

Better than Angels

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 2nd of March 2003 The preacher is Paul Barker His sermon is entitled Better Than Angels and is based on Hebrews chapter 2 verses 5 to 18 And you may like to have open the Pew Bibles, the Black Bibles at page 971 from the letter to the Hebrews chapter 2 for those visiting today this is part of a sermon series that we began two weeks ago on the letter to the Hebrews and let me pray for us as we hear God's Word O God, our Heavenly Father, we thank you that you are not silent but have spoken through the ages in many and various ways and most fully and finally in your Son Jesus Christ and as we sit under his Word to us we pray that you'll write it on our hearts that we may not only believe it but live it and do it so that we may live for your glory. Amen.

Some of the most moving news footage is the sequences of people being rescued from perilous situations who will forget the excitement and jubilation when Stuart Diver was finally plucked alive from the Thredbo landslide in 1997 or the excitement and jubilation on the streets of Kabul last year when the city was liberated from the Taliban regime Those with long memories may remember footage of European cities being liberated at the end of World War II or scenes of rescue of people who've been imprisoned coming out of imprisonment whether that in the Middle East, in Beirut or in other places or scenes of rescue of people being brought out alive from burning houses or buildings destroyed from earthquake or bomb or whatever or the relief when sailors are rescued from capsized ships and floating in the ocean and so on those exciting footage of people being rescued and the joy and relief that they, if they're well enough, and their family, friends and rescuers experience and demonstrate when they come out alive.

This passage in Hebrews following on from last week is about our rescue and it's a rescue that we ignore at our peril. The beginning of chapter 2 which we looked at last week urged us in very strong words to pay all the more serious attention to what we have heard because if we neglect the words spoken to us how on earth shall we be rescued?

And indeed the implication as we saw last week is that there is no rescue for us from this life. We shall not survive this life alive so to speak if we neglect to pay attention to the word of Christ to us. What do we need rescuing from? What is this rescue all about? If you look around our world, what do we see? Well summarising, we see things not as they ought to be or were intended to be.

[3 : 27] Yes, we see good things and enjoy them day by day. There is much that is beautiful, there is much of dignity and love and grace and peace in our world.

But we also see a world that is riddled with fear and loneliness, a world where poverty and hardship is more common than not, a world of injustice, war and rumour of war and not just in recent weeks and months, a world of selfishness and greed, of pride and dispute, a world of frustration and futility and folly, a world of evil and lack of love, a world of natural disasters and man-made terrors and atrocities.

Things are not what they were meant to be or made to be originally by God. And we need rescuing from a world that is fallen and a world that is subject to decay.

The present world in which we live was made to be perfect, harmonious, beautiful, created under God, a world that fits together and knitted together in love under Him.

And as the crowning part of that original creation, we find human beings. In the very opening page of the Bible, the climax of the creation was the creation of humanity, male and female, under God, to have dominion over this world that God had made.

[4 : 58] And when God saw everything that He'd made, including human beings, He saw that it was very good. It was perfect indeed. Everything fit for its purpose, functioning perfectly in God's world.

And human beings were the part of God's creation that He cared for the most, that He held dearest of all things, given dominion over the rest of creation, all things at our feet.

One of the writers of the Psalms marvelled at not only the creation, but at the place of human dignity in the creation, that human beings had such a high place in the creation and in the created order by God.

The writer of a Psalm said, what are human beings that you are mindful of them? Looking around the vastness of the world and the starry sky, thinking of all things in this creation, human beings count most to God.

What are human beings that you're mindful of them or mortals that you care for them? You've made them for a little while lower than the angels. You've crowned them with glory and honour, subjecting all things under their feet.

[6 : 15] And yet even the writer of the Psalm recognised that the world, as we experience it, is not quite right. And certainly the writer of the letter to the Hebrews recognised the same very clearly.

The problem is human failure. We've failed to live up to the high calling God placed upon us when He made us at the beginning of creation.

And from the very first, the Bible tells us that the first human beings, Adam and Eve by name traditionally given, first succumbed to the devil's wiles and thereafter in effect lost their place of dominion over the creation, usurped by the devil himself to rule this world.

Now that of course is not the end of the story, thankfully, but that is the plight in which we find ourselves and from which we need rescuing. The letter to the Hebrews is written to encourage discouraged Christians.

Christians who in the first century AD, a few decades after Jesus' life, death and resurrection, were discouraged by opposition, maybe mockery or ridicule from people, not Christians living amongst them.

[7 : 29] They were discouraged by persecutions or times of testing or trial or tribulation of some sort. They were certainly tempted to give up on God and many were drifting away from Christian faith.

Some perhaps, as we saw last week, might have been turning to angels or other forms of help, spiritual help. Some were possibly being ridiculed for believing and trusting in a Messiah who was dead and crucified on a cross.

