

Sermon for 14th January 2018 (Second Sunday of Epiphany)

Isaiah 60. 9-22; Ps. 96; Heb. 6. 17-20

May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

“We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul.” When preparing for this evening, I found it difficult to decide quite where to start, as the writer of the letter to the Hebrews is not the easiest to understand, particularly in his reference (the only one in the New Testament) to that mysterious and almost mythical Old Testament character named Melchizedek, who appeared out of the blue to Abram after the latter had won a battle to release his nephew Lot from captivity (Gen. chapter 14). Now a week ago yesterday I had the privilege of taking part in an exhilarating and (almost) complete performance of Handel’s wonderful Oratorio “Messiah”. Compensation was made for the lack of cuts by the exciting speeds at which many of the choruses and solos were taken, at the same time enhancing the sense of theatre in this dramatic work. In my view Handel’s Messiah encapsulates the best summary of the Christian faith outside of the Apostles’, Nicene and Athanasian Creeds; so having reflected on this recent experience eventually I went for **“this hope”**, our hope in the good news of the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is the bedrock of our Christian Creeds, of Handel’s Oratorio, and in essence of the letter to the Hebrews.

My eye was then caught by the descriptive phrase which follows: **“a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul.”** This is a strange, metaphorical use of the maritime word “anchor”, which has the connotation of needing to be embedded in the sea-floor to make a ship “sure and steadfast”. So the writer goes on to explain that this hope, this anchor, is embedded in the Holy of Holies, the inner shrine where God was thought to live and where Jesus has entered on our behalf. What safer harbour could anyone wish for? And then the writer reminds his audience that Jesus occupies that seat at the right hand of the Father **“having become a high priest for ever according to the order of Melchizedek.”** I say “reminds” because in the previous chapter he had stated that Christ was appointed a high priest by the Father, who said to him: **“You are my Son, today I have begotten you”** (Psalm 2) and again: **“You are a priest for ever, according to the order of Melchizedek”** (Psalm 110). This name Melchizedek means King of righteousness, and he is also described as King of Salem, that is of peace - two attributes which are mentioned by Isaiah in this evening’s reading. His priesthood was prior to and therefore seen as superior to that of the Levites, which was set up under Mosaic Law some six centuries or so later. In the Jewish scriptures Melchizedek lacks known parentage