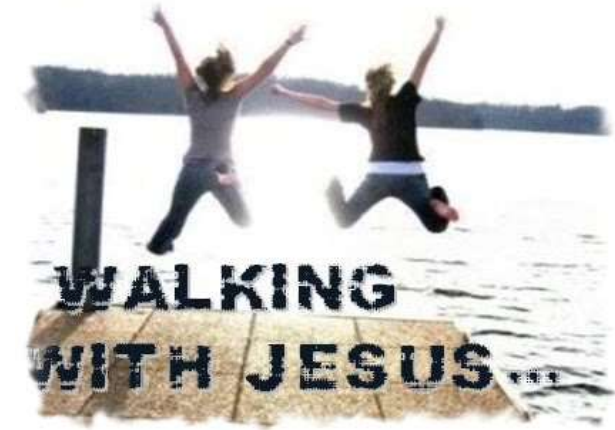


**Meditations on the Book of Hebrews:
A Devotional Resource for the 40 Days of Lent**

THE LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father in heaven,
 hallowed be your name,
 your kingdom come,
 your will be done,
 on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread,
Forgive us our sins
 as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation,
 but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
 now and forever. Amen.



Our Lenten Challenge for 2017

As my dear Lord Jesus went to Golgotha to endure the agony of the cross and separation from God, and there died for my sin to free me from hell, I would like to walk more closely with him.

I can do this by:

- Trying to attend worship each Sunday during Lent.
- Setting aside a small amount of time each day for a devotion and prayer.

May the Holy Spirit inspire me with the love of Christ to draw near to him as he has already come near to me, so that I am walking with Jesus. Amen.

Walking with Jesus through the Book of Hebrews

Dear Reader,

You may not have read the book of Hebrews or perhaps you have been put off by its many examples and arguments based on Old Testament texts. It is thirteen chapters long and maybe that is another reason to shy away from it.

I hope you will stay with us as the church travels with our Lord Jesus during the 40 days of Lent. Perhaps our perseverance with reading and reflecting on the word of God will mirror the endurance, trust and hope the writer of Hebrews exhorts his readers to have.

No one knows who wrote this book because it does not have the usual introduction Paul's letters have, which identify the writer. Intriguingly it has the usual ending that ancient letters to the churches had. Nor do we know who the recipients were though 13:24 might be suggesting Christians somewhere in Italy. In fact, it doesn't even sound like a letter but rather a long, very long sermon, despite the writer saying he has been brief (13:22).

We can be clearer about the reason for this sermon: the recipients were in danger of going back to Judaism, to its endless sacrifices by mortal and sin-prone priests, to the law that never made a person right with God and to a temple made with hands. Such was their back-sliding and reversion to a milk-sop Christianity, or worse, to Judaism, that these early second-generation Christians were in jeopardy of apostasy.

This latter development filled the writer with horror. To give up on Christ and take the formal and final step of renouncing the Saviour, was to reach a point of no return in his thinking. Luther and other believers since the Reformation have not been so sure. Jesus spoke of the unforgiveable sin but only God knows when someone's position is irreversible.

Yet the encouragements the writer uses to hold people like you and me fast to our Lord are worth a million times as much as his dire warnings. He is the writer of the most tender comfort, soothing us with the knowledge that our Lord Jesus has cried out in agony like you and me. On the subject of Christ's ascension, there is no one who comes close to him in describing Christ's authority to represent us before his Father's throne. Equally unforgettable are his references to Jesus as the pioneer of salvation, the one who started from a position lower than we occupy on this earth, yet through trials, temptations and physical suffering, managed to beat his way into the inner sanctuary of heaven itself. How could a devout believer in the Lord ignore such a teaching? And

*Greet all your leaders and all the Lord’s people. Those from Italy send you their greetings.
Grace be with you all.*

“Do I have your blessing?” is a common phrase and perhaps goes back to the great saints of old like Abraham and Jacob who blessed their off-spring. The approval and support of parents and spouses are great human blessings; imagine the blessing from the one who has spoken to us through his Son, or that comes from our Lord Jesus, who is the great Shepherd of the sheep and has sealed God’s salvation with his blood, that is, his crucifixion.

When things do not go so well, if you are like me, we are quick to doubt God’s blessing. Indeed, that could be our problem, that we measure blessings in a material or physical way: good health, spare income, nothing breaking down, everything generally going our way. Too often we think of our interests rather than our Father’s interests. His will and the plans of his kingdom are at work in us, the church. All that has been said in the book of Hebrews is to keep us strong and to be the Lord’s instruments in the world.

Yet despite our weaknesses the Lord continues to bless, to keep us firmly in our faith, to forgive us over and over again, and then by the Holy Spirit, to equip us with love and prayerfulness so that we are kind to all, witness to Christ, and honour God by honest and holy lives.

As the writer reminds us, Christians around the world suffer for what we take for granted, the freedom to follow Christ. Let us too, think of them and make some little sacrifices by supporting Christian agencies fighting injustices and helping prisoners for Christ. If we are willing, God is certainly going to bless our efforts that we make through the church. Christ is alive and working amongst us to bless what we are doing alongside our leaders.

The word I take with me today is: The Lord blesses me to keep me as his own and do his work.

Prayer: Dear Father, your hand is on my head to bless me. All the saving goodness of Jesus my Shepherd is flowing into me. Help me to live for you under your blessing. Amen.

what about his once and for all sacrifice that in a single moment fulfilled the entire Old Testament covenant, showing how superior he was to angels, prophets, priests and kings, completing everything his Father was aiming for in the old covenant, so that the old temple, the old laws, and old sacrifices and the old priesthood are no longer necessary for us as a way into the presence of God? On these matters, this mystery writer is beyond peer. Please enjoy him and be inspired.

Wayne Muschamp.

(The Hebrews quotations are all taken from the New International Version)

CALENDAR 2017

The number in **bold** type is the day number

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
5 Mar 1	6 Mar 2	7 Mar 3	8 Mar 4	9 Mar 5	10 Mar 6	11 Mar 7
12 Mar 8	13 Mar 9	14 Mar 10	15 Mar 11	16 Mar 12	17 Mar 13	18 Mar 14
19 Mar 15	20 Mar 16	21 Mar 17	22 Mar 18	23 Mar 19	24 Mar 20	25 Mar 21
26 Mar 22	27 Mar 23	28 Mar 24	29 Mar 25	30 Mar 26	31 Mar 27	1 Apr 28
2 Apr 29	3 Apr 30	4 Apr 31	5 Apr 32	6 Apr 33	7 Apr 34	8 Apr 35
9 Apr 36	10 Apr 37	11 Apr 38	12 Apr 39	13 Apr 40	14 Apr Good Friday	15 Apr

Day 1: Spoken through his Son

Hebrews 1:1-2

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.

Who are we listening to? Who or what influences what we believe? What is our primary source of truth?

The *Digital News Report Australia 2016* gives us a glimpse of just what Australians were turning to as their source of news. Researchers separated all responses by those who cited traditional media platforms – TV, radio, newspaper and magazine – as their main source of news vs. those who cited online media platforms as their main source – websites/apps of newspapers, magazines, TV, radio and other news outlets – or social network services/blogs. They found that terrestrial TV and social media were reported as the most popular source of news. But taken together, TV news bulletins and 24-hour news TV are still regarded as the main source of news.

McCrindle, one of Australia's social researchers, found, in 2014, that less than half of Australians owned a bible. Other researchers have found that bible usage is low and are now taking steps to increase the hunger for God and to make Him known.

Is Scripture our primary source of truth? What would our response to this question be? Would our lifestyle support our claim?

The issue is not how much TV we watch, how often we read the newspapers or how much time we spend reading books or other publications. The issue is '*who are we listening to*'? Are we listening to the Spirit of God or the spirit of this age?

God spoke to humankind throughout the ages in ways such as prophecy, poetry, proverbs, and special messages. And God did not speak only once. He spoke on very many occasions throughout history. Some heeded. Others did not.

Today's text tells us that now God addresses us by *his Son*. This is an astounding statement. Who is God's Son? He is none other than the one great Messenger, who had come to finish the Divine communications and to give a uniform and connected revelation to humanity. Communication from God is complete. We don't need to look anywhere else. What God wants us to hear

Jesus makes this abundantly clear in Matthew 25:40, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers or sisters of mine, you did for me.'

Sacrifices also include 'bearing the disgrace Jesus bore' – being willing to be insulted, persecuted, or even suffer because we bear the name of Christ. This will become more and more common as our society moves from ambivalence to open hostility to Christians and the Christian message. Also we sacrifice by giving our Christian leaders both the authority and accountability they need to serve us with God's word. Submission is not servitude or enslavement but a gift that is given, recognizing that because of the office they hold and the work they are called to, God holds them accountable.

Sacrifices are costly – by definition. Following Jesus is costly, and it does come with sacrifice. And yet these are little in comparison to the sacrifice Jesus made for us to make us holy and reconcile us with God.

The word I take with me today is: Through Jesus, let us offer God a sacrifice of praise and good works to our neighbour.

Prayer: Jesus, you gave yourself for me. Now I give myself to thee... In response, gratitude and love for all you have done through your sacrifice, let me offer good works to my neighbour, praise and thanksgiving to the Triune God, honour to my Christian leaders, and willingness to share your disgrace. When I am aware of the cost of following you, remind me of what it cost for you to call me to follow. Amen.

Day 40: Under God's blessing

Hebrews 13:18-25

Pray for us. We are sure that we have a clear conscience and desire to live honourably in every way. I particularly urge you to pray so that I may be restored to you soon.

Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Brothers and sisters, I urge you to bear with my word of exhortation, for in fact I have written to you quite briefly.

I want you to know that our brother Timothy has been released. If he arrives soon, I will come with him to see you.

We carry out his will. Day by day we express our love of others as if they were family. We provide hospitality to friends, strangers, the less fortunate, the ill-treated and even prisoners. Our focus is on the other. We uphold marriage and avoid promiscuity. We are grateful for what we have. We are envy-free. We trust that God provides all we need.

Just as consistency of aim and effort are needed to use our knowledge of nutrition to achieve optimum health, to have right relationship with God we need to listen to his word and to then carry out his will daily.

The word I take with me today is: An important dimension of my worship is God-directed service.

Prayer: Daily, Lord, help me hear your voice. Daily help me carry out your will. Amen.

Day 39: Persecution, praise and obedience

Hebrews 13:11-17

The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.

Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise – the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you.