Probably the recipients of this letter were mainly Jews who'd become Christians and quite possibly, therefore, the opposition or ridicule they faced were from Jews who had not become Christians and who mocked them for believing the Messiah had come and even more, that the Messiah was dead on a cross.

How could you believe in such a hero, a rescuer, a Messiah? Some of these recipients of this letter thought that God had abandoned them, that he was absent, remote or silent.

Indeed, for them as for us, as they surveyed their world, things were not as they were meant to be. But the writer is encouraging them to remind them that God has not given up on his original intentions for humanity in this created universe.

[8 : 53] It may be that to the full extent we do not see human beings crowned with glory and honour in this world as God intended and exercising a godly dominion under God himself.

Yet, he says, we do not see that fully yet. But look to Jesus whom we have seen and do see. For in Jesus we find a human being who perfectly reflects the glorious stature of humanity intended by God.

In Jesus we see somebody who exhibits full humanity, above and beyond even what we exhibit as human beings in this world. A human as God intended, fully human, subject to the sufferings and trials and tests of this life as demonstrated by his submission unto death.

But now exalted, risen from death, a tomb that was empty, ascended to heaven and invited by God to sit at his right hand in glory as we have seen over the last two weeks.

This world is not as it is meant to be, yet. But the coming world, the world in which Jesus reigns, a world that is perfect and will always be perfect and will never be spoiled or marred or come under the wiles of the devil, that world to which we look is the world where Jesus, the perfect human, is crowned with glory and honour.

[10 : 19] And there we find the fulfilment of that writer of the psalm, Psalm 8 as it is, seeing Jesus crowned with glory and honour and all things submitted to his feet.

He's the rescuer. He came to earth taking on full human nature in order to save human beings and to rescue them from a fallen world and the plight that we experience in this world.

He did that, rescuing us by dying on a cross for us. See what Hebrews chapter 2 says about these things.

Verse 5, Now God did not subject the coming world about which we're speaking to angels. Why turn to angels for help? Why not turn to the one who is sovereign over all things and the coming world? He's the one who will bring you help, not angels, is the thrust of what we saw last week. But then he quotes Psalm 8 as I've already quoted it.

[11 : 28] He says, Someone somewhere has testified. It's always a great encouragement to read that line. I often forget where things are in the Bible and here is a writer of part of the Bible who himself can't remember.

So when the kids can't remember the memory verse from the holiday program in January, we shouldn't panic too much. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews couldn't remember where Psalm 8 was from. He still quotes it, remember, but he doesn't quite remember its verse.

And by the way, the other memory verse is 1 Peter 5 verse 7, not verse 1. And so he quotes verse 8. He acknowledges that human beings were originally intended to be crowned with glory and honour, sovereign, exercising dominion over this world.

But then he said, and he goes on to say at the end of verse 8, in subjecting all things to them, God left nothing outside their control. Human beings were to exercise great dominion.

But then he goes on to say, as it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to them. That is, this world is not yet as it ought to be. We don't see it as God originally made it to be.

[12 : 35] But, we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, referring to Jesus become human, but more than just becoming human, Jesus subjecting himself to suffering and even death on the cross.

but now, crowned with glory and honour. Why? Not just because he became human, but because, as the verse goes on to say, of the suffering of death.

Because he died, God has crowned him with glory and honour in heaven. And not just because he died, we all die, but because of the nature of his death.

So that by the grace of God, he might taste death for everyone. That's why he died. That's why he came. That's why he subjected himself to being fully human and undergoing all the trials and tests and strife that we endure, even to death, for him on a cross, but a death for us.

So that he might taste death for everyone. It's an evocative expression. You can imagine that the taste of death is bitter. The sort of stuff you might drink and then spit out as you realise how bitter it is, the wormwood and the gall sort of idea.

[14 : 05] But Jesus tasted it for everyone on our behalf so that we need not undergo the final death.

It's tempting when we look around the world to think that God is absent and silent. It's easy to see that the world is not as it's meant to be, corrupted as it is by human failure and its associated problems.

But don't be fooled by appearances. Don't think that God's abandoned or neglected us as the recipients of this letter were tempted to do. Jesus is supreme, Jesus reigns and we will see all things under His feet.

We do not yet see that completed here but we will see it for He's risen from the dead and ascended to heaven and sits on that throne in heaven and the day is coming when all things will be brought finally and fully under His feet.

we can have confidence about that because He's died and because He's risen from the dead.

That's the guarantee if you like that Psalm 8 will be fulfilled through Jesus Christ, the perfect human and that all things will come under His feet and be restored to their original purpose and glory and that includes us for we don't demonstrate and exemplify the full glory as originally intended marred as we are by our own failures what the Bible calls sin but in Jesus will be restored to that glorious place as Jesus Himself has demonstrated and reigns in heaven.

