

Hebrews 13:1-14

Back in September I went to Oak Hill to see my friend Matthew, who works there. He took me round the College, which had been the college I had trained in but hadn't seen for a long time. It had changed and at times I couldn't remember what it had been like when I had been a student there. But that is how it is isn't it? Life moves on and things change. We change and the world around us changes.

However at the heart of our passage today are these words, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." (Heb 13:8)

### **1. The sameness of Christ**

What does it mean to say Jesus is the same? He is the same because he is God and as God he does not change. We see some of this in Heb 1. In Heb 1:3 we see the nature of Jesus, "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word." (Heb 1:3) Today Jesus is still the same. His nature hasn't changed. He is God. Then in Heb 1:8-9 we read, "But about the Son he says, "Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever, and righteousness will be the sceptre of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness;"". His throne is forever but also we see here that his character is unchanging in terms of righteousness to which of course we could add wisdom love and power. His nature and character are unchanging. As he was after his ascension so he is today in nature and character. That doesn't mean he can't respond to our circumstances different as they are today from those who have gone before us. John Bunyan, who wrote Pilgrim's Progress, lived in a very different world to us but the Jesus who met his needs in prison is the Jesus who meets your needs and mine though we are not in prison and don't have the same issues that Bunyan had.

However, his response to us, as to these early Christians comes out of a changeless, consistent character. Jesus responds to you and I as he has to countless millions of Christians down the centuries because his character is unchanging.

In 'Grace abounding to the chief of sinners' Bunyan wrote, "Those Scriptures that I saw nothing in before shine upon me. Jesus Christ was also never more real than now; here I have seen and felt him." Is not Jesus the same to us and do we not meet him in the same way today?

He is that same yesterday and today and forever.

### **2. Yesterday, today and forever**

So what was the writer to these early Christians trying to say to them in this sentence?

This letter was written to Christians who were from a Jewish background and who were drifting back to Judaism because of the rituals and festivals as if Jesus wasn't sufficient. The writer's aim through the letter was to show that Jesus was better than the best that Judaism could offer. He was the true

Son of God, the great high priest, the perfect sacrifice. They didn't need anything else Jesus was sufficient. So the encouragement comes in 12:1&2 to continue running the race with eyes fixed on Jesus because Jesus never changes he is the same in and for every generation.

Yesterday – the past he died for us a sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the world. His sacrifice of himself offered once for all people on the cross was sufficient, is sufficient and always will be sufficient. They didn't need to add special offerings or sacrifices and neither do we.

Today – the effect of his sacrifice is sufficient to deal with our sin. As Paul put it in Romans 8:34 he is “at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us”. That doesn't mean that he is asking God the Father for things for us but his very presence is a reminder that sin has been paid for. Daily he continues to be our means of access to the throne of God. There is no other way and today his death is sufficient to open the way as it was in the past.

Tomorrow – as the eternal Lord his sacrifice will stand the test of time. They and we need to look nowhere else. We simply need to “fix our eyes on Jesus”.

### **3. The practical implications**

The overall practical implication for these Christians and for us is a consistency, the consistency mentioned in 12:1 in the terms of perseverance. Yes following Jesus is sometimes hard. Many other things come along that might seem attractive and that the devil will use to draw us away from Jesus. In the week where Steve Jobs has died we are very much aware of our human love of new things or innovation and that is not just in the light of iPhone and iPads and the like but in terms of faith so many new things come along which undermine the sufficiency of Jesus and draw us away from him as our sufficient sacrifice for sin and our true Lord. We are to persevere in following Jesus and in living his life. These verses are full of such exhortations.

**a. Keep on loving each other** – the practical actions of showing the love of Jesus to others be it in looking after strangers or remembering those in prison as we see here. Both these came out of the situation of that day whereby, in the absence of Travelodge, travellers relied on the hospitality of people and Christians being persecuted were often in prison. Today things are different but the injunction is the same. As Jesus continues to show his love for us then we reflect that love to others. It might be in offering to baby sit for someone so they can get to a homegroup, or having someone in for a meal who feels a bit down. On a wider scope the week before last I was reading on a website about Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani. He has been sentenced to death in Iran for apostasy. The article I read encouraged readers to send an email to the Iranian Ambassador asking for clemency. For a moment I hesitated and then thought that it would only take me a few minutes and a man's life was at stake. So remember those in prison is still a word for us today. However the overriding truth here is that as the love of God for us in Jesus is consistent so should our love for others.