Do Christians offer sacrifices to God? The answer is yes – with a caveat. We DO NOT offer sacrifices to appease God or to atone for sin. Jesus has already made us holy because of his blood – his sacrifice is all we need for atonement. But we DO offer sacrifices to God. We offer prayer, praise and thanksgiving, not IN ORDER TO be right with God, but BECAUSE we are already right with God! And along with the sacrifices of prayer, praise and thanksgiving, we offer good works TO OUR NEIGHBOUR. As v16 above says, ‘And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.’ God doesn’t need our good works! But our neighbour does. And God is happy to take our good deeds to our neighbour as if they were done to him.

has been revealed by God’s Son through whom all things were created. What power? What wisdom? Surely this is where my attention should be placed.

The word I take with me today is: Why would I not listen to God’s own Son, the creator of the universe, sent to save me?

Prayer: Dear Lord, help me to pay attention to what really matters. Help me to spend time with you. Help me open my heart to listen to your Son. Amen.

Day 2: Radiance of God

Hebrews 1:3-4

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. So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.

Have you ever wondered what the Father is really like? Have you ever yearned for an experience of the Father? I have. This yearning propelled me to look widely for descriptions of God. The quest took me on a journey to the discovery of kataphatic theology, a method used to describe God’s characteristics in positive terms, and apophatic theology, a method through which God’s characteristics are described in terms of what God is not.

Even these exercises have ended in frustration. God frequently remains vaguely and obscurely described. And why should I be surprised? After all, the conception of God is far, far beyond human conceptualisation and understanding, well beyond the concept of infinity.

Thankfully we are far from stuck. Today’s verses offer resolution to our quest for we are told that “*The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being ...*” We need go no further. Our verses indicate his claims to our reverence. Our text refers to him as Redeemer, but not only or mainly as a man. More exactly, they refer to him as Divine. They advise that in his incarnation, our Redeemer is the brightness of Divine glory, and the express image of God. Glory is the nature of God revealed in its brightness. Whatever the Father is, is exhibited in the Son, just like a seal in a stamp on wax.

The Son of God was the last and greatest of God's messengers to humanity. Our verses are a description of *him as he actually is* – the incarnate son of God; the equal of the Father in human flesh.

But "The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Cor 4:4). The human soul is dark respecting the Divine character, until it is enlightened by Christ.

We perceive God through Christ. It is by him only that the true character and glory of God are made known to us.

The word I take with me today is: The Son is the radiance of God's glory and true emanation of the Father. I experience the Father through him.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, remove the veil from my eyes. Help me to see and experience your radiance. Amen.

Day 3: Superior to angels

Hebrews 1:5-14

For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father"? Or again, "I will be his Father, and he will be my Son"? And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says, "Let all God's angels worship him."

In speaking of the angels he says, "He makes his angels winds, his servants flames of fire." 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; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy."

He also says, "In the beginning, O Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will roll them up like a robe; like a garment they will be changed. But you remain the same, and your years will never end."

To which of the angels did God ever say, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet"? Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?

What is our experience of angels? What were we taught about angels?

Angels, both good and bad, were very real to Luther. Informed by scripture, he was convinced that angels had great influence on matters of human life. In the third of three sermons preached on angels during Michaelmas of 1531, Luther taught that multitudes of good angels accompany us day and night and are by

praise you for your grace through your Son Jesus. Maintain my joy in you. Amen.

Day 38: Carry out the will of God

Hebrews 13:1-10

Keep on loving each other as brothers. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.

Marriage should be honoured by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral. Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"

Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by ceremonial foods, which are of no value to those who eat them. We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat.

Most of us know the importance of good nutrition and its impact on health. We might have read guidelines that voice the "do's and don'ts" of healthy eating. We might have been motivated to comply with the advice given to alleviate serious illness. And we might have been saved from serious illness through our compliance. But altering one's tastes and habits can be challenging; for some, almost impossible. We crave. We forget. We lose track. We revert to our old habits, our previous focus.

Today's verses take account of the realities of being human. They take account of the fact that we can be told about God's grace, we can be very knowledgeable about the theory of the Christian life, but the translation of this knowledge into regular practice might occasionally be lost on us. And so, our text highlights the key principles of practice: the exercise of brotherly love and enduring faith.

Today's verses present the idea that an important dimension to our worship is serving others in the way that God directs. We serve God by offering him praise through Jesus Christ in every area of our lives, that is, not simply through attendance at worship on a Sunday. We listen to God. We discern.

perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven? At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, “Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.” The words “once more” indicate the removing of what can be shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain.

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our “God is a consuming fire.”

This is an apocalyptic passage, in that it gives us a glimpse of the writer’s vision of the last times, when anything that can be shaken, that is, all created things, will be taken away. These are words of warning, but also of great comfort. Our God is awesome, in the original sense of the word. He is terrible, he is to be feared. But we don’t need to worry about that, because we are not confronting the God of the burning mountain, we are protected by the God of the new covenant, who offers us loving forgiveness.

This passage shows us the difference between the trembling occasioned by the Law, before which we all must cower, and the joy aroused by the salvation granted us by Jesus. Our names are written in heaven. How dreadful it will be if we allow ourselves to be distracted by earthly fears or pleasures and turn away from our salvation!

I’ve heard it said, to my sorrow, after one disaster or another, “How can you believe in a God who allows such dreadful things to happen? Or, “Why didn’t God do something to prevent it?” I think those speakers, generally unbelievers, have the God of fire and brimstone and judgement in mind. They have created God in their own image, and they imagine God, like Thor, coming down to smite the unbeliever with his hammer of wrath. They entirely fail to understand the God of love and forgiveness, who prefers to work through the weak, trembling hands of his followers to care for his people on earth. Even the most appalling disasters are not an excuse for blaming God or refusing to follow him. Rather we need to trust him and continue joyfully to praise him and spread the message of his love and forgiveness on earth.

The word I take with me today is: Do not refuse God who calls you.

Prayer: Dear heavenly Father, creator of the universe, you are truly to be feared in your mighty power. I thank you for your loving forgiveness and

our side as we pass through death into eternal life. Luther had quite a lot to say about angels.

The ministry of angels was well-known and highly respected by the audience of the author of The Letter to the Hebrews. Historical records indicate that in the period our Letter was written, many Jews prayed to angels regularly prior to becoming Christians.

In these ten verses our author presents seven Old Testament passages to support his argument that the Son of God is far superior to angels. Of the seven quotations, five are taken from the Psalms; of the remaining two, one is taken from the Former Prophets and one from the Torah.

Our author presents Christ at the top of the hierarchy of celestial beings. Christ is the Father’s first-born Son, to be worshipped by all angels. As angels are not the Father’s first-born Son, they are lesser beings. They are not equal to the Son. They do not sit at the Father’s right hand. They are spirits ministering to others. Angels are sent to provide service. In contrast, Christ is the Father’s first-born Son. Angels are to worship him. The Father’s Son is God forever. His throne is everlasting. He is immortal. He is clearly superior to angels.

The word I take with me today is: the Son sits at the right hand of the Father. He is the Father’s anointed Son, immortal. His throne is everlasting.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help me see and experience you as you truly are. Amen.

Day 4: Don’t ignore this salvation

Hebrews 2:1-4

We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. For since the message spoken through angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

I cannot always claim to be a good listener or someone who is always attentive to what his wife is saying. Sometimes, what I am reading, the television programme or the work in front of me has my eyes and ears. The frustrated look on her face tells me that she is not impressed when she is being ignored.

Drifting away when someone else is talking is the problem not only between teachers and students but also between God and his children. He speaks to us in his Word, even in his Son, the living Word, and like children looking out of the class room window, we begin to tune in to other sounds and images around us. A difficult situation might make us a little more attentive to the Lord, more prayerful and open to what the pastor is saying in his sermon, but the crisis passes and we drift off once more.

The writer of Hebrews uses law and gospel. He warns us that the commandments came through an angel and brought judgement and death to humanity. If what an angel delivers has such an impact, how much more crucial must be the gift of life when it comes through his Son!

Salvation by a free act of mercy on God's part, offered to all in the appalling death of Christ and his powerful defeat of suffering and every evil, is an amazing event and arrests me and rivets me to the spot. But we also know that the good news of salvation came with great corroboration, such as an eye-witness record and the miracles of Christ and miracles done through believers today. There are many other "proofs": the claims of Christ, his sinless nature, his authority to forgive sins, his compassion and love and so on. Perhaps today, one of the mightiest miracles is the change people experience as the Holy Spirit transforms them into people who trust Jesus, love others, serve the church and willingly do the will of God. It is enough to make you pay attention.

The word I take with me today is: Pay attention to what God is doing.

Prayer: Dear Holy Spirit, thank-you for speaking to me and leading me to Jesus. Forgive me when I drift off, when believing is not exciting and other things seem more important to me. Help me to pay attention to you. Amen.

Day 5: Everything under him

Hebrews 2:5-9

It is not to angels that he has subjected the world to come, about which we are speaking. But there is a place where someone has testified:

*"What is mankind that you are mindful of them,
a son of man that you care for him?*

*You made them a little lower than the angels;
you crowned them with glory and honour
and put everything under their feet."*

In putting everything under them, God left nothing that is not subject to them.

relational quality, for the verse says, 'Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy.' Our decisions in the moral and the relational realms have results; our attitudes and actions have consequences. While forgiveness is always available and removes the eternal penalty for sin, forgiveness does not necessarily remove the human consequences of sin. This is made clear through the brief reference to Esau, who threw away his relationship with his father (represented by his inheritance and his blessing) on the basis of an impulsive decision and action based in a moment of hunger.

Holiness, in this sense, is being set apart to become more and more conformed to God's will in thought, in relationship, and in action. It's God's grace that leads to and defines our holiness. God's grace is relational. God does not want bitterness, enmity or immorality to put a wedge between people. He is in the business of restoring relationships and it grieves God when relationships are damaged. This brings us full circle to the saying, 'Make every effort to live at peace with everyone...' Jesus says 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.' God is in the business of reconciling, not of tearing apart.

The word I take with me today is: Make every effort to live at peace with everyone.

Prayer: God of reconciliation and relationship, may I also be one of your agents of peace. Make me more and more aware of your will and more and more willing to carry it out, so that I may be conformed to the image of Christ, may be a peacemaker, and that I may live a holy life that reflects your grace. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Day 37: Don't refuse God's call

Hebrews 12:18-29

You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded: "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death." The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, "I am trembling with fear."

