous because sin needs to be dealt with properly. And Jesus on the cross is God's heart exposed of mercy and yet holiness together in harmony.

And it's once for all. He dies on a cross once. It's not an ongoing event. He's not always dying on a cross like he's always the radiance of God's glory. It's once only.

[17 : 06] It's all that was needed to deal with the sin of the world was God in Christ dying on a cross. And then comes the climax of this sequence, the seventh and final claim, if you like.

He sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high. Whenever in the Old Testament priests offered sacrifices of animals to deal with sin, they had to keep offering sacrifices because there was always sin to deal with.

It's just like cleaning your floor. When you're cleaning your floor, as all you men no doubt do, you sweep the kitchen floor and no sooner have you swept it and put it in the dustpan and thrown it out the back door or whatever you do with it, then you have to sweep the floor again because it's got dirty again.

It's hardly ever time, it seems to me, to sit down and let the kitchen floor stay clean. But when Jesus died on a cross to deal with the sin of the world, it was finished and dealt with and done, gone, atoned for, purified for and Jesus sat down at God's right hand.

No mention of him being buried, no mention of the resurrection from the dead. The writer, to climax this whole sequence, jumps straight to the fact that Jesus, after his resurrection, ascended to heaven and sat down at God's right hand because his work was over and his work was accomplished and it fulfilled what he intended for it.

[18 : 32] Sin was purified, sin was atoned for, the mess of this world was dealt with. You see, that's the big problem about our world. God made it good but human sin has corrupted it and rotted it and decayed it.

That's the problem and Jesus Christ is God dealing with it at its source, dying on a cross so that ultimately the world can be restored to God. and Jesus' work was done effectively and so he sat down at God's right hand on high.

There at God's right hand on high he was seen to be higher than any angel. Probably the people to whom this letter was written were tempted to think that angels were the most important beings or were to be worshipped but they're not.

Jesus was higher than them and the end of verse 4 says that his name is more excellent than theirs, the name of Jesus Christ the Lord. This letter was written to encourage Christians who were lagging in their faith.

Perhaps they were discouraged by opposition. Perhaps they'd lost enthusiasm after being Christian for a few years. Perhaps they were losing interest or finding it boring. This was written to Christians who were perhaps confused by the apparent silence of God in their world facing pressures.

[19 : 47] Some of them had given up meeting together, going to church and so on. Some of them perhaps feared that God was remote, that somehow they needed something else to bring them back to God or stand between them and God.

If you read through the letter they're the sorts of things you glean from what the state of the church was to whom this letter was written. It's a pastoral problem and we might well expect the writer to sort of pat them on the back and jolly them up and say, come on, you know, life's a bit more exciting than that, keep going.

but the answer to those pastoral problems is a very strong theology of Jesus Christ because Jesus Christ is the primary motivation for being a Christian.

Jesus Christ is the primary motivation for staying a Christian. Jesus Christ is the primary motivation for coming to church. Jesus Christ is the primary motivation for withstanding opposition.

Jesus Christ is the primary motivation for withstanding temptation. And if Jesus Christ is not God speaking to us, then it's all a waste of time. But if he is God speaking to us, his full and final and definitive word, then we must make every effort to hear him and heed him.

[21 : 06] And that's what this letter is about. Amen. Amen.