

SERMON – 21 AUGUST 2022 – HEB 12.18-end, LUKE 13.10-17



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

Sometimes, when inspiration doesn't really come for a sermon, I have a look back to see what I said three years ago – we have a three-yearly cycle of readings, so I fought with these readings back in 2019. My sermon then reminded me that life in the Barham household was stressful – we were both trying to finish our University MA dissertations. Mine on “Lindisfarne, place and pilgrimage – how does a tidal island have influence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” had reached 13,585 words – it needed to be 15,000 words – while Julie’s “Writers’ House Museums, pilgrimage, popularity and potential” was somewhat lagging behind. I commented that, having worked with my better half since 1980, I know that she will not sleep much this week, and it will be ready for handing in on time – it was.



Looking back on it after three years, I find myself quite frustrated by it. We enjoyed doing our MAs, don't get me wrong, and we're very grateful to the Church for letting us do it, but I had rather hoped that I might have been able to use some of the knowledge and experience we got in a practical way. I had a ministerial review with +Jan shortly after I'd finished it, and I said we had experience in tourism and public heritage that might be useful – after all we are a diocese which contains a National Park. Both of us had looked at why people visit, why people go to particular places, why they come and see us. What brings people through the doors of buildings. I thought the Church might find this useful, and +Jan agreed. She made some encouraging noises and a few

notes, and then disappeared out of the Diocese. That's as far as that offer went! On the other hand, the leaflets we have on the tables in both churches to welcome our visitors were a direct result of our degree work, and the photographic skills of Liz, one of our fellow students, so all was not wasted. I've also used the fact we did MA's, and did them successfully, to argue for being allowed to do the Sabbatical next year – so they were certainly not wasted. And perhaps someone will then be interested in the work I plan to do on heritage and welcome.

I suppose the most frustrating thing is that we both wrote 15,000 word dissertations, that were read by two people. The examiner, and the external examiner. Neither of them were ground-breaking seminal works, but it would have been nice if all that work had been read by a few more than two people! O well, that's life.

Our reading from the letter to the Hebrews talks about why people come. It's quite a complicated passage but the basic message is you, the hearer, have come to Jesus – you, a Christian, have come to Christ.



“You have not come to something that can be touched”, says the author. In Old Testament times there was fire, darkness, gloom, tempest, the sound of the trumpet, and the voice of God. That's what the children of God experienced. It wasn't an easy experience – God was to be feared, He was a God so Holy that if an animal even went onto the mountain it had to be stoned to death. Even Moses, that great prophet of God, even Moses trembled with fear.

“But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God”, the heavenly Jerusalem, innumerable angels in festal gathering – what a lovely picture.



Most of the people who first listened to this letter being read would, quite literally, have come to Mount Zion. Even though they may have lived elsewhere in the Roman Empire – Jerusalem is the centre of their faith. They have come to the Temple for the feast days, the festivals – “I was glad when they said unto me, let us go to the house of the Lord”. Their relationship with that temple may have changed, as they put their trust in the person of Jesus Christ, as they defied the leaders and some of the traditions of that temple, but the writer is affirming their faith, affirming their belief in the living God.



<https://www.northernvicar.co.uk/2018/10/26/upwell-norfolk-st-peter/>

I love the image of “innumerable angels in festal gathering” – if you want to see some splendid angels have a look at my blog and search for Upwell in Cambridgeshire – amazing carved wooden angels (for the Lord Peter Wimsey fans among you, they are the ones that feature in “The Nine Tailors”). Angels with joy and a smile – always a good idea.