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made

would educate us, in time, making us more mature, caring, loving people. Discipline acts to “straighten us out” so to speak.

In contrast to earthly parents who did their best, the Father, in his infinite love and wisdom, consistently presents us with hardship to discipline us throughout our lives for our good. That good is our share in his holiness. God’s holiness is his distinctive character and life. He shares it with those he brings to his kingdom. To this end, he uses various trials to test and sustain faith, producing a harvest of peace and righteousness in those who have been exercised by his discipline. We can begin to share God’s holy life and character here and now. Sonship and suffering go hand in hand as the Lord disciplines those he loves.

Ultimately, though hard, we see adversity as God’s grace. It is through hardship that God toughens us up, tests our faith, heals us, and cultivates the maturity we need. In adversity we trust that our trials are God-given and inescapably and necessarily the straight and narrow road that leads to life. The Father’s discipline yields perfect fruit if we submit to it as from God, trusting him to help us endure.

The word I take with me today is: the Father, in his infinite wisdom, gives us the discipline to keep us on track to eternal life. I take up and run with whatever the Father gives, including hardship, as his discipline.

Prayer: Dear Father, I realise that the hardship you present in my life is for my highest good. Help me pray to you for help and guidance that I might learn the lessons you intended. May I be fertile soil for the cultivation of a righteous life, responsive to your will. Amen.

Day 36: Live for God

Hebrews 12:14-17

Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. Afterwards, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. Even though he sought the blessing with tears, he could not change what he had done.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus says, ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.’ The author of Hebrews almost echoes these words: ‘Without holiness, no one will see the Lord.’ It’s clear that this holiness is not only a moral but a

Yet at present we do not see everything subject to them. But we do see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honour because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

Eighteenth century scholars believed in something they called the Great Chain of Being. (Correct me, all you English scholars, if I’ve got it wrong!) God was at the top and the devil was at the bottom. In between were several layers of an angelic hierarchy, then Man, then the animal kingdom. Man, according to Genesis 1: 28-29, was in charge of the Earth. That meant he could plunder Earth’s resources, pollute her atmosphere, drain her wells dry and destroy her animals for his own advantage, and if you know anything about the Industrial Revolution and the expansion of Empire, you will know that that is precisely what Man proceeded to do. It’s an attitude which hasn’t changed much to this present day. The Genesis passage was seen as God’s permission for Man to wreak havoc on nature.

Of course, it’s not really like that. Nowhere does God give us permission to pillage and destroy. Anyway, the writer to the Hebrews seems to have a similar sort of heavenly hierarchy in mind, and as he discusses it, he comes across a paradox. Jesus is not an angel. He’s not part of the created order. He is part of the creative force, equal to his Father. Yet, in order to redeem the human race, he had to become human, so that he could fulfil the Law perfectly in our place. But when Jesus took on humanity, he became a lesser being, lower than the angels, even though he was above them.

Having risen from the dead, Jesus now sits at the right hand of his father, crowned with glory and honour. I’m not quite sure what that means in real terms, because to describe the exact state of heavenly glory almost certainly exceeds both my imagination and my vocabulary. Humans really do have dominion over the Earth, in that we have been given the planet for a little while as our home, and so, it behoves us to look after it. We have almost unimaginable power to do anything we want to, in our role of masters of the earth, which is a frightening thought. And in mining its minerals, and harvesting its lands and forests and oceans, we have almost forgotten our primary purpose, which is to tell others about Christ, who is the real Master of the planet and the universe it swims in.

The word I take with me today is: Jesus, master of the universe, became human for me.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, you put aside unimaginable power and glory and became a humble carpenter for my sake. Grant that I might treat your world and my fellow humans wisely, being mindful that I am only a caretaker here. Amen.

Day 6: Attained glory through suffering

Hebrews 2:10-13

In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered. Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters. He says, "I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters; in the assembly I will sing your praises."

And again, "I will put my trust in him."

And again he says, "Here am I, and the children God has given me."

It seems a truism that anyone who achieves glory of a human kind does so through years, even decades of discipline, self-denial and preparation. For example, J.K. Rowling, the very famous and very rich author of the Harry Potter series, struggled in humble circumstances, after a divorce with her journalist husband, living as a single mother and helping her sister in Scotland. While there is an enormous amount of so-called luck involved in success, as has been said, it is really 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration.

The pathway to glory is through suffering. This path, which Jesus called the 'narrow door', is the hard way as opposed to the 'broad, wide and flat highway to destruction'. The Lord Jesus himself established this route by the pioneering activity of his ministry, his crucifixion and his resurrection and ascension into heaven.

What human beings esteem as glory, God despises. All that exists, all the power and nations of the world, already belong to him. The kingdoms of men are not what he seeks. Rather, his purpose from eternity was to find a way back to him for fallen humankind. Everywhere is the jungle of consumer products, career, fame, money, power and control, the false glory most people seek. Through an unimaginable love for us, Christ managed to cut a pathway through all that entangles us, the lust, greed, and arrogance of life. It came with tears over Jerusalem, the agony of betrayal, his closest friend denying he knew him, enemies all around, people spitting at him, and religious leaders

happen to us, in this beautiful land we live in, yet something seems to prevent us from living in the full joy of the Lord.

What hinders us? Possibly, we are afraid of ridicule, but I think the worst hindrance is a combination of doubt and pride. We are very proud of our intelligence and the technology that it has produced. They are wonderful gifts of God, but they have produced a blindness in our hearts. We are so sure of our own cleverness that we have begun to doubt the very existence of our Creator.

When I have doubts, I go back to the historical fact. Jesus was a real person, who lived and died and lived again, for my sake. This is the basis and foundation of our faith.

The word I take with me today is: Fix your eyes on Jesus, the Saviour.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, grant me that child-like faith that you taught to your followers, so I can see you clearly, worship you with joy, and share your love with others. Amen.

Day 35: Hardship as God's discipline

Hebrews 12:7-13

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. "Make level paths for your feet," so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.

Discipline: does anyone take pleasure in being disciplined? Most of us would answer an almighty "no"!

In answering this question, we might reflect back to moments in our lives when we were disciplined by a parent, teacher or guardian. If we were lucky, we might have been disciplined feeling the loving care of this person, realising that the discipline dished out was somehow for our long-term benefit. The discipline

The word I take with me today is: "... faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."

Prayer: Dear Lord, help me to run with faith in you and your Word. Help me truly practice complete and utter faith in you, day by day. Amen.

Day 34: Fix your eyes on Jesus

Hebrews 12: 1-6

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons:

"My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son."

I want to look at two things in particular in these verses; the great cloud of witnesses, and everything that hinders.

There are two different groups of witnesses, but they all died having struggled for their faith. The Old Testament witnesses had faith in the promise of a Saviour although they died without seeing that promise fulfilled. The martyrs, the people of the New Testament, died in faith because they had seen or heard of their living Saviour and were not prepared to deny him, even in the face of horrific torture. The writer to the Hebrews is anticipating that many of his hearers will be facing similar trials and threats in the future, and he is urging them to keep their eyes fixed firmly on Jesus, who is both their goal and their example.

There are countries all around us where Christians are being persecuted today. Their homes and churches are being burned, their livelihood is threatened, they and their loved ones are being killed. Our Christian neighbours overseas, like the early Christians, very rightly fear being murdered for their faith, but it doesn't seem to stop them worshipping their Saviour. This is less likely to

insulting him, a suffering in the very heart of God that no one can fully comprehend.

This is what the word means when it says that the Father perfected his Son through suffering; not that he was a sinner who improved but rather, the sinless Son of God who succeeded in reaching the goal and fulfilling his Father's plan. He reached glory, the first being from this earth to do so. And because he did it and found a way, he is our pioneer.

Now, we can be his brothers and sisters living with him in glory, with the Father and the Spirit and all the holy children of God, by trusting him.

The word I take with me today is: He suffered and succeeded for me.

Prayer: Dear Father, help me find the secret pathway through all the false roads of this life. Lead me to Jesus and put my steps in his, the way of salvation, goodness, purity, and beauty. No matter what it costs me, it will be worth it. Amen.

Day 7: Freed us from fear

Hebrews 2:14-16

Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil – and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. For surely it is not angels he helps but Abraham's descendants.

I have to admit that sometimes when I'm reading Hebrews, it's the same as if I was reading the American Constitution. I recognise all the words, but I don't really grasp the issues. This could be because they don't have a lot of importance to me. I don't understand why it is so important to the Americans that they should be able to freely purchase deadly weapons, and I don't understand why the writer to the Hebrews was so insistent on the inferior position of angels when compared to Jesus.

That said, I have to look at where my attitude comes from. I am in the fortunate possession of a body of attained knowledge which has come to me simply because other people have battled with issues like gun control and the position of angels in the great chain of being, and have written their studies down. We twenty-first century humans can pick up that great body of literature and examine it and form opinions on it at our leisure.

The early Christians had the Old Testament writings and some stories which were being passed on by word-of-mouth. The stories were supported by signs and miracles and some powerful testimony from witnesses, but their transmission must still have been somewhat piecemeal. People such as Luke and the writer to the Hebrews were very aware of this, and their writings are specifically meant to give their audience a coherent account of the information that they deemed important. It is certain that the collection of writings that we know as the New Testament were not the only accounts in circulation. Everybody who could write was probably passing on the good news, but the texts we have are the ones that the early church saw fit to carefully preserve.

So what did our writer think was important enough to pass on to his audience in the above text? Here, he is very carefully emphasising Christ's humanity. It was necessary for Christ to become exactly like us, that is, human in every way, in order to make atonement for us. I find that amazing. Jesus has been where we are. His death for sin in our place is a very great mystery, but his shared flesh is a very great comfort, because whatever happens to us, Jesus has been there. He really does know how we feel.

The word I take with me today is: Jesus, who is equal with God, became human for us.

Prayer: Dear Lord Jesus, even with the careful explanation of your writer to the Hebrews, I still don't really know why it was necessary for you to become human, and suffer and die for us, but I know I am thankful for your great love. Keep me in your way. Amen.

Day 8: Made like us

Hebrews 2:17-18

For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

The longer we live, the more opportunity we have of mind-blowing experiences. We have all had our share of them. The experience of reading this passage has to be tops!

Why would God, creator of all that is, who could come into the world anytime, in any place and form, choose to become a human being? Why would and did

though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.

These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

Wow! What an amazing passage! We can love it for its directness, its logic and its presentation of where "the rubber hits the road."

