Diocese of New Jersey - On-Line Sermon

19 Pentecost – Proper 22 – Year B – October 3, 2021

Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12; Mark 10:2-16

Preacher: The Right Reverend William H. Stokes, *Bishop of New Jersey*

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen*

*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.* (Hebrews 1:1).

These are the opening words of the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews. They capture me, these opening words of Hebrews. I hope they capture, inspire you too.

The so-called “letter” to the Hebrews is more sermon than letter.[[1]](#endnote-1) It’s a masterful exhortation by an anonymous author intended to “strengthen flagging faith and encourage hope in God’s promised salvation.”[[2]](#endnote-2) Faith and hope in Jesus Christ who the author declares is “*the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being”*(Heb 1:3).If you want to know God, if you want to know what God is like, if you want to know what God is about, the author urges, look at Jesus. It’s all there.

The Letter to Colossians echoes this, saying of Jesus: *He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers…*(Col. 1:15 – 16). Colossians also asserts, *For in him*, in Jesus, *all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross”* (Col. 1:19-20). Again, if you want to see God, know what God is like, look at Jesus. It’s striking these similar claims made by both the author of Hebrews and the author of Colossians.

“The Son is the radiance that emanates from the light that is God and bears God’s image as clearly as a coin bears the image of the die that stamped it,” biblical scholar David A. deSilva observes about the Hebrews passage.[[3]](#endnote-3) “The core of [the author’s] sermon is his exposition of the person, character, achievement, and model of the Son, Jesus.”[[4]](#endnote-4)

Hebrews is addressed to a church that, like us today, was struggling at a lot of levels. deSilva writes, “These believers have faced down a great deal of shaming and hostility from their neighbors, who disapprove of their withdrawal from the religious and social activities that bind a city and its people together (10:32-34), and the pressure isn’t going away (12:4; 13:3). The ongoing assaults on the believers’ honor, economic standing, and even their persons are taking their toll on individual commitment. Some have stopped identifying with the Christian group entirely (10:25); the danger exists that others might be “drifting away” (2:1), “turning away” (3:12), and thus “falling short” of attaining the good end that God has promised for those who remain faithful (4:1, 11; 12:15).”[[5]](#endnote-5)

We know about these things. Yes, in our consumerist, polarized, divided, secularized, violent, often-hostile COVID19 we know about those who have “drifted,” “turned away.” I hear it over and over again… “We’ve lost people…” “We wonder if they’ll every come back.” We see people pulled away by the fear, hatred and anger that are pervasive today. A cacophony of voices and realities have drawn people, so many people, away from Jesus and his love. To whom are they listening? Who are they following?

As Church, as the baptized, it is our calling to listen to one voice. It is our honor to follow one Lord, Jesus, who alone is *the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being.*

Philosopher and Theologian Romano Guardini, who died almost exactly 53 years ago, on October 1, 1968, once observed, “We [human beings] are the archenemy of our own salvation, and [Jesus], the Shepherd must fight first of all *with us – for us.”* Guardini’s observation is astute. How often our own stubbornness, self-will, sinfulness, fear, anger and ideologies are the primary obstacles in our relationships with one another and with God. How often they get in the way of our own happiness and contentment, get in the way of peace with ourselves.

While teaching at university in Berlin in the 1930s, Guardini, who was born in Italy but raised in Germany, openly criticized Adolph Hitler and was dismissed from his teaching position by the Nazis. As Robert Ellsberg reports in his book *Blessed Among Us*, Guardini used his forced retirement “to write books that later spoke to the spiritual hungers of the postwar world.”[[6]](#endnote-6) Guardini’s postwar writings were highly influential in Catholic circles, having an impact on Joseph Ratzinger who became Pope Benedict XVI, and Jorge Mario Bergoglio, now Pope Francis.

