

Approaching God CC 10.30 21st Sept 08

I want you to stop and think what have you brought to church with you this morning?

Just think for a moment.

Some of you have brought the car, the kids, a coat, an umbrella.

I would hazard a guess that none of you has brought anything that will help you gain access to God. You might, I suppose, have brought your offering, in an envelope so we can claim the tax back I hope, but nothing to offer to God that will gain you access to him.

You haven't had to come with a couple of pigeons in a cage or a sheep or a goat and thankfully none of you have brought a bull.

But that was how it was for the people of God back in the OT wasn't it?

In order to be right with God they had to drag their sacrifice to the altar and see it offered there by the priest.

But now things are different, as we are reminded, not just by the letter to the Hebrews that we have had read to us today, but by the very fact that we have pitched up here this morning without so much as a goat between us.

The salient message in Heb 10 is clear.

In vs 1-4 the readers are reminded that all the sacrifices of blood and goats cannot fully take away sin and so they had to be repeated over and over again, as it says in v1, these sacrifices were a shadow, a preparation for something better to come.

That something better has come as we see in v19&20, "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body,".

What is being said is clear we can enter into the "most holy place" that is the presence of God" through the body and blood of Jesus, that is through his death. He has by his death opened a way into God's presence that can never be closed.

We can come to God the Father through the death of the son. We don't need any other sacrifice, or offering or act of worth. As the hymn writer put it "nothing in my hand I bring simply to thy cross I cling".

Now all this is important as we move on in our series on prayer and think this morning about how we approach God.

Some years back I went to Portman Road home of Ipswich Town Football club. I went to see Billy Graham at one of his evangelistic rallies. I admit I went with the intent purpose to take photographs. Having parked up I wondered how I could get in and get close enough to get some decent shots. Walking round the ground I bumped into a man I knew from the church I was in at the time. I knew he was something to do with the Billy Graham organisation and so I asked him how I might get in to take photos. He took a pen and a bit of paper out of his pocket and wrote a note saying I should be give a press pass and let in and signed it. It appears he was secretary of the Billy Graham Association. But it was through him I got access to Billy Graham. What the writer here is saying is that through Jesus and through his death we have access to God our Father. By his death we have a pass into the very presence of God. Before that our sin prevented us from coming into the presence of a holy God. But through that death our sin is dealt with. God the Father accepts us as holy and we can come to him.

In the light of that the writer encouraged his readers v22 "let us draw near to God" that is let us come into God's presence with our prayers, our requests.

But that still doesn't answer the question of "how do I approach God?"

I want to suggest from this passage three things - isn't God good the way he always puts three things in the passage:

1. with confidence, 2. with seriousness 3. with sincerity.

1. with confidence

That's there clearly in v19 "we have confidence to enter the most holy place". The writer was speaking to Jews who would have the temple in their mind and the most holy place was the most inner part of the Temple where in the past the ark of the covenant had been, the sign of God's presence. A curtain separated that place from the rest of the temple and only the High priest could go through that curtain into the presence of God and only once a year. But now through Jesus anyone can come and so the writer says we can come with confidence or as in v22 with full assurance, why, because we have been made clean in Jesus.

We can come into God's presence as we pray because we have a pass signed with the blood of Jesus. Therefore we have confidence we have full assurance that we can stand in the presence of our Heavenly Father and ask him for what is on our heart.

How do I approach God - with confidence.

Jesus put it slightly differently when talking to the disciples when he said "You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it" (John 14:14). The name of Jesus is the opensasame into the presence of the Father.

My friends I hope we have that confidence if not I hope this morning we may all be encouraged to grow in that confidence.

Ron Yeats who was captain of Liverpool in the 1960's said of the then manager Bill Shankly, ""He gave me a lot of confidence. He made any player feel like a great player. If you feel like one, then you'll play like one." The name of Jesus gives us confidence to enter

the Father's presence as a loved child. You are one so should feel like one and be one. We come to God with confidence.

Here's a question I've often thought about, does Prince Charles have a key to Buckingham Palace? I've stood a number of times outside the palace looking at it through the bars but never been in. Whereas for Prince Charles he just drives up and the gates open and in he goes. For us we can just come into the presence of God. We can just pitch up with every confidence of being acceptable and accepted because we are children of God. So, as the writer here encourages his readers, let's do that let us draw near to God and do it with confidence not hesitation or uncertainty - we can come in.

2. with seriousness

This isn't written there in the passage as such but the point I want us to note is that if this morning you had to go out and select out of your flock a sheep and drag it here to be sacrificed so that your sin might be forgiven and you could be right with God, you'd know this was a serious thing. You'd know it was not a thing to be taken lightly. When we read here that we come into the most holy place, the presence of God, by the blood of Jesus then that is serious. Its not a thing to be taken lightly. Also it not something we should ignore.

Let me say this sentence, "they have gone to so much effort so we should..." How do you finish the sentence what situation can you recall where someone has taken a lot of effort and you knew it would have been wrong of you not to do something?

What the writer here is showing is the cost to Jesus of opening up that way - can we for whom he gave his life do anything other than take seriously what has been done for us?

Now I don't want to get into 'ought' here for as we saw in the first of this series prayer is coming to a Heavenly Father and there is no ought there. However, I don't want us to take lightly the fact that we can come but to recognise the cost and so to come with seriousness.

3. with sincerity

In v22 these Christians were encourage to "draw near to God with a sincere (or true) heart".

I think if we want an illustration of what is meant by that we see it in the second reading from Luke 18:9-14. When we come to God we come with a sincere a true a humble heart. We come recognising that of ourselves we have no right. In what we have done we have no hope. We come because of Jesus and so we come with true humility. The words of David in Psalm 51:17 remind us of this, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."

Friends when we come to our Father in prayer he is pleased to hear us. But let's not be pleased with ourselves as if there is something about us that means God jolly well ought to be pleased to hear from me.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews wanted to assure his readers that in and through Jesus they had the only and therefore the best way of access to the throne of God. That way was there for them and so he encouraged them to draw near to God with confidence.

I would encourage us today to do the same.

I recognise that many of us suffer not from the problem of the Pharisee but just the opposite. Many of us have a low view of ourselves. They recognise their failings and often beat themselves up with how bad they are and so tend to think like the tax collector that God won't want anything to do with me. Have you been there? Are you there at the moment?

It may be that there is an awareness of sin in our lives. Or we have been told over and over again by those close to us that we are useless. Or we compare ourselves with others and see we are not as good as them - in our view any way. Or we have a view of God only as majestic but not as a loving Father and as a result we can't see how he can have anything to do with us.

Are you in there somewhere? Are you hesitant to draw near to God because you just don't think you are the sort of person he can have anything to do with?

Richard Baxter, a minister in the 17th Century, who wrote many books and some hymns including ye holy angels bright, speaking about John 3:16 said "I thank God for this word "whosoever". If it had read there is mercy for Richard Baxter, I am so vile, so sinful, I would have thought it meant some other Richard Baxter. But this word "whosoever" includes the worst of the Baxters that ever lived"

How do we approach God? We approach with confidence no matter who we are or what there has been in our life because we enter that most holy place through Jesus. So will you draw near will you come to your Father in Heaven and ask him for those things that are on your heart?

For me, as I seek to put this into practice, I do always, as I come into God's presence in prayer, begin with confession. I begin by recognising that I bring nothing other than my sin from which I need cleansing. It helps me approach with the right attitude for it again focuses me on the cross of Jesus and I am therefore reminded that this is serious but even as I do that I know my father in heaven hears his repentant child.

I recommend it to you to try for yourself if you are not already.