

Sermon *Jesus, the Son of God*

“In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways...”

Sure enough, when the ancient people of God were in trouble, they cried out to him. God answered: God acted and God intervened. The people were saved. And then people drifted away. Not just once, but time and time again.

Whether it was Egyptians or the Philistines or the Babylonians or whoever or natural disaster – the people of God, needed God’s help, and God variously sent them judges, champions, and prophets to help them. Then the people were saved and they were happy, and, every time, soon enough, they went back to their old ways.

But that all changed on that first Christmas. The writer to the Hebrews, tells us that “... but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.”

And that ‘but’ is important, because it contrasts all the ways that God had spoken to his people in the past – in what we know as the Old Testament – with the way he did to the people at the time of the letter to the Hebrews, and indeed to us today.

But, he says, God has spoken to us through his Son.

In the Old Testament, God spoke through dreams and visions, through prophecy, and through the sacrifices and ceremonies of Jewish tradition. God had spoken to some directly, and some indirectly, but not, since Adam, ‘in person’... until that first Christmas.

From the moment Jesus came into the world, in that stable in Bethlehem, God had a new and better way of communicating with mankind, because, unlike the prophets of old, Jesus didn’t receive the word of God. He was - and is! - the Word of God. Jesus didn’t speak from God some of the time, like the prophets had, but all of the time, in everything he said and in everything he did, Jesus gave us the perfect revelation of God, and especially of God’s grace.

Hebrews goes on to tell us “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.”

In the modern church, we’re used to the idea that Jesus provided purification for our sins, or was the atoning sacrifice for our sins, or that he died for us. In fact, we’re so used to the idea we don’t always appreciate the significance of it. But think for a moment about how the Hebrews who first read this letter would have reacted to this news, because under Jewish law, dealing with sins meant sacrificing.

And that wasn't putting some money in an offertory bowl, or giving up some time to help others. Sacrificing meant killing bulls or goats or sheep or doves. And it was an ongoing process, and needed to be done with the correct rituals, by the correct people. The Jewish priests of the Old Testament made the same offerings again and again, day after day, Sabbath after Sabbath, new moon after new moon, year after year. Their work was never done.

But all that is finished with, because the Son is the perfect sacrifice for sins, and has sat down at the right hand of God (Hebrews 1:3).

In verse four, the writer to the Hebrews tells us that the Son is superior to the angels, because He has inherited a better name than theirs (Hebrews 1:4). The rest of the first chapter goes on to establish how the nature of Jesus is unique through a series of quotes from the Old Testament.

Unlike the angels, Jesus shares with God an intimate Parent-Son relationship. Though angels are called sons of God (in Job 38:7) and though Christians are referred to as the children of God (I John 3:2), Jesus' title of "Son" is used in this text to denote that only Jesus is entitled to ask God for dominion over the whole earth.

The next few verses (1:6-9) tell us that God has decreed that the angels must worship Jesus. We see this in Luke's gospel when the angel appears to the shepherds in the fields near Bethlehem: An angel of the Lord appeared to them [and] Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests." (Luke 2:9,13-14)

The last few verses of our reading from Hebrews come to us from Psalm 102: 25-27, a psalm which speaks of the messiah to come, and suggests that the one to come – the messiah, the Son – was also the creator. It reflects the opening of John's gospel, where John declares that Jesus, the Word, was with God in the beginning. God had to create the angels, but Jesus was with God in the beginning.

The story of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem is a familiar one. The images of the nativity that we share are warm and glowing and comforting. We sing the carols we know so well. But there is more – so much more – to Jesus than remembering him as that helpless baby lying in a manger.

We can look to Jesus' short life and ministry, how he told – and showed – people that the kingdom of God was at hand, how we taught and healed and fed the hungry. We can remember his death, his resurrection and his ascension.

But the story of Jesus is even bigger than that: it began in the very beginning, and is without end. That means that it is also here and now.

The writer to the Hebrews looks back to history and looks back through the scriptures he was familiar with, to help explain who Jesus is. I think it is important for us to do the same. To look back and see what God has done and what God has said. We know people will say that they hear a lot of things from God today, but we can always test what they say against what God has said and done in the past.

So today, this Christmas, let us all embrace the image of the baby lying in a manger, a child who fulfilled ancient prophecies – but let us also look beyond that to all that Jesus did and is. The one through whom all things were created, and the one who loved us so much, that he gave himself up for us. The one who call us to follow him today.

Amen.