Take the first verse. It sets out the nature of all true faith for us. There is hardly any verse more significant in the New Testament than this one. This verse defines faith. In fact, this is the only definition of faith attempted in scripture. The definition is clear and concise. It does not beat about the bush.

And why is this so important? It is because a solid definition of faith, a gift of God, provides the understanding necessary for a way forward on our spiritual journey. Being clear about what faith is and its sheer importance acts as a key or a password to the most important state of being we can possibly hope for: eternal life. Eternal life hinges on the presence of faith and its exercise.

Faith enables us to feel and act believing that the object of our faith, the existence of God and his Word, are real and present now. Our faith enables us to simply take the leap of accepting God and his Word as it is without question or judgement: a "leap of faith" so to speak. This is what the faithful women and men of the Old Testament did. They had no rational proof of the existence of God. They simply accepted and ran with an intuitive knowing that God does exist and that his Word matters more than anything else. They based their lives on this faith. They trusted that God's holy will was best for them. They had no assurance or proof that God's word would be fulfilled. But they had the most important thing: faith.

Once we have the eyes of faith, all else flows. We open up to God's influence bit by bit, firstly by putting our "toe in the water", then perhaps "a full immersion" swim. Through practising our faith daily, we develop new eyes, develop an ever-growing relationship with God. And, as the years pass, we become sure, strong in our knowledge of God and the impact of his word in our lives. This is not a temporary, "iffy" faith that shrivels back to destruction. This is a faith that withstands trials to the preserving of our soul. Our faith takes God's promises for us as fact and makes them real in the present. It demonstrates the reality of the hidden world. It gains God's approval. It is the key to eternal life.

regular basis? Do our congregations give sacrificially of finances and time to serve the persecuted church? These are deeply serious questions and I urge you not to pass over them lightly. Go back and actually verbally answer each of them individually. If the answer to any of them is ‘no’ or ‘rarely,’ why is that the case? Are we enjoying our privileged and isolated position in our comfortable Western churches?

You can find out more about the persecuted church at websites like www.opendoors.org.au or www.barnabasfund.org. There you can learn how to pray, listen to the stories of the persecuted church, and give to support our brothers and sisters, in order to ‘stand side by side with those who are so treated.’ You can stand side by side by advocating for them within your congregation, sharing stories, praying, raising their profile, and remembering them.

The word I take with me today is: Remember the persecuted church.

Prayer: Lord of the Church, when your people suffer, you suffer with them. Expand my horizons. Don’t let me get stuck in my comfortable bubble. Help me remember and pray for the persecuted church, and stand beside them in all the ways I can. And now I pause and pray for all your persecuted ones. Have mercy on them. Grant them strength. Deliver them from the power of evil and from those who would hurt or attempt to silence or destroy them. Jesus, in your name I pray. Amen.

Day 33: Faith makes us sure

Hebrews 11:1-6, 17-19, 39-40

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for.

By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.

By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead.

By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death; he could not be found, because God had taken him away. For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even

God choose to live here on earth just like us? Why did Christ have to suffer during his life and especially during his death? And what has all this to do with being “*a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God*”?

The Jewish high priest was one of the people, but only he had the privilege of entering the most holy place to make atonement for the sins of all the people.

Through being made like us, Jesus was in complete and utter solidarity with us. Though without blemish, he understood the nature of the human condition, including temptation, suffering and death through his own personal experience and so was eminently able to help us in our iniquities.

Today’s passage presents Jesus as high priest. He became man to be one of us to be in solidarity. He became high priest and the sacrificial blood he carried into the Holy of Holies was his own blood. He set right our relationship with God. He annulled our past, cancelled it out. He obliterated forever our inner bias towards evil and gave us the inner strength to stay in right relationship with God. This is the true nature of Christ’s help.

Christ helps us in two ways: he helps us through altering our relationship with God. He also speaks God’s heart to us. What else do we need? A mind-blower indeed!

The word I take with me today is: He was made like us in every way and sacrificed his blood on the altar for me.

Prayer: Dear Lord, today’s message to me is profound. Help me to run with its meaning and to live out its implications in my life day by day. Amen.

Day 9: Christ is faithful over his house

Hebrews 3:1-6

Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, whom we acknowledge as our apostle and high priest. He was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in all God's house. Jesus has been found worthy of greater honour than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honour than the house itself. For every house is built by someone, but God is the builder of everything. 'Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house, bearing witness to what would be spoken by God in the future. But Christ is faithful as the Son over God's house. And we are his house, if indeed we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory.

For us who think of a house as a very important thing in our lives, this passage should alert us to a much more significant house. While for many a house is simply a home, it is indeed real estate that over time appreciates in value so that a situation has been reached today, that many in the community are asset rich – millionaires because of bricks and mortar.

This godless preoccupation with the house, the endless makeovers and other fetishes, must take back seat to the house of Christ. Its value far exceeded Moses' position as the greatest prophet and leader of Israel and builder of the first temple, the tabernacle in which his brother Aaron served. Moses was also responsible for the whole house of Israel, the people and the nation. However, he was created by God and a member of Israel too, who eventually handed on his mantle to Joshua and then died.

The Son is in a far greater position because all things were built (created) through him (see 1:2) and he reached heaven itself, reaching an exalted and glorified state. As such he is over God's house and not just in it. This house is the house of all Christians, who have confidence about their future glory.

Our focus then should be in what Christ has granted us as a free gift: membership in a community of heaven who are destined to enjoy a kingdom under his rule of love. This is an existence next to God himself where we shall be radiated by the power and character of the Son of God.

We waste too much of our time, money and energy on houses. Let us think more of how Christ has built us anew, from the foundations up to the roof, as redeemed people, people with hope and purpose while we serve him.

The word I take with me today is: Christ is faithfully building my life into his.

Prayer: My dear Lord Jesus, steer me away from things I foolishly think are permanent and will give me peace and security, such as a house. Rather, help me to appreciate the new community of the church and my place in it, which is permanent, full of equality, love and closeness to you. Amen.

Day 10: Encourage one another to the end

Hebrews 3:(7-11),12-15,(16-19)

See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. We

The word I take with me today is: When reading Scripture, remember context and find what points to Christ!

Prayer: Lord, let your Holy Spirit work in me. May I never turn my back on Jesus or insult the Spirit of grace. Help me understand Scripture as it points to Christ, and put my trust in him. In his name I pray. Amen.

Day 32: Do not shrink back

Hebrews 10:32-39

Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions.

So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. For, "In just a little while, he who is coming will come and will not delay." And, "But my righteous one will live by faith. And I take no pleasure in the one who shrinks back." But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved.

Many times, Jesus and the New Testament writers tell us that following Jesus will result in suffering. These words sound somewhat strange to our Australian ears, because the worst 'suffering' or 'oppression' that we face is mild social stigma for being Christians. Yet for literally millions of people around the world, those who are part of the persecuted church, these words ring true as simple descriptions of their life and experience. From North Korea (the worst country in the world for persecution of Christians) to Iraq, from Colombia to Kenya, there are many countries where professing faith in Christ is a dangerous, even illegal act, as it appears to have been for the recipients of this letter.

This passage says 'Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated.' Hebrews 13:3 says 'Remember those in prison as if you were there yourself. Remember also those being mistreated, as if you felt their pain in your own bodies.'

Do we stand side by side with our persecuted brothers and sisters? Do we make the effort to know and understand their situation? Do we pray for them on a

Day 31: Judgement against continual rejection

Hebrews 10:26-31

If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think someone deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified them, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' and again, 'The Lord will judge his people.' It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

There is no denying that this is one of the 'difficult passages' in Scripture. This was the one of the passages that led Martin Luther to suggest that Hebrews should not be in the canon of the New Testament.

Taken as an isolated paragraph, this passage could be quite terrifying, especially for anxious Christians unsure of their salvation. Therefore, it is vitally important to remember the context of verses like this: first in the context of the book of Hebrews as a unit, understanding its audience and author's intention, and then in the context of the whole of the New Testament and 'what points to Christ.' As one commentator has written: 'The Book of Hebrews is written to Christians of Jewish background, facing the temptation to renounce their Christian faith because of persecution and return to the (relative) safety of the Jewish religion. The author masterfully weaves together his arguments for the superiority of Christ with his warnings against falling away...' This is one of those warnings and it is a powerful one. This warning needs to be understood in context, especially in the light of the verses that immediately precede it and follow it, which are full of hope, gospel and promise, e.g. Hebrews 10:23: 'Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.'

Perhaps the author of Hebrews in speaking about 'insulting the Spirit of grace' and 'trampling Christ underfoot' is saying something similar to Jesus when he says 'The sin against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven.' This is a sin that is impossible to commit and still be worried about it. It's describing absolute hardness of heart and utter rejection of Christ, NOT describing someone who continues to be aware of sin yet is repentant. In other words, if this passage from Hebrews worries you, then you are not one of the people that it is describing! As Hebrews 10:39 says, 'But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believed and are saved.'

have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first. As has just been said, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts, as you did in the rebellion."

I was weeding my front garden the other day and a woman I had never seen before stopped for a chat. It turned out that she and her husband were sort of stranded in town for a week while their mobile home was undergoing repairs. I said, "Well, if you are not doing anything else tomorrow, why don't you drop in for a coffee?"

Next morning, about ten o'clock, there was a ring at the doorbell and there the couple were, looking somewhat tentative and carrying a newly-purchased cake from the bakery. I ushered them inside, switched the kettle on and said, "How lovely that you took me at my word." And it was. We spent a very pleasant hour chatting and they agreed to drop in again when they are passing through.

I know some of you are thinking that I was taking a bit of a risk. What if something bad happened? What if they were merely casing the joint? And that's very sad, because we are becoming so fearful of our fellow man that we are no longer willing to offer ordinary hospitality. Our homes have extended their role from castles to fortresses and we lock ourselves away.

And that brings me to my point. The writer tells us to "Encourage one another daily." That sentence implies a community which is in constant, daily friendship and communication with each other. I should add, constant loving fellowship. If we see our fellow Christians being warm and generous and supportive of each other, then it encourages us to do the same. If we meet frequently for discussions about our loving Lord, and demonstrate that love to each other, then that keeps him in our hearts. I'm not sure we can do all that in one hurried hour on Sunday. And finally, if others in the secular community see us being warm and loving and generous to each other in the name of Jesus, it will encourage them to join us in his worship.

The word I take with me today is: Every day, encourage each other to praise and worship God.