I went this last week to the Edinburgh Tattoo. I first went in about 1978, when my brother and I persuaded mum she would take us on a Merry-maker Train from Cambridge (dad was preaching on the Sunday so he couldn't come). We left Cambridge on Saturday morning and at Ely our train joined another that had come south from Kings Lynn. We went up the East Coast Main line – the first time Dave and I had ever been north of York – and arrived in Edinburgh about 4. We had an evening in the city, went to the Tattoo at 9 pm, and had seats right up at the top of the stands. My mum hated bagpipes, but even she was impressed by the spectacle below us. We caught our train back at midnight, work up in Carlisle, had a long ride back on the Sunday via various freight lines, and when we got back to Ely, the Kings Lynn portion of the train was facing Cambridge, and the Cambridge portion facing Kings Lynn. We all had to change ends!



More recently, Gareth and I had been to the Tattoo on two or three occasions, driving up from Newcastle, and driving back in the early hours of the following morning. Wonderful evenings. I hadn't been since we died, and said it was something I'd like to do again for my 60<sup>th</sup> celebrations. Hannah organised it for me, and I had a wonderful evening with her and Amy. The benefit of being with someone in a wheelchair is that you are so close to the action. The plus side of that is I was near enough to ask the Highland Dancing girls for their phone number – no, I didn't – the downside was that 120 bag pipe players in close proximity was quite something!

VIDEO ON POWERPOINT



We were a bit nervous going. There were 5,000 people in the stands, and when you are in a wheelchair, a crowd that size can be quite intimidating. Edinburgh is not the easiest city when you are on wheels, and the whole evening could have gone disastrously wrong. It was wonderful. The staff could not have been more helpful or accommodating, and it was an occasion I will never forget. We felt so welcome! Though there was one point when the mass pipes and drums of one of the Highland Regiments were advancing towards us, and I was very glad I was not, on this occasion, the English enemy.



The Holy Trinity, carved by Matthias Garn

<https://www.northernvicar.co.uk/2018/11/01/york-yorkshire-priory-church-of-the-holy-trinity/>

The writer to the Hebrews reminds us that it is a bit more than all being nice friends together, however important that is. He talks about Jesus as “the mediator of the new covenant”, that’s a relationship between humanity and

God, between a human being – me, you, us – and God. We believe that relationship is important. It is a relationship that exists because of Jesus' death on the cross, the spilling of his blood, a price that is paid for human sin, the cost of forgiveness. "See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking" he writes, because this is important.

I do believe that our world needs a relationship with God, human beings need a relationship with God, because I believe that it is only in the depth of that relationship that we can have life in all its fullness. For all the faults of those of us who try and live as Christians, I do believe that there is a sense of purpose, a sense of love, a sense of forgiveness when we seek to follow God's will. I have no doubt that this country needs a church which seeks to love and serve and be involved in life – rather than one which has let itself be pushed to the margins. I want a church which celebrates and rejoices, and challenges and stands up to what is evil.

Our faith is needed more than ever before – a faith that believes in a God who holds and cares for his creation, a God who challenges ordinary men and women like us to care for his creation (even if that means we change our way of doing things), a God who gives us faith that the world can change.



We start, says the writer to the Hebrews, by offering "acceptable worship with reverence and awe" – so there is a deepness there. Our church must be friendly, a place of joy and laughter, but it must also be deep, a place of reverence and awe. Don't just talk to each other before a service, talk to God – and if someone near you is praying, give them the space and peace they need. When we take communion, return to our seats and pray – draw close to God, don't chat to each other. Take time in our relationship with God, day in, day out, to pray and think and read and worship.



It's a bit like writing a dissertation – you go to some wonderful places, you read some fascinating books, you meet some lovely people, you explore, you think, you journey, you learn. You also have to do the hard slog, getting the thing written – because God demands work and energy and effort from all of us. That dissertation was just a little part of my pilgrimage through life, just like an evening in Edinburgh is just a little part of my pilgrimage through life, and that pilgrimage continues, but there will come a time when even that will finish, and my journey will be over.

Today's post communion prayer is rather lovely, and fits in very well ...

God of our pilgrimage,  
you have willed that the gate of mercy  
should stand open for those who trust in you:  
look upon us with your favour  
that we who follow the path of your will  
may never wander from the way of life;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.