**b. Continue in holiness** – we are called under Jesus to live holy lives and here for these readers again there were two examples, v4 in marriage there should be no immorality or adultery and they should keep themselves free from the love of money, which is idolatry. Again these were issues of the day but still speak to us today. In a world that is obsessed at the moment with money and the world economy it is hard to keep money in perspective. Yes God gives us the money we have and yet we are not to let money and the desire for more dominate our lives. As Jesus put it “you cannot serve both God and money” (Matt 6:24). However again the point is much wider in that Jesus looks for us to live his life here on earth. He looks for us to live holy lives with contentment because v5 God is always with us and our contentment is to be found not in the amount of stuff we have but in the nature and love of God, who v6 is our helper and deliverer.

**c. Keep the faith** – it is an often used phrase but that seems to be what the writer is saying in vs7&8. The encouragement here is for these readers to remember their Christian leaders who had died in the faith, those who had as it were completed the race. These were those who had taught them the faith and remained true to Jesus and they were to imitate these leaders because the Jesus they followed yesterday is the same Jesus today and will be forever. So they were not to deviate from the truth of Jesus and his word. Yes of course situations change and as we said at the start the world changes and our world today is so different from the world of these early followers of Jesus and yet the faith is the same, Jesus is the same and his word is the same and as with them we should hold onto the unchanging truth of God in Jesus Christ. So we should remember our leaders those great men and women of the faith who have gone before us and yes we should imitate their faith focused as it was in the unchanging Jesus Christ.

Over the years the biographies of people like James Hudson Taylor the great missionary to China, William Carey the founder of Modern Mission and many others have had an impact on me encouraging and challenging me about my faith. But then there have been others more recently who I personally remember and who encourage me in my faith.

Here is a photo and as it says it is the staff team at St John’s West Ealing in 1976, the year I went off to being ordination training.

On my right is Tony Rigler who was instrumental in encouraging me towards ordination but whose life and example I gained so much from and though he is now in glory I still think of him. To my left is Revd George Hoffman who was an Honorary curate and who in the mid 1960’s began an organisation we here know well – Tearfund. The drive and dynamism, the commitment to the world’s poor that George had was amazing and I remember that today though fear I fail to imitate his faith. But can you see the point we are to remember our Christian leaders who have held to the

truth and run the Christian race to the end and follow their example by running with perseverance and not deviating from the truth because Jesus is the same yesterday and today and forever.

#### **d. Strengthened in grace**

But one question underlies all these things and that is the question how?

It is hard to love and often it is costly. The temptations of the world especially in terms of materialism are always around us and the “old old story of Jesus and his love” well it is old and I have been following him many years. So how can I continue and persevere? How did the writer expect these Christians to persevere?

Well the answer as we see in v9 is not to be found in continually seeking new things and in moving away from the truth of God’s word. Nor is it to be found in rituals and simply going through the motions of religion. No the encouragement of the writer here is that they “be strengthened by grace” v9. Their spiritual lives will be nourished not by attending some religious event and eating food offered ceremonially but by walking closely with Jesus and allowing his grace to flow into them. It would be by feeding on the bread of life. Friends there is no startling and new recipe for a strong life of faith. Through the ages men and women have shown us the way of faith and that has been to walk closely with Jesus, feeding on the word speaking to him in prayer and living his life in the power of the Holy Spirit. As it was for Hudson-Taylor, for Tony Rigler, for Betty Payne so it is for us we walk by faith and are strengthened by the grace of God. But also we walk in hope for v14, “we are looking for the city that is to come”. We know there is a place for us in heaven, prepared by Jesus and made ready for us and so we continue to run with perseverance the race marked out for us with our eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith who is the same yesterday and today and forever.