[15 : 52] So you see the writer is encouraging his recipients not to be discouraged and think that in this world we're just left and abandoned by God that somehow God is remote or God is not sovereign.

Not true. Jesus didn't stay dead on the cross and don't be put under pressure I think he's implying if people ridicule you for believing in a crucified Messiah because he didn't stay dead.

He reigns. He's supreme on the throne of heaven. So don't be put off by a crucified Messiah. Don't be put off by an apparently weak Messiah or hero.

Yes, Jesus is hardly your Hollywood stereotypical macho, strong Arnold Schwarzenegger type hero and champion but the rescue he's effected for us is greater than any Hollywood rescue or greater than any news footage you'll ever see.

Indeed, Jesus is the champion. That's one way of understanding the word that's used to describe him in the next verse, verse 10. It was fitting that God for whom and through whom all things exist in bringing many children to glory should make the champion, the pioneer, the author if you like, of their salvation perfect through sufferings.

[17:10] Not that he wasn't perfect but that he finally fulfils his purpose by suffering to death required of him if he was to be our rescuer, our champion, the pioneer of our salvation.

The one who blazes the trail and sets the path, who opens up the way so that many children can go to glory is the way verse 10 expresses it and he does that by dying.

No other way. Not by his teaching or by his healing, not by the goodness of his character. He does that by dying, by suffering, made perfect through his suffering. He is opening up the way for many children to go to glory.

Australians like heroes who are down to earth type characters, sometimes at our peril like Shane Warne, typical blokey Australian, a bit of a false hero now it seems.

I think it's part of the appeal of Bob Hawke 20 years ago, especially compared to Malcolm Fraser. Bob Hawke's sort of blokey, down to earth, one of us type of character for all his faults as well.

[18:20] There's a sense in which Jesus is the same and that's the point that this writer is making. He's our hero, our champion, the one who's the pioneer of our salvation because he's one of us, fully human.

He's not sort of aloof away in the clouds just orchestrating some rescue from there without ever getting his hands dirty. He's one of us, fully human and if he wasn't fully human he couldn't save humans but that he was fully human enabled him to do so and that's the point that the writer goes on to make in verses 11, 12 and 13.

For the one, that is Jesus, who sanctifies and those who are sanctified, that is set apart for God, all have one father, God that is but the point that's being made there is that Jesus and us humans have one and the same father, we belong together, we're brothers and sisters together as the language will go on in the next verse, at the end of the verse.

For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them, that is Christian people, brothers and sisters. He's on a par with us. He doesn't sort of look down and say that we're just little servants down there, he's one of us and so he's not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters saying and then quoting from Psalm 22, I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters in the midst of the congregation, I'll praise you.

Jesus saying to God that he will proclaim God's name to all his brothers and sisters that he's leading to glory and rescuing from the plight of this world and again this time quoting from Isaiah, I'll put my trust in him and here am I in the children whom God has given me.

[20:01] Jesus our rescuer shares a profound identification with us in that he is fully human and if he were any less than fully human he would not have been able to rescue us from the plight of this world and the purpose of him becoming fully human was to lead us to glory.

That's how verse 10 says it or verse 11 to sanctify many, that is to set us apart or dedicate us for God and put it another way, Jesus became fully human in order to defeat the devil and that's the language of the next couple of verses.

Verse 14 says, since therefore the children, that is Christian people, share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same thing so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is the devil.

You see if Jesus weren't fully human then his death is a nonsense and his death accomplishes nothing but he is fully human, one of us and because he's a perfect human his death accomplishes something.

It defeats the power of death, that is the power of the devil. In the Garden of Eden, the beginning of human history, the devil's lures led Adam and Eve not only to just take a piece of forbidden fruit but actually to disobey God, not to trust his word and then to reap the consequences.

[21 : 33] death, not immediate death but they died and death entered the world and the power of death is because of human failure to trust and obey God and the power of death is in the devil's hands in effect and death is a fearful thing because its sting is human sin or failure but Jesus' death, the death of the perfect human being came to destroy the power of death and the power of the devil and thus as verse 15 says and to free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death, to liberate human beings from the fear of death.

death. It is right to fear death if you are not a Christian. It is the most fearful prospect that you can imagine if you are not a Christian to anticipate dying.

For all the fear in our world now at the threat of war with Iraq or North Korea or anywhere else, that is nothing compared to the fear that we ought to feel if we are not Christian people and are facing death.

For death for non-Christian people is the gateway to hell and God's wrath and judgment forever. It is a terrifying prospect.

Don't underestimate it. death. And we need rescuing from it. And the rescuer has died to conquer death and the devil to release the sting from death so that we need not fear it anymore.

