

Sunday 15th September – Hebrews 4:9-16 ‘Confident in God’s grace’

Confidence is a strange thing. For most of us it’s not something constant -it ebbs and flows, it waxes and wanes. If something goes wrong, we might say that we’ve lost confidence. And then something goes well – and we gain confidence.

I’ve played sport most of my life, which is somewhere you’ll see the power of confidence at work. A team starts winning and it gets to the point where they go onto the pitch expecting to win. Or, on the other hand, they get stuck in a rut of losing. Even during a game, one team can be on top, and suddenly the momentum shifts, often with the same players still playing. The difference is confidence – suddenly the team believes they can win, and something changes.

But, for all that confidence appears to make a real difference in certain areas like sport, recent research from Berkeley University in California suggests otherwise – a sample of respondents took a test: half were told that they would do brilliantly, the other half that they would crash and burn – but when they took the test, each sample scored almost the same. Confidence made little difference to actual results.

The point is, confidence needs to be earthed in something. Being confident didn’t make those people taking a test *know* more – they only knew what they knew. What made the difference was preparation and ability. **You’ve got to put your confidence in the right things.**

And if this is true in life, it’s just as true in faith. We need to place our confidence in the right things – the things we can rely on. And today’s passage ends by telling us this amazing truth: (v16) we can approach God’s throne of grace with confidence. Last week was all about hanging on in difficult times – this week takes that idea and turns it into a positive: we can do more than just hang on, we can approach God with confidence. What for? The second half of v16 gives us the answer: ‘so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our hour of need.’

The Jewish Christians that this letter was addressed to needed more than just to cling on: they needed strength, they needed answers to prayer. And today’s passage is great news, the writer is saying, yes there is help available! And it’s from the most reliable source possible, the one place we can have true confidence: from God himself. **God will give you both mercy – i.e. relief from your struggles when you really need it – and grace – i.e. strength to endure, even when the struggles continue.**

So many of us imagine that God doesn’t really like us approaching him – that somehow it’s a sign of failure, that we couldn’t manage it all our by ourselves. So we approach God timidly or apologetically. And the writer of this letter says no – you don’t need to approach God like that, you can do it confidently.

And in making this bold, wonderful claim, he gives us three reasons to back it up.

The first is that being able to approach God with confidence was God’s plan for humanity all along. The start of our passage said this: ‘There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God.’ This section is a bit hard to understand, but the basic gist of the first half of chapter 4 is that God’s plan for humanity was to enter his rest – i.e. his permanent, abiding presence. God rested on the seventh day, and the Sabbath he gave to humanity was to give them a glimpse of heaven, of the perfectly restored relationship of love and worship we were designed to have – with God and with each other. It’s not just about not working! It’s a bigger vision entirely.

And of course, our Saviour comes to earth and invites us into this very thing: ‘Come unto me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you (what?) *rest*.’ Jesus invites us into the rest of God. So, those who follow him, share that rest – or they’re meant to. So, we can approach God’s throne with confidence because that was God’s plan all along – he longs for us to enter his presence, his rest.

Second, we can approach with confidence because Jesus is there already. Verse 14: ‘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.’ Jesus is there, working for us on our behalf, praying for us, representing us to the Father and vice versa too. We don’t approach the throne on our own. As St John says, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous.

We’re watching a great series at the moment: Extraordinary Attorney Woo – we love a bit of K-drama – and like most legal series, the heart of it is that Attorney Woo represents her clients in the courtroom and usually figures out a way of winning the case. Well, Jesus is our ultimate Advocate. He ascended into heaven and is there doing that job, forever on our behalf. Even if we don’t feel confident, we can trust Jesus to help us, just when we need.

Finally, we can approach God with confidence because Jesus understands. Last week, we noted that Jesus had to become a human to win our salvation. This week, we note a further benefit of the eternal Word becoming flesh: ‘We do not have a High Priest (i.e. Jesus) who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet he did not sin.’ In the modern way of saying it: Jesus gets us. This advocate we have is not like the sort of lawyer who is not like us, who is somehow set apart or aloof. When Jesus represents us to God, he does it knowing full well what it’s like to be human, to be like us. He overcame, and he longs for each of us to overcome as well.

And that’s the point: **Jesus is not there to condemn us, but to help us overcome.** If we’re tempted to give up, Jesus wants to cheer us on, to keep going. If we struggle with a particular area of our lives, Jesus knows what that’s like and he wants to strengthen us. As the old Prayer Book says – his property is always to have mercy. That’s who he is – and he wants to share that mercy and grace with us.

This is the word of God to us today – and as I close, I haven’t even mentioned the famous verse about the power of God’s word to speak to our hearts. Instead, we’re just going to let that word do its work, just as this text says it will. **Whatever you face today, you can approach God’s throne of grace with confidence. Offer it to God.** Jesus will be interceding and mediating for you too. And may the Lord graciously grant us mercy and grace for our time of need. Amen.