Prayer: Dear Lord, grant us a spirit of community, so that we come out of our shells and live and work and have fellowship with each other without fear, nurturing each other in your love. Amen.

Day 11: Strive to enter your rest

Hebrews 4:1-11

Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith. Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said, "So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.'" And yet his work has been finished since the creation of the world. For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: "And on the seventh day God rested from all his work." And again in the passage above he says, "They shall never enter my rest."

It still remains that some will enter that rest, and those who formerly had the gospel preached to them did not go in, because of their disobedience. Therefore God again set a certain day, calling it Today, when a long time later he spoke through David, as was said before: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience.

How many of us can say we have had a good night's sleep? Even if we can say "yes" to this question, how many of us can say we are truly rested? Some of us ask: what does being "truly rested" feel like or mean? We might have time for leisure activities, but the time gets swamped with perhaps a list of "should be doings", possibilities for entertainment, taking on more hours at work, helping friends or family The list can be exhaustive and usually ends in exhaustion and, if we go on long enough, the disaster of an early death. But there is always something to do. It's a disease. But a longing for rest after exertion belongs to the universal human condition. It is, in fact, part of the rhythm of daily and weekly life.

If we cannot wind down to rest in the physical plane, how might we make ourselves available to rest in God? The most obvious form of human resting in Scripture is the Sabbath – one day set aside for freedom from work. It provided for total rest and the opportunity for spiritual nutrition through worship of God and reorientation of a person's values, taking attention off workday preoccupations with getting and spending and onto God and spiritual realities ... willingness to engage in such resting is nothing less than "a sign" between God and his people. It was also understood as a release from the bondage of Israel in Egypt.

Having entered into the presence of God, it is right that we worship him. The ways of doing this are as numerous as the bodies which constitute the Church and profess the name of Christ. The writer of Hebrews, having cast aside the temple ritual, urges his hearers to do several things. They should not give up meeting together, they should encourage one another, and they should spur one another on toward love and good deeds.

From what I can make out, the early Christians met frequently, and each time they met they broke bread; that is, they celebrated the sacrament of the Eucharist. They listened to the Word, they prayed for one another and they gave personal testimony. They seem to have met informally, in each other's houses or on the river bank, not in elaborate, purpose-built churches and cathedrals. Worship took place over the table, at a communal meal, with God in the midst of them, as he promised. With our present-day insistence on facing the front, it isn't too surprising that some newcomers think we are actually worshipping the image of Jesus pinned to the front wall instead of Jesus himself.

Have we complicated things too much? We put a lot of energy and money into building and maintaining church property. Could those resources be better used? I sometimes wonder, with our insistence on certain forms of liturgy, certain songs and hymns, certain types of behaviour, whether we are in danger of allowing ritual to take the place of worship. This might seem to be straying somewhat from the text, but it's relevant that we should think about how we worship Jesus so that our hearts are not distracted by unimportant matters but can focus wholly on him.

The word I take with me today is: Let us draw near to God with a heart full of assurance of his grace.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, remind me, when I worship you, that I am not the most important person in the conversation. Grant me the humility to draw close to your presence, through the freedom you have given us in Christ. Amen.

Both of these are true. You are flawed, sinful, growing in holiness, in need of grace. You are forgiven, justified, right with God. And both of these are happening because of the sacrifice of Jesus.

The word I take with me today is: I am forgiven. I am always being made holy.

Prayer: Jesus, help me live in the crazy/beautiful tension of being sinner and saint, of your work of justification being complete and the Spirit's work of sanctification continuing. Today, and for the rest of my life, would you help me to be who I am, to live in trust of your forgiveness even when all I see is my sin, and to grow in holiness? For your name's sake. Amen.

Day 30: Draw closer to God

Hebrews 10:19-25

Therefore brothers (and sisters), 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, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

There are almost no rules in the New Testament about the form which our worship should take. The Old Testament was very specific; you only have to read Leviticus and Numbers to see that. Everything was dictated, from the shape and substance of the tabernacle to the precise forms of the rituals. The priests had to wash themselves with pure water and cleanse the vessels used for the ceremonies. The curtain mentioned in the text is the barrier which separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple. Only the high priest had access to this most special place, and that, only once a year.

The writer of Hebrews transfers these requirements symbolically to all Christians. Now we, as individual worshippers, can enter into the presence of God, through the living curtain, that is, Jesus. The pure water is, of course, more than a mere symbol, it is the water of baptism, with which we are cleansed from sin.

Rest is a form of freedom – from work, from human striving and acquisitiveness, from worldly preoccupations. Willingness to rest is a sign of commitment to God.

Just as the Israelites were invited to enter God's rest, so too are we. Today's passage puts to us the real opportunity of entering God's rest. It is a call, an invitation offering no less than entry to eternal life. It is a call we should find hard to refuse. Yet many find it hard to accept. Our text urges us to remain faithful to the end. The offer of entering the "rest" of God remains open. It is up to us to take up the offer.

The word I take with me today is: "... the promise of entering his rest still stands". I believe. I will enter God's rest.

Prayer: Dear Lord, I have had the gospel preached to me. The message is of great value. Please help me hear its value and help me be faithful to you. Help me find true rest in you. Amen.

Day 12: The power of God's word

Hebrews 4:12-13

For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

In reading today's verses, one can only be mesmerised by the imagery used to portray the activity and power of the Word of God.

The sword, single or double-edged, was a significant weapon of combat in the ancient Near East and in the Greco-Roman world. The sword was effective in plunging and hacking opponents in armed conflict. Of the over 400 occurrences of the term in scripture, most can be understood literally. The word *sword* also came to gain a set of symbolic meanings including bloodshed and strife, divine judgement, power of civic authorities to punish and execute wrongdoers, and anything that causes harm or injury to people. A double-edged sword spelled far more than double trouble.

In scripture the Word of God is symbolised as a sword due to its ability to incisively penetrate human life. It cuts through to the chase. The Word of God is not like the word of a person. The Word of God is living, effective and self-

fulfilling. It diagnoses the condition of the human heart. It sees: “you are distressed here,” and brings blessing to those who receive it in faith, drawing them to ever closer relationship with God.

Today’s verses tell us that the Word of God probes, digs deep into the deepest, indeed the most secret recesses of our spiritual being and brings all our subconscious motives to light. It penetrates with an edge so sharp that it opens us up to healing relationships with ourselves, others and God. Nothing is hidden. All is laid bare. We cannot hide. There is nowhere to go. We are faced with the possibility of healing: healing that is comprehensive, all-encompassing.

At the end of the day, we submit our ultimate account to God, not others or our own conscience. Stripped bare of all masks, veneers and protection, we are completely at the mercy of God, the judge of all. Sidestepping or shunning the offer of the Word of God seems crazy.

The word I take with me today is: To the Word of God I am an open book.

Prayer: Dear Lord, you know me far better than I know myself. Help me to be more and more authentic. Through increasing authenticity, help me to draw closer to you and others. Amen.

Day 13: Jesus a merciful and faithful high priest

Hebrews 4:14-16

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

When things get complicated, when we are challenged or face an experience that tests us we might try to meet the trial in a number of ways. We might do preliminary research, perhaps Google the topic. We might ask friends who have had experience in handling a similar issue. We may seek professional advice. Depending on the nature of the challenge, we may even get a second opinion.

For matters of mercy and grace, to whom or where might we go? We can safely respond: “There is no one better than Christ.” Our verses tell us why.

you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, ‘Here I am – it is written about me in the scroll – I have come to do your will, my God.’”

First he said, “Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them”– though they were offered in accordance with the law. Then he said, “Here I am, I have come to do your will.” He sets aside the first to establish the second. And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, and since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool. For by one sacrifice he has made perfect for ever those who are being made holy.

‘For by one sacrifice [Jesus] has made perfect for ever those who are being made holy.’

For me, this one verse perfectly encapsulates one of the wonderful paradoxes or tensions in the Christian faith: the paradox that we are 100%, all the time, God’s holy saints, and 100%, all the time, sinners in need of God’s forgiveness and grace. In Latin this is ‘simil iustus et peccator’ – simultaneously saint and sinner. The tension can also be described as the junction of a completed justification and an ongoing sanctification.

That’s a lot of theological jargon. But it’s really important. So I’ll try to unpack it a little more.

Look at the tenses of the sentence I have quoted.

‘Jesus HAS MADE PERFECT...’ – this is in the past tense, describing an already completed action. The word translated here as ‘made perfect’ could be translated ‘complete’ or ‘mature’ or ‘finished.’ It’s from the same word as Jesus cries on the cross: ‘It is finished!’ Because of the sacrifice of Jesus, you HAVE BEEN forgiven, reconciled to God, justified, declared not guilty. You are 100% saint, and God chooses not to remember your sins and lawless acts.

And look at the second half of the sentence. ‘Those who are BEING MADE HOLY.’ This is in the present continuous sense. You are still a work in progress. There is always more for God to do with you to sanctify you and to equip you to be who you are, to help you live the holy life God has called you to. From a human point of view, as you are no doubt painfully aware sometimes, you are 100% sinner, always in need of God’s grace and of continuing to be made holy, continuing to be set apart completely for God’s purposes.

not yet too late to die,’ she says, and he replies, ‘No, the other way around: it’s not yet too late to change your life, but far too late to die...’ He then tells her the story of Jesus’ death from the perspective of Barabbas, and says to her, ‘You are too late, Fatma. The death you have deserved Jesus has already died. Since his death, every suicide is too late. It’s unnecessary. You are free. Free like Barabbas.’ Later, the pastor and his wife declare God’s great forgiveness to Fatma, in a powerful moment of healing and grace: ‘...you are free now, absolutely free. The past is effaced from God’s memory. If you continue to burden yourself with your forgiven sins, you commit a new one.’ She replies, ‘I understand.’

Jesus’ once-for-all sacrifice has atoned for all sin. We cannot pay for our own sin – it is impossible to do something that has already been done. We are ‘too late’ to try to pay for our own sin. We can sometimes try to do this, even as Christians, when we continue to hold ourselves guilty when God has pronounced his forgiveness on us for Jesus’ sake, or when we ‘beat ourselves up’ for our sin and sink in to self-loathing. God’s forgiveness is not dependent on us feeling really bad or hating ourselves. It is dependent only on Jesus’ once-for-all, atoning and life-giving sacrifice. Trusting in him as Saviour and Lord, we know for sure that when we face him as judge, God will render the verdict ‘Not guilty – because of Christ.’