[23 : 28] It is absolutely right for people who are not Christians to be terrified of death. I have met many over the years. But it is absolutely right and proper if you are a Christian not to fear death.

Death holds no fear for us if we are trusting in Jesus Christ because he has conquered death. He has dealt with our sin. Death holds no sting anymore and rather than being the gateway to hell, it is the gateway to heaven and bliss and perfection and the presence of God.

Do you fear death? Are you terrified of dying? Or do you try and shove it as far from your mind as you can? A mark of Christian maturity is the confidence with which we face death, trusting in our rescuer, Jesus Christ.

And it is worth knowing the rescuer to take away the fear, but more importantly, to open the door to heaven. The writer summarises in verse 16, it is clear that he did not come to help angels, that is he didn't become an angel, he became a human.

So, he came not to help angels, but to help humans. But rather, as he says, the descendants of Abraham, a way of describing human beings who are the people of God. A way of implying too that Jesus' coming was fulfilling old promises made by God to a man, Abraham, and 2,000 years before Jesus was born.

[25 : 03] Therefore, Jesus had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, including death, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people.

Fairly convoluted sort of sentence, which the writer will go on to explain in later chapters. But simply put, it's saying another way of how Jesus rescues us. He came to lead us to glory, verse said, to sanctify us, verse 11 said, to conquer death and the devil, verse 14 said, and liberate us from the fear of death, verse 15 says.

Another way of saying the same sort of thing about the rescue that Jesus came to bring was to make a sacrifice of atonement for us. That is, to do two things.

When we fail because of our sin, a penalty needs to be paid and the wrath of God needs to be dealt with. Now, I must confess, on Friday night, I got a parking ticket.

Seven o'clock at night, I thought, you know, I could just park here, but I didn't realise the one hour thing still existed and I got to my car and thought, oh dear, it's more money gone. The man got to his car next to mine with the same ticket just as I was driving off and he started kicking his car.

[26 : 20] I thought, well, it's not his car's fault, it's his fault really. But in order to deal with that, I just have to pay \$50 and which I explain several ways I can do it on the internet and all sorts of complicated things and it will be dealt with.

And I'm sure that when the person came and stuck the parking ticket to my windscreen, he was just doing a job. He didn't get angry and kick my car because it was in the wrong spot. He just put a fine there, notice, on the windscreen.

The penalty has to be paid. But our mistakes with God are a bit different because our mistakes to God offend God and God is angry at us for them.

He's not indifferent like the parking inspector. So not only does a penalty with God need to be paid, like my fine, in God's case it's death, but God's anger has to be averted.

And that's all brought up in that expression, Christ making a sacrifice of atonement for our sins, paying the penalty, dying for us, and dealing with God's wrath against us.

[27 : 25] That's Jesus rescuing us from the plight of this world. Death no longer having a sting because he dies for us. The fear of death gone and the gateway to heaven opened for us.

Now if all of these things are true as they are about what Jesus has done for us, leading many to glory, opening the gateway to heaven, sanctifying us, defeating death and the devil, taking away the fear of death, making a sacrifice of atonement, all different ways of saying the same thing about the rescue, if all of those are true as they are, then there is no way that God has abandoned us now.

There's no way that he's ignoring us here in this life now. And therefore in the midst of the trials and tribulations of this life in which we live, God is ready to help us.

Jesus, who reigns on heaven's throne, is ready to help us. And that's the key point in the end, at the end of the chapter. Because Jesus himself was tested by what he suffered, he's able to help those who are being tested.

So if your life you find is being tested, if your Christian faith is being opposed or ridiculed by someone in your family or a friend or a colleague or neighbour, if things don't seem to be working out, if it seems that God is silent and absent, think again about these words.

[28 : 49] For all that Jesus has done for us already, now risen and reigning on the throne of heaven where all things are subject to him, he is able to help us now, here and now, in the trials and tests of our life.

Don't be discouraged. Don't drift away from faith as these people were tempted to do. Don't give up and yield to the ridicule, the persecution or opposition. Jesus is ready and able to help us now and the evidence is his death, resurrection and ascension to heaven's throne.

The writer is encouraging us here not to give up and be despondent Christians but to know the depth of the rescue that Jesus has brought for us and therefore the help that is open to us day by day here on earth in this world.

When we see that news footage of people being rescued, the excitement and the tears of relief and joy, we ought to be able to share in that joy for surely as Christians we know a greater joy because we know a greater rescuer and we know a greater rescue.

Too often we live as though we're not rescued but we are eternally by an extraordinary act of Jesus Christ.

[30 : 22] What joy that should give our hearts to know each day the rescue that his death has brought for us. A rescue from sin and its penalty, a rescue from the wrath of God and a rescue from not only the fear of death but death itself and all the horrors that death may lead to hell, gone, rescued because of Jesus.

Amen. Amen.