

Our sermon series continues today in the Letter to the Hebrews towards the end of chapter 5 and on into chapter 6. It falls naturally into three sections so I propose to give today's message in three parts, each introduced by its Bible passage from the Contemporary English Version. We have reached a point where the writer gets tough with his readers as you will see. That can be necessary if individuals need to be challenged about moving on in their discipleship, and even more so if a whole church is in danger of slipping backwards.

Picking up in Hebrews Chapter 5 from the last two verses that our pastor addressed last week:-

⁹ Suffering made Jesus perfect, and now he can save forever all who obey him. ¹⁰ This is because God chose him to be a high priest like Melchizedek. ¹¹ Much more could be said about this subject. But it is hard to explain, and all of you are slow to understand. ¹² By now you should have been teachers, but once again you need to be taught the simplest things about what God has said. You need milk instead of solid food. ¹³ People who live on milk are like babies who don't really know what is right. ¹⁴ Solid food is for mature people who have been trained to know right from wrong.

6 We must try to become mature and start thinking about more than just the basic things we were taught about Christ. We shouldn't need to keep talking about why we ought to turn from deeds that bring death and why we ought to have faith in God. ² And we shouldn't need to keep teaching about baptisms or about the laying on of hands or about people being raised from death and the future judgment. ³ Let's grow up, if God is willing.

What a gloomy start for the readers of this letter. The writer must have been well travelled in order to have known the people to whom the letter was written. They got short shrift about the way in which they had remained somewhat childish in their faith and there's an expectation in this scripture that Christians will grow up in their knowledge of God. Indeed, that they'll be able to progress to be teachers. Now that used to be the case when Sunday school classes were large. Very often young people and certainly young Christians would be drafted in to help with keeping the class sizes to a sensible number. But what a risk if as teachers they don't move on in their knowledge of the faith, of their Saviour and how to follow him well. To move from the milk of the word to maturity much has to be taken to mind and heart. Learning the difference between right and wrong, it says in verse 14, is needed; that is not just the difference between right and wrong morally but the difference between right and wrong in theology. Making these steps forward was not easy for first century Christians whose background was in Jewish rituals. A great deal of time was spent in the second, third and fourth centuries of the church in pinning down where human thinking had strayed away from the truth of the Word of God. Early Creeds were a necessity. We think of the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and others like it. When the Reformation came there were moves to instill in worshippers a more definite knowledge of the gospel in all its fullness and glory. From Switzerland came John Calvin's Institute's doctrine and he was not alone in trying to bring forward such a system. In this country it emerged in the Presbyterian Westminster Confession. And by the 1680s Baptists had become strong enough as an English denomination to feel that they should unite in their declaration of faith and so emerged the Baptist confession of 1689 to which many well-known Baptist churches, and their leaders subscribed at a major gathering in London. I fancy our own first pastor John Eckles would have gone from here to London to join them had he not been so old. To read down the contents list

alone is a challenge to any Christian who has not sought to mature in understanding the word of God

BAPTIST CONFESSION OF 1689

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Much understanding now begins with the Alpha course and is consolidated by Sunday sermons and Life group studies. Better still is your own regular reading through the Bible. The Holy Spirit is a wonderful revealer of truth as we do that. It isn't necessary to be naturally academic. I have known Christians with no great track record in school years who have really demonstrated that the word of God was understood and effective in their lives.

Some years ago I was in a home group that had come out of ecumenical Lent groups in the town where we lived. One valued member was a Catholic but he shared that he welcomed the group because it had taught him more about the Old Testament and its meaning. That surprised the rest of us, thinking that as he came from a church that read Sunday by Sunday through all the Bible using a lectionary of readings he might have been in a better position than we Baptists. Small groups are a great way to find answers to questions that nag away at us. In that way we can face the writer's challenge:

LET'S GROW UP.....

And now the second section of the passage in Hebrews 6.

⁴⁻⁶ But what about people who turn away after they have already seen the light and have received the gift from heaven and have shared in the Holy Spirit? What about those who turn away after they have received the good message of God and the powers of the future world? There is no way to bring them back. What they are doing is the same as nailing the Son of God to a cross and insulting him in public!

⁷ A field is useful to farmers, if there is enough rain to make good crops grow. In fact, God will bless that field. ⁸ But land that produces only thornbushes is worthless. It is likely to fall under God's curse, and in the end it will be set on fire.

The writer began with an admonition. Now in this second section he gives a dire warning:

NO WAY BACK.....

We cannot be sure whether the reference here is to those who have gone along with the crowd in adopting Christian ways rather than having a personal belief. I don't believe this is suggesting true Christians can lose their salvation. All of the letter to the Romans is against that. But probably many in any time of rapid church growth are caught up in the excitement of seeing the Spirit at

work around them and yet finally turn away from the commitment involved. Clearly the writer was concerned that in the midst of congregations to which he was writing there were those where (as Jesus put it) the word had fallen on stony ground. A shallow response can be misleading. Roots need to be put down deeply into the goodness of God's word or the challenges of life may not be met. For the rich young ruler, to whom Jesus warned, what turned him back was his inability to stop trusting in his wealth. Many of those who avidly followed Jesus around Galilee could see, even hear, the Holy Spirit at work in miraculous ways. People were often amazed by the miracles of Jesus and could know at first hand that Jesus had raised Lazarus and others from the dead. But it seems not many of them were to be found in the earliest churches.

Maybe some are letting the weeds of this world's thinking crowd out the good personal growth that God wants from us. The weeds of this passage are thorn bushes, all too easily set on fire and destroyed, maybe by a lightning strike or an arson attack. That sort of wildfire is encouraged by too many thorn bushes all being together. How we need to be wary of the company we keep or God's word can be choked.

The writer wants no turning back among his readers. If I knew Pilgrim's Progress better I am sure there is more than one character there who turned back from the journey to their great loss spiritually. Instead, we need to grasp the Apostle Paul's injunction to press on to the prize of our high calling as true disciples of Jesus.

And the third section from Hebrews 6 reads on more hopefully like this

⁹ My friends, we are talking this way. But we are sure that you are doing those really good things that people do when they are being saved. ¹⁰ God is always fair. He will remember how you helped his people in the past and how you are still helping them. You belong to God, and he won't forget the love you have shown his people. ¹¹ We wish that each of you would always be eager to show how strong and lasting your hope really is. ¹² Then you would never be lazy. You would be following the example of those who had faith and were patient until God kept his promise to them.

The writer knows there were many of his readers showing their faith in Jesus by doing his good works in their own setting. Verse 10 is full of that sense that Christians are known for their love of one another. I was reminded this past week that it is not an exact Bible quote, however translated, to say "See these Christians, how they love one another". It does in fact come from an early church leader Tertullian, but he had the backing of this passage. He is an interesting character because he came from North Africa, from Carthage in modern Tunisia, but in his days part of the Roman Empire. In the days when holiday travel was so easy, Ruth and I had just a day in and around Carthage with all its monumental ruins. Around 200AD the church was strong there and not just among the Roman colonisers. Tertullian is known as the first theologian to be writing in Latin, a writer who helped the churches to understand the truth of God as Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But I must not digress too far from our passage. These verses are telling us to press on with helping fellow Christians in love; to show that certain hope we have in the coming rule of Christ our King. That way we never fall into the pitfall of laziness. We are to follow the best examples of faith and patience until God keeps His promise.

So from our three sections: **LETS GROW UP, NO WAY BACK, SHOW YOUR LOVE AND HOPE**

Find time to reread this 'chapter'. The goodness of God's word will refresh you for the weeks ahead.