The word I take with me today is: Jesus has died for me. I will live for him.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, how can I thank you enough for the depth of grace, the sacrifice of Jesus, to take away my sin and make me holy? Help me to accept and know your forgiveness and grace, trust it, and live for your glory. Amen.

Day 29: Made perfect by one sacrifice

Hebrews 10:1-14,(15-18)

The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming – not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. Otherwise, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshippers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins. It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said: “Sacrifice and offering

Firstly, as the Son of God, Christ is the ultimate revelation of God and the one in whom God’s purposes for the universe are completed. As the ultimate high priest, he was faithful to God in the face of suffering and temptation. He endured death to make atonement for the sin of humanity. Who is better qualified to help us in matters of mercy and grace?

Secondly, in his ascension, Christ passed through the heavens and went to God’s presence to act as our representative. (Remember, this is in contrast to the Jewish high priests who, on the Day of Atonement offered sacrifices outside the temple and later passed into the inner sanctuary to intercede for the people – based on the people’s offerings). Again, who is better qualified to help us in matters of mercy and grace?

Thirdly, the exalted Christ carries with him his earthly experiences of resisting sin: he continues to know what it is like to be tested. As he is the only one who has resisted temptation, he is the only one who could possibly know its full weight. He proved himself to be a man of true personal calibre and the only one who could possibly save us from the power and penalty of sin. Again, is there anyone better qualified to help us in matters of mercy and grace?

When things get complicated, when we are challenged or face an experience that tests us in matters of mercy and grace, Christ is the only one to whom we can turn.

The word I take with me today is: God’s rule is characterised by grace and mercy. I have a high priest who understands my challenges completely. Christ is my high priest.

Prayer: Dear Lord, I ask for mercy for my past failures. I ask for grace. Help me draw near to you always, including in my time of need. Amen.

Day 14: Jesus, called as Son and priest forever

Hebrews 5:1-6

Every high priest is selected from among the people and is appointed to represent the people in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness. This is why he has to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of the people. And no one takes this honour on himself, but he receives it when called by God, just as Aaron was. In the same way, Christ did not take on himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him, “You are my Son; today I have

become your Father.” And he says in another place, “You are a priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek.”

We live at a time when the cult of the individual dominates the thinking of many if not most people in the community. One of the aspects of this self-adoration and belief that one can do no wrong is the propensity to promote oneself. Confidence in a job interview or aspiring to enter a national sport’s team is necessary and natural. Rather, I have in mind the unrealistic expectation that promotion will come quickly and almost without effort.

The role we play in life is something we ought to see as coming from God. He is our heavenly Father and we should expect him to guide us into a position or activity that is suitable for us and serves the community; and this can happen very differently for each believer in Christ. A person is very lucky if he or she knows from an early age what to aim for as a career but for many there is confusion and several experiments and retraining before a proper niche is found. I firmly believe I was led into the ministry but I had to train for seven years and wait till I was approved for ordination and for a congregation that would accept a graduate. Promoting yourself was not an option.

High priests were selected to a point. A person had to be a descendant of Aaron, the first high priest. If there were a capable son, then he would be installed, either by the king or the Jewish parliament called the Sanhedrin. If no son were available or deemed eligible, then a devout, learned and wise individual was called from the priestly group of candidates.

Christ’s call to this position surpassed that of the old Jewish system. His Father called him, first through the ancient prophecies of Psalms 2 and 110. Further, he was not only called to be a high priest but a heavenly high priest, able to offer the sacrifice of his life to atone for sin, as the Son of God. This makes his high priesthood much greater, for it is without sin or any human weakness, completely effective because it is divine, and one that lasts forever. So Jesus’ role was not based on self-assertion but on humble obedience to the point of suffering and death. Since he was humble, he fulfilled the requirements of his call, but waited till his ascension in glory before his Father bestowed on him a position of sonship and honour as a high priest able to make a once-and-for-all sacrifice.

I guess in a cut-throat world, some ambition and self-promotion is necessary but how different to the one who started by putting himself in the lowest position and fully identifying with the weak.

outwardly but cleanses our consciences so we can be free from guilt. In some situations, guilt can be a powerful motivator. But it’s ultimately destructive of our service to God. The blood of Jesus and the new covenant sets us free to serve God in bold confidence that because of what Jesus has done, our service of God is pleasing to him.

The word I take with me today is: Jesus has cleansed me so I can serve the living God.

Prayer: Dear Lord Jesus, thank you that you have shed your blood for me and cleansed me of guilt, sin and shame. As your blood now runs through my veins, may I serve God with joy, today and always. Amen.

Day 28: A once and for all sacrifice

Hebrews 9:16-28

In the case of a will, it is necessary to prove the death of the one who made it, because a will is in force only when somebody has died; it never takes effect while the one who made it is living. This is why even the first covenant was not put into effect without blood. When Moses had proclaimed every command of the law to all the people, he took the blood of calves, together with water, scarlet wool and branches of hyssop, and sprinkled the scroll and all the people. He said, ‘This is the blood of the covenant, which God has commanded you to keep.’ In the same way, he sprinkled with the blood both the tabernacle and everything used in its ceremonies. In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.

It was necessary, then, for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these sacrifices, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God’s presence. Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. Otherwise Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But he has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgement, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.

In one of my favourite novels, I Married You, by Walter Trobisch, the protagonist – a pastor – is speaking on a bridge with a troubled young lady, trying to prevent her committing suicide. ‘It’s too late to change my life, but

The word I take with me today is: Jesus' forgiveness is real. We can rest assured in his grace.

Prayer: Dear Lord Jesus, free me from the tyranny of habit and custom. Show me how to truly obey you in the freedom of your saving grace. Amen.

Day 27: Christ the Mediator

Hebrews 9:11-15

But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say, is not a part of this creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, so obtaining eternal redemption. The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!

For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance – now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.

A covenant is a life-shaping and identity-defining promise, made either unilaterally from God's point of view or in an agreement between God and people. God had made a covenant with the nation of Israel when they came out of Egypt, but he had also promised a new and better covenant to come in the prophecies of Jeremiah. Jesus through his death and shed blood becomes the mediator of a new covenant. This new covenant fulfils and expands God's first covenant with the people of Israel, and makes God's salvation available to all people, not just Jews. Because Jesus has instituted a new covenant, you and I can receive the inheritance of God's sons and daughters.

This passage from the book of Hebrews brings to mind the Last Supper, when Jesus instituted Holy Communion with these words: '...this is my blood of the new covenant, shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.' Although it's not an exact analogy, I like to think of receiving Holy Communion as being like receiving a blood transfusion from Jesus. His blood, his life, is now running through my veins, bringing health and life and healing and forgiveness. Like a terminally ill patient, I can't live without it! The blood is getting where it needs to go – to my heart – to work its life-giving effects in me. The blood of Christ, shed as the seal of the promise of the new covenant, cleanses us not just

The word I take with me today is: Jesus is my priest through his humility and his exaltation as the Son.

Prayer: My dear Lord Jesus, I thank-you that I have you to represent me before the Father. You understand my every weakness and failing yet have power as the Son and Eternal High Priest. Help me to understand that you are qualified to lead me. Amen.

Day 15: Jesus' cries for us

Hebrews 5:7-10

During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek.

It's time to confess that I tend to be a bit slapdash about prayer. I pray, but my methods are haphazard. I don't necessarily put aside a time specifically for prayer – it's more like pray as I go. I'm not contemplative and I find it difficult to concentrate on the single action of prayer. Sometimes, while I'm gardening perhaps, or doing the dishes, my prayers are long and considered and altruistic and sometimes, in different circumstances, they are short and desperate, along the lines of, "Dear God, just let me get through the next five minutes."

I don't think there's anything particularly wrong with this. We all have our different personality traits, and sometimes it's better to just go along with them, rather than giving ourselves long pious lectures on what we should be doing. The important thing is that I am seriously praying.

We might think that, if Jesus is God, he would have no need to pray, but that is not the case. The gospels record many, many instances of Jesus praying to his father. When his disciples asked him for a lesson, he taught them the prayer we know as the Lord's Prayer, which manages to be both all-encompassing and quite short. The writer to the Hebrews makes the point that it was the high priest's job to pray for the people, and Jesus does that for us. What's more, God hears and heeds the prayers of Jesus for us. But that doesn't mean we should stop praying for ourselves. We are specifically told to keep reminding

God of our needs. The parable of the importunate neighbour is a case in point. He kept nagging until his friend got up and gave him a loaf of bread.

I have a friend with a particular spiritual gift of praying in tongues. She doesn't say much about it in public, but I always feel very reassured when I know that she is praying for me. How much more reassured should I feel then, to know that Jesus is daily praying and interceding for me with God his father!

The word I take with me today is: Jesus prays to his heavenly father for me.

Prayer: Dear Lord Jesus, I thank you that you intercede for me with your father. I thank you for being the sacrifice for my sin. I thank you for your forgiveness and love. Amen.

Day 16: The training of the mature

Hebrews 5:11-6:3

We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about cleansing rites, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And God permitting, we will do so.

How mature are you in your Christian faith? Are you mature enough to teach others? (Sit with that question for a full minute before reading on.)

This provocative question is the standard that the author of Hebrews sets for growth in faith. While it is easy to look around and consider the maturity level of other Christians, this is a question which calls for us to examine ourselves, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Have we become 'spiritual consumers' – babes in the faith who demand light, entertaining biblical 'snacks'? Do we listen to a sermon or read a bible passage and judge it by its entertainment value, or by how well presented it is, rather than by its content and its power to let the Holy Spirit lead us into repentance and righteousness?

was still standing. This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshipper. They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings – external regulations applying until the time of the new order.

These words must have been an extraordinary revelation to the Jewish readers of this letter. They were inculcated with the ceremonial requirements of the old covenant, with the Law and all its meticulous demands, and here these requirements are simply being put aside. We all know from experience how disturbing it can be to have our regular rituals and routines disrupted; think of how disturbed these sincere Jewish believers must have been to be told that the rituals that they had based their daily lives around from childhood were simply unnecessary. It's not too surprising, really, that some of them were drifting away from the good news of Jesus back to the old covenant of Moses.

The Law, that is, the ten commandments, teaches our conscience morality. The commandments show us what is right and wrong. Jesus commanded us to love God above everything and to love our neighbour as ourselves, and the commandments are very helpful if we are puzzled as to what this means in everyday living. Following the commandments helps keep our conscience clear. But some of us add things to these rules and we might not even realise it. Keeping the children quiet in church, for example, is a matter of courtesy. It's polite, and it helps those who are a bit deaf to hear what is going on. But having noisy children is not a reason for excluding their parents from church. There's no theological reason or rule that says: "Thou shalt not talk in church."

A better example, and a very prevalent problem, is the issue of liturgical form. I know there are pastors and congregations in the Lutheran church of Australia who refuse to use the new liturgies or sing the new songs. They stick stubbornly to the old ways because they insist that is the only right thing to do. They have transformed a matter of custom into a matter of conscience. So we can understand how troubled the early Jewish Christians must have been at having their rigid laws about dietary customs, about circumcision, about Sabbath restrictions, swept aside.

The writer of Hebrews hands the problem of conscience back to the responsibility of the individual worshipper. Luther, with his "Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen." showed very clearly that individual people are responsible to God for their own actions. We cannot buy indulgences from the priests, or rely on them to sacrifice for us any more, we can only go to our great High Priest with an appeal for mercy. Then we can rest in the freedom of Jesus' forgiveness.

human beings right with God. Hebrews makes everything so clear here, that Christ is the once and for all sacrifice, that he serves in the heavenly temple (the presence of God), that he is the Son of God, the word made flesh, and that he lives eternally unlike the sinful and mortal priests of old.

In that sense, the old covenant is obsolete and can never be the foundation for our relationship with God. But the old work of God does not disappear as though plan A was just an experimental phase. The history God had with his people of old was crucial for the next phase, plan B as it were. And so we have said that the proper way of looking at the history of God's saving work is to see that Christ is the fulfilment, that he completes and makes perfect the old – he is the culmination of the law (see Romans 10:4). Christ surpasses the old covenant of works by fulfilling it.

We can think of a number of analogies: the person is much better than the photograph, the country surpasses the map of it and the destination is greater than the journey. In the Old Testament, we already see this great truth shining through in a number of places. Jeremiah, the prophet whom our writer quotes, says that knowing what the Lord requires is different to having a real desire to understand the Lord and see his will done. External codes never do much for people except make them into hypocrites. Similarly, knowing about God is not the same as knowing him personally. And rather than forgiveness being achieved by the old covenant, something that is impossible in any case, the forgiveness offered by Christ is the foundation of the new covenant, the very starting point of knowing God intimately and actually being renewed by his Spirit.

The word I take with me today is: Jesus' covenant with me is something new in the world.

Prayer: Dear Father, I thank-you that I stand at the peak with all the people of old supporting me by their experiences recorded in the Old Testament. Now, through Christ, I have the clearest view. Amen.

Day 26: Obtaining a clear conscience

Hebrews 9:(1-6),7-10

But only the priest entered the inner room and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people committed in ignorance. The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle

Consumerism is alive and well in the church. 'What's in it for me? What do I get out of it? How is it meeting my needs?' These are common, if unspoken questions about our involvement with worship or church programs, and if the answers are not what we like, we are tempted to look elsewhere. But consumerism is the deadly enemy of maturity in faith, of discipleship, of following Jesus.

Consumerism focuses on me, my, I. The focus is taken off Christ and on to our own feelings about faith. Consumerism is, in fact, a carefully crafted alternative religion, offering explicit promises of meaning, purpose and security – the truth of which can only be found in Christ.

Maturity in Christ calls us to be able to teach others, to share our faith, to give – as Christ has given to us. Not only pastors and church leaders are called to grow more and more like Jesus. ALL Christians are to trust in his grace and live boldly in righteousness and a life that clearly distinguishes good from evil. Jesus' plan for us ALL is to become more like him, not in order to earn our salvation, but because in his grace he has called us to follow.

Ask again: Are you mature enough to teach others? To give rather than simply consume?

The word I take with me today is: Maturity in Christ leads me to give, not just consume.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, please reveal to me where I am not mature in faith, where I am a spiritual consumer rather than a disciple of Jesus. Please help me to grow in those areas. Give me the courage to learn, grow, and give to others. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Day 17: Repentance – always available

Hebrews 6:4-8

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.

Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned.

Is the word of God telling us that a person who has fallen away from Christ, having once known him, can never return to the Saviour through repentance? All of Scripture tells us that this could not be the case. The writer of Hebrews was thinking of those who had once been a part of the Christian community, had received the holy things of God, his word and the body and blood of Christ in the sacrament, and by faith, had participated in the ascended Christ, ready for his return and the resurrection from the dead. Under the pressure of persecution, they had renounced Christ and committed apostasy. Could they be forgiven?

Of course, we would say. Jesus assured us of this when he spoke to us the parable of the prodigal son. He had known the goodness of his father. Every day, even the least staff member on the farm was properly looked after. When he had rejected his father, demanded his inheritance and spent it on prostitutes and wild parties, in his destitution the prodigal came back to his waiting father, who ran to him and embraced him. This is the picture of God that Christ made real for us by taking our sin, being crucified and then rising in victory over death and the devil.

It is true that land that produces only thistles will be cleared of weeds by burning. It is an image of judgement and hell. But note that the writer says, it is in danger. What if the land responded and produced a crop that smothered the weeds? Then it would not be cursed. Our Lord said something similar when he spoke of a tree that despite his grace and attention, failed to produce fruit (Luke 13:9). There is always danger for the Christian who does not witness, serve, attend worship and so on. But returning to the arms of Christ through repentance is always possible.

The author may have had in mind those who had committed the unforgiveable sin of so utterly rejecting Christ that there was no way back. But who knows of such people? How could we determine this in any person's situation? We would be rushing to judgement, wouldn't we? Pharaoh would not let the Hebrew slaves go free despite the gospel Moses preached and repeated attempts at revealing the power of God's love for his people. In the end, Pharaoh hardened his own heart by his pride and obstinacy, believing that he was God. He is a warning to us that continual rejection of salvation can become final.

But anyone can repent; today is always a day of salvation (2Cor 6:2) because repentance is God's gift and not ours to produce.

The word I take with me today is: God grants me repentance every day.

our Lord has established a superior covenant because he has succeeded in winning salvation for us, and offers it to us as a gift. He has done what the law cannot do, but we would not say that God's relationship with the Jewish people has ended or the commandments can now be relaxed. We could use the analogy the writer has introduced, that of the shadow. The old temple and sacrifice was a copy of the true thing that exists in heaven and when Christ came, the shadowy thing became a living substance in him. As the ascended Lord with power over the whole universe, Jesus now serves in the temple of heaven, the true house of God, from where he directs his support to each of his children. Christ is the reality whereas the former covenant was a copy.

The word I take with me today is: Jesus ministry is a like a promise kept.

Prayer: Dear Father, thank-you for relating to me through your Son and making clear to me that rules and rituals will not save me. Help me to see that all those things written in the Old Testament are now complete and true in Jesus Christ without me having to do them for my justification. Amen.

Day 25: Christ fulfils the old covenant

Hebrews 8:7-8,(9),10-13

For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. But God found fault with the people and said:

'The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah...

This is the covenant I will establish with the people of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbours, or say to one another, "Know the Lord," because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.'

By calling this covenant 'new', he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear.

The old and the new is a major theme in Hebrews and it certainly is in our lives too. We instinctively know the difference between them but it doesn't always mean that old is better than new. An antique dealer would disagree and rightly so. In our transient world, new replaces old, just as a new-born enters a world as an old and frail person leaves it. When it comes to the old covenant of earning salvation by adherence to the laws of God, by sacrificing animals as a propitiation of God, the temple as the house of God, the priesthood as his servants, and the utterances of the prophets, we know that they cannot make

That gives us a certain responsibility. If Jesus is to act in the world, then it's up to us, his people, to do it.

The word I take with me today is: We are Jesus' right hands here on earth.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, the harvest is great and the labourers are few. Let us not be daunted or defeated by the task, but give us the strength to act as your willing representatives and workers right where we are. In your name we pray. Amen.

Day 24: The old sanctuary only a copy

Hebrews 8:3-6

Every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices, and so it was necessary for this one also to have something to offer. If he were on earth, he would not be a priest, for there are already priests who offer the gifts prescribed by the law. They serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven. This is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: "See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain." But in fact the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, since the new covenant is established on better promises.

The writer is speaking about the most basic of biblical facts, that we have an old covenant and a new, an Old Testament and a New Testament; testament and covenant being the same thing. As Luther correctly simplified things, the old covenant is the law and the new covenant is the gospel. The law, including the cultic laws that established the sacrifice and the temple, were ineffective in changing humanity. People could be controlled outwardly but their inner attitudes, impulses and desires remained the same. A new relationship with God was required, one of grace based on the once-and-for-all sacrifice of Christ and the indwelling Spirit who begins restoring and transforming the baptized believer.

It would be wrong to say that the new has superseded the old and the old is obsolete. Christ made it abundantly clear that not one jot or tittle of the law would be removed and anyone who taught a relaxation of the law would be in serious trouble. Our righteousness has to exceed that of the Pharisees our Lord taught us (see Matthew 5:17-20). One way of thinking of the connection is to think of the tourist horse and buggies operating in the centre of Melbourne and the modern vehicle. The vehicle has fulfilled the role of the cart but the principles of the cart, its wheels, seats, and horsepower still apply. Likewise,

Prayer: Dear Father, protect me from back sliding, of ignoring you, or denying you under pressure. When I fall, restore me through repentance and fill me with a godly sorrow and strong faith in Christ. Amen.

Day 18: God does not forget our work

Hebrews 6:9-12

Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are convinced of better things in your case – the things that have to do with salvation. God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, so that what you hope for may be fully realized. We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.

As a pastor, I have had a number of anxious people talk to me about their loved ones who have Alzheimer's disease or dementia. Their question has run along these lines: 'My mum has dementia and can't even remember her name, let alone mine, and doesn't respond when we talk with her about matters of faith. She's been a Christian all her life but now she doesn't even remember the Lord's Prayer. Will she still go to heaven? Is she still saved if she can't remember anything?'

The essence of this question is about the nature of saving faith. Is faith only a conscious, aware thing, an intellectual response or ability? For this crucial pastoral question the Book of Hebrews offers great comfort. 'God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people.' Saving faith is a relationship of trust in God through Christ which shapes a whole life. Conscious, reflective knowledge of the content of faith is one part of this relationship. Although we may forget, God does not. Similarly to a child being baptized before conscious or reflective faith is possible, saving faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit – given, imparted, as a relationship, which shapes both thought and action throughout a person's life. This saving faith remains in force, even when a person no longer is able to cognitively remember the content of that faith.

Of course, that doesn't mean that we can get lazy – as the author of Hebrews makes clear. We are to love God with our heart, soul, mind, and strength – what strength we do have, in the relationship of faith which shapes our thoughts and actions. But God's salvation is a gift of relationship from him to

us, through Christ – not a result of our own intellectual ability, our goodness, or any other quality.

The word I take with me today is: Though I may forget God, God does not forget me.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank you that in your grace you do not forget us. Through Christ you always offer the gift of trusting relationship with you, the gift of faith. As we have strength, help us to act and live in that relationship in a way that gives glory to you, and when our strength fails, support and hold us in your loving arms. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Day 19: Hope, an anchor for the soul

Hebrews 6:(13-18),19-20

We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.

In Luke 23: 44 we read, “It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour, for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Jesus called out with a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” When he had said this, he breathed his last.”

The curtain of the temple separated the holy of holies, the inner sanctuary, from the rest of the temple. It was a place which was entered only once a year on the Day of Atonement by the high priest, who carried blood for the atonement of all the people, including himself. It was understood under the covenant that God made with Moses that the priests had a special role in making sacrifices for the sins of the people. It was their job to approach God.

With Jesus' death, the covenant changed. The curtain was torn in two. Now, God's people can approach him directly. There is no more need for the sacrifices because Jesus has made the sacrifice once and for all. We have our own priestly role because Jesus became human like us and sacrificed himself to become our eternal high priest. The whole of the Old Testament sacrificial worship culminates in the cross, is fulfilled with Jesus' death, and is swept aside by God himself, acting through his Son, whom he raised from death.

The word I take with me today is: Jesus will champion my cause.

Prayer: Dear Father, I am not alone. My Lord Jesus is thinking of me and continually helping me to remain faithful and overcome those things that can bring me down. Please give me a greater awareness of his eternal presence in my life. Amen.

Day 23: Jesus seated at God's right hand

Hebrews 8:1-2

The point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man.

The point has already been made about Jesus' position as High Priest to intercede for the people, but what about his position seated at the right hand of God? This is the position of authority in the kingdom. Joseph probably sat at the right hand of Pharaoh. James and John wanted to sit at the right and left hand of Jesus when they joined him in heaven. The person sitting on that seat was literally the right hand of the ruler, the executive officer, the CEO, if you like.

There's a song which starts: “If I ruled the world ...”. I don't remember the rest of it, but it's an interesting thought to follow. If I ruled the world, what would happen? Well, I'd make sure that everyone lived peacefully with their neighbours, and if they didn't want to, well, I'd force them to do it, wouldn't I? And there of course, you will have realised, goes any thought of peaceful co-existence.

Worldly authority, as interpreted by humans, is all about power, status and control. Men use authority in a grandiose manner. They have fantasies of global domination, of wielding unlimited power, and when one of these maniacs gets into power it invariably ends in disaster. Hitler, Stalin, Assad, etc. Jesus' authority is global, but he acts through the weak and powerless, through individuals, not armies, through love, not force. It is one of the most paradoxical concepts of Christianity, that Jesus acts through individual humans, not powerful masses. He doesn't rule from the top down, by making plans and policies and enforcing them by imposing his will on people. Rather, he rules from the bottom up, by loving us and enjoining us to love others.

priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself. For the law appoints as high priests men in all their weakness; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect for ever.

Mentoring has become an important concept and practice in the business world. A more experienced person, usually one who has succeeded, coaches, supports and advises a person wanting to improve his or her performance. If anyone aspires to take on leadership or start a business, a mentor is a wonderful person to have. As a pastor, I work alone, often thinking about strategies, encouraging the involvement of others and beginning new activities. Being isolated is one of the very real disadvantages of ministry.

Chapter 7 is about our high priest Jesus whose office was pre-figured by Melchizedek. It all sounds very obscure and Old Testamentish. However, think of Jesus as your mentor. He has many qualifications. The writer of Hebrews has mentioned that he fully identified with humanity and those he saved through his suffering and the way he endured our fears, staying close to us. He is truly one of us. Another achievement was finding the way to God, of slashing his way through sin and mortality to reach the glory of heaven. He is the pioneer of our salvation. And in this passage follow two more accomplishments that make him the Mentor of mentors. All the earlier priests died in office so that there were many of them. Because Christ rose from the dead, his life is beyond the attacks of men, beyond ageing and accident and cannot be affected by decay. His is a truly exalted and majestic existence; his body radiates all the glory of God. And the last feature we need to highlight is how effective he has been in eradicating sin. Priests could preach and make legal judgements but they failed to do what they were saying. They had to keep on offering sacrifices for themselves as well as for others. Now, the greatest act of all history has taken place: Christ, completely sinless and without blemish, sacrificed himself for every single person of the human race. His life has the power to cover every impulse, weakness and failure of all people for all time.

Now, the point of this is that our eternal high priest can be our mentor. He is one of us yet completely different and above us. He is totally for us, understanding our collapses into despondency or anger and yet full of eternal endurance. He will get us over the finishing line of life and will shower us with his own fame and honour. We can talk to him about our problems, discuss plans with him and ask him to give us wisdom and his power to heal. He is perfect.

To go back to the nautical imagery, there is no risk that our little boat will drift away from faith, because we now have our hope of salvation anchored firmly and securely in Jesus himself. In very simplistic terms, when we consider the biblical writings, the Old Testament is centred on hope promised, and the New Testament is centred on hope fulfilled. Our hope is no longer some nebulous promise of something in the future, it is hope attained, now, in the living person of Christ. A sure anchor, indeed!

The word I take with me today is: “My hope is built on nothing less, Than Jesus’ blood and righteousness.”

Prayer: Dear Father in heaven, you give us hope for eternal life centred in the living person of your Son. Keep us firmly anchored in your Word. Amen.

Day 20: Jesus, our eternal Melchizedek

Hebrews 7:(1-10), 11-17

If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood – and indeed the law given to the people established that priesthood – why was there still need for another priest to come, one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron? For when the priesthood is changed, the law must be changed also. He of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe, and no one from that tribe has ever served at the altar. For it is clear that our Lord descended from Judah, and in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests. And what we have said is even more clear if another priest like Melchizedek appears, one who has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life. For it is declared: “You are a priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek.”

When I started high school, discipline was very severe and given for the most trivial of offences. It was like the convict era at Moreton Bay or Norfolk Island where sadists whipped men so that bones were exposed and many died of infection. Some of our teachers relished giving boys a caning, of bringing up welts across the lower back and bottom because of an infraction of school rules. By the end of high school I noticed that younger teachers hardly ever caned, or shouted or ridiculed a person for an infringement. The blanket of fear resting over the school was lifted.

To understand this passage we need to think of the end of an old regime under God’s law and the beginning of a new regime under the gospel like the total change of atmosphere at my high school. The law was ineffectual in creating a better humanity. Punishments didn’t work, sacrifices continued, and rebellion

against God and lovelessness towards others went on as usual. Always there was fear of being accused under the law, a law that applied spiritually but also was in effect through the government of the king and his servants in every town of Israel. It was a theocratic rule no one could escape.

Then another priest appeared, not a descendent of Levi and Aaron, but from God and indeed, God's Son. He was like this unknown person Melchizedek, who was a non-Israelite, practising monotheism and ruling as king in Jerusalem, long before it became the city of David. Because his origin was unknown to Israel, his priesthood was considered eternal, without origin. Before the law of Moses, which also governed the priesthood, came into existence, this mysterious king and priest was serving God.

Jesus is like this, not ruling through moral laws or ritual laws, but offering his body out of love, removing human fear of death and fear of punishment. Priests sinned and were mortal like everyone else. But Jesus has an indestructible life and is human to the fullest and most beautiful extent. Under him, we are at liberty as his brothers and sisters.

The word I take with me today is: Jesus is my eternal priest of the gospel.

Prayer: My dear Lord Jesus, I thank you for perfecting the old relationship to God via the law with a new relationship via your holy life and loving sacrifice for me and the world. Amen.

Day 21: Jesus guarantees a better covenant

Hebrews 7:18-22

The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God.

And it was not without an oath! Others became priests without any oath, but he became a priest with an oath when God said to him: "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: 'You are a priest for ever.'"

Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantor of a better covenant.

Throughout the book of Hebrews, the author points to Jesus as the fulfilment of God's promises found in the Jewish Scriptures, what we often call 'the Old Testament' (and which some scholars prefer to call the 'First Testament' because it unfolds the first covenant God made with the people of Israel. I like this terminology because it helps us remember that Christianity grows out of, and has continuity with, the Jewish religion and God's promises to the people

of Abraham). Sometimes the fulfilment is in the form of a First Testament figure or event pointing to Christ, such as the priesthood in the Tabernacle pointing towards the High Priesthood of Christ. Where this happens, the First Testament figure is called a 'type' of Christ: something that points forward to the life and ministry of Jesus and finds its true meaning only in Jesus. Sometimes the author of Hebrews directly quotes a First Testament Scripture and relates it directly to Christ. Both are the case here. The quotation is from Psalm 110. This Psalm is a clear Messianic Prophecy – in which the chosen one of God is both KING (v1-3) and HIGH PRIEST in the order of Melchizedek (v4-7).

In the First Testament, there is NO PERSON who fulfils the roles of both King and High Priest – these two were always kept separate. The King is the ruler, the leader of armies and defender of the people. The Priest is the intermediary between God and people, offering sacrifices and speaking on behalf of God. It is only in Jesus that the office of King (not just of Israel, but of the whole universe) and High Priest in the order of Melchizedek is combined. God's oath in Psalm 110 is that this leader 'will be a priest FOREVER.' Thus we can always draw near to God – because Jesus is always our great King and our High Priest.

Thanks be to God for fulfilling his First Testament promises to the people of Israel by giving *us* a gracious ruler and merciful high priest, Jesus!

The word I take with me today is: Jesus is always my King and my priest.

Prayer: Thank you, Triune God, that Jesus is both king – ruler – the one who has the final say in how the Universe runs, and Priest – forever – mediating your covenant not just to the Israelites but to us, and to the whole world. Through Jesus may your kingdom come...may you forgive us our sins...may you deliver us from evil. Amen.

Day 22: Jesus, a perfect high priest

Hebrews 7:23-28

Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives for ever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.

Such a high priest truly meets our need – one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high