

Our High Priest

I am currently studying the book of Hebrews.

It was written, it is thought, to a group of Christians in Rome who were under persecution. It was no longer safe to be a Christian. After the great fire in Rome in AD 64, the emperor Nero used Christians as a scapegoat for the disaster and they were facing a very real threat of martyrdom.

The writer to the Hebrews seeks to encourage his readers to stand firm whatever they are facing, and not to recant and go back to their Judaism.

He does this by firstly reminding his readers who Jesus is. He points out in the first few chapters that Jesus is superior to the angels, to Moses and Joshua, and to Aaron, the high priest.

The role of the high priest was to communicate with both God and man. Jesus is uniquely qualified to be our high priest. He was obedient and faithful and without sin, and yet in relating to us he is compassionate and has been tempted as we are. He is able to feel what we feel because he has shared our situation

Hebrews ch 4: vs 14-16

“Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, 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 feel sympathy for our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”

The verb translated as “feel sympathy” apparently has a deeper meaning than just to sympathise or empathise with someone. I quote from William Lane who has written a commentary on Hebrews

“It must be understood in an experiential sense : *our high priest suffers together with the on this being tested and brings active help*. When the lash is falling on you, he rushes in so that it falls on him as well. When you are treated with contempt he experiences the humiliation that you feel. When you are bruised, he feels the pain. He is able to feel our weaknesses with us.....it implies more than compassion. It always includes the element of active help.”

V.16 The phrase translated “let us draw near” is in the ‘present imperative’ tense. This is apparently to emphasise that we can keep coming, let us draw near again and again and again and again... Every time we fail we can come for mercy, every time we can’t cope we can come for grace to help.

Interestingly too, the phrase translated ‘with confidence’ had a history in secular Greek to signify the frank and open conversation of citizens with each other. It was never used in the context of prayer, until so done by Greek speaking Jews. So the attitude encouraged here is to approach God with ‘bold frankness’

Let’s meditate on the grace and mercy that is freely available to us.

I was reflecting too that this encourages me in my meditation practice too..when our thoughts wander, when it seems hard, when we fail to meditate, we can come with confidence to our great High Priest