

## Reflection for Pentecost 12 by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

Today's Epistle reading comes from the final chapter of the letter to the Hebrews - an epistle in which the author is never named but where the closing section does have close parallels with other epistles written by St Paul, so he may be the author.

In the earlier sections of the letter, the writer has spent much of his time considering the nature of faith, using examples such as Abraham and the nature of Christ's work as our one true high priest who has passed through into the heavens. Now, in this closing chapter, his attention turns to the practical out working of faith within the church. But he does so, not by giving vast details on particular issues, rather by making the point that faith does not stop at what we believe. For faith to be true and living it needs to permeate every corner of our lives and to be visible to others. This visible faith in action is a sacrifice pleasing to God.

Or, to put it another way, through faith in Christ we are justified (set right) before God. That, though, is not the end of the story - only the beginning. Each of us as committed Christians, needs then to strive towards sanctification - that process of becoming more Christ like, and becoming more holy. As that process develops, its characteristics will be exhibited more & more clearly in our lives and, in so many ways, this can be an even more powerful witness than any number of words to the community in which we live.

This journey can be both constructive and destructive.

I will always have etched in my mind a holiday we took as a family, shortly after I was ordained, to Legoland in Denmark. We stayed in a bed and breakfast farmhouse, and I got into a conversation with another couple staying there as well. As we talked, they sensed I was a clergyman and the conversation drifted to the subject of Christianity. They openly admitted that they were not Christians, but neither were they opposed to the teachings of Christ. What, though, had put them off was the discontinuity they had seen in some Christians that they knew: the way the faith they proclaimed so loudly with their lips did not match the reality of lives they were seen living - rather, the opposite was true.

The way we live and act is important not only in our own lives and for our own holiness, but also in the way the gospel is proclaimed. Faith and works need and must go hand in hand - they cannot be separated.

In the letter, the writer to the Hebrews looks to encourage a faith that generates a truly dynamic love - a dynamic love that makes new ways of being, new ways of sharing, normative within the body of Christ.

Increasingly, we live in society that seems to be built in, on and around the individual. One characteristic of this is the way it is difficult in society as whole to get people to commit themselves to serving the community on an ongoing basis. Yet, what we have in Hebrews is a plea for unselfishness and for the expression of love & faith as service.

*"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers.*

*Remember those who are in prison,*

*Remember ... those who are being tortured."*

This echoes our Lord's own teaching, recorded in Matthew,  
*"I was hungry and you gave me food,*

*I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink,  
I was a stranger and you welcomed me,  
I was naked and you gave me clothing,  
I was sick and you took care of me,  
I was in prison and you visited me.'"*

Each of these exhortations reflect the world into which the letter is written, but this is a world which, in many ways, is not that far from our own - a society that was increasingly mobile, with the need for Christians to welcome and provide hospitality for fellow brother and sister in the faith as they travelled from one place to another for a whole string of reasons, not always through choice. We might describe some of them as refugees.

This was a society in which the church was, from time to time, subject to public abuse, arrest, and loss of property. Support your fellow brothers and sisters going through trial and those in prisons. Provide for their needs - visit them - do not forget them.

The other aspect that the author highlights is the temptation to seek to blend into the world - to go almost unnoticed and, as a result, stay out of trouble, rather than to be prepared to be distinctive as Christ was distinctive.

Two examples of this are given: the love of money - seeking to find safety and security in wealth. Wealth in itself is not wrong, However when the acquiring of it or the possession of it creates an ever-growing barrier between God and us, reducing our dependency on God, that can get in the way, as it prevents faith and discipleship growing and maturing.

Sexual relationships, in the same way, were a temptation to the early church, with temple prostitutes being commonplace in Roman cities as the temple cults pervaded the whole of society. Faithfulness to one another in love is what is called for in relationships.

In general terms, this dynamic love is one that seeks the good of the whole Christian community and, as it develops, shines as a bright light of witness into a dark world.

In many ways we could use this list as a benchmark for our own lives. Maybe we are not under persecution, but do we care for, pray for and support our brothers and sisters who are under threat? We hear stories of churches under attack in different parts of the world. Do those stories brush over us, or do we feel something of their pain?

Are we prepared to spend time sitting listening to those in need; not necessarily trying to do anything in particular, but simply being there? Being there because we care, doing the small things that we can: why? because the suffering of one should affect us all.

Have we allowed the values and the norms of the world we live in to water down our faith and our trust in God? Do we rather trust ourselves for strength and that which we need - rather than looking to God.

Can we honestly say that we are continually offering a sacrifice of praise to God, with our lips, and also in the sacrifice of our lives, not neglecting to do good and to share what we have?

If we can, then such sacrifices are pleasing to God. If not, we need hear again those words from Hebrews.