In a Forward to Guardini’s book *The Lord,* Pope Benedict XVI summarized Guardini’s work with words that are relevant to today’s reading from Hebrew’s, relevant to our whole lives in faith, as a matter of fact. Benedict wrote, “As we are taught by Guardini, the essence of Christianity is not an idea, not a system of thought, not a plan of action. The essence of Christianity is a Person: Jesus Christ himself. That which is essential is the One who is essential. To become truly real means to come to know Jesus Christ and to learn from him what it means to be human.”[[7]](#endnote-7) “The essence of Christianity is a person, Jesus Christ himself…To become truly real means to come to know Jesus Christ and to learn from him what it means to be human.”

*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 whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word* (Hebrews 1:1-3).

He sustains all things by his powerful word. All things, including you and me, because he is the Word, the Word made flesh (John 1:14), the one in whom the fullness of God is pleased to dwell (Col. 1:190. If you want to know what God is like, look to Jesus. If you want to know how God acts, look to Jesus. If we want to know what God desires of us, of each one of us, look to Jesus, *the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being…*

“Jesus was no cold Superman,” Romano Guardini writes, “he was more human than any of us. Entirely pure, unweakened by evil, he was loving and open to the core. His ardor, truth, sensitivity, power, capacity for joy and pain were unlimited, and everything that happened to him happened in the immeasurableness of his divinity.”[[8]](#endnote-8)

*God has spoken to us through the Son – the reflection of God’s glory – the exact imprint of God’s very being – he sustains all things by his powerful word,* sustains all things, including you and me. Jesus who suffered and died for the sake of the world, for our sakes, died for you and me, to provide us with an example of love, pure love, sacrificial love, selfless love, love that absolutely rejected hatred, that absolutely rejected violence…Jesus, who calls us to mirror him, to pattern our lives on his life. That’s what it means to be his disciple. *Follow me*, Jesus says (Matthew 9:9).

We are a people called and committed to living a certain way of life, patterning our lives on Jesus, following his commandment to love (John 13:34). We make vows, promises, which frame this pattern of living, solemn commitments to live and love like Jesus.

This demands believing in, putting our whole lives and trust in, God the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit as these have been revealed to us in the Holy Scriptures. Continuing in the Apostles’ Teaching and Fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in the prayers. Persevering in resisting evil and whenever we fall into sin, repenting and returning to the Lord. Proclaiming by word and example the Good News of God in Christ. Seeking and serving Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as our selves. Striving for justice and peace among all people, and respecting the dignity of every human being.[[9]](#endnote-9)

We are the body of Christ,[[10]](#endnote-10) called into Jesus’ life and ways by virtue of baptism, all of us. *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, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.*

Listen to these words, sing this hymn… Follow the person Jesus. Let his reflection, his divine reflection sanctify you, shine in you and through you…and live, truly live. Discover what it is to become truly human, one called by Jesus, brother, sister.[[11]](#endnote-11)

1. See Koester *art. cit.* [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Kittredge, Cynthia Brigg - Introduction to The Letter to the Hebrews – *The New Oxford Annotated Bible – New Revised Standard Version (Fully Revised Fourth Edition) –* Michael D. Coogan, Editor - (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) p. 2103. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. deSilva, David A. ““Commentary on Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5 – 12” on *Working Preacher* website for October 3, 2021 found at <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-27-2/commentary-on-hebrews-11-4-25-12-5> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ellsberg, Robert *Blessed Among Us-* Day by Day with Saintly Witnesses (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2016) p. 567 – Kindle edition. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ratzinger, Joseph Cardinal – “Introduction” to Guardini, Romano *The Lord* tr. Elinor C. Briefs (Washington, D.C., Regnery Publishing, 1954). P. 2 – Kindle location 120) [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Guardini, Romano *The Lord* tr. Elinor Brief (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 1954) p. 263 – Kindle edition [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See Book of Common Prayer (1979) pp. 304-305 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. See 1 Corinthians 1 Corinthians 12:27 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. See Hebrews 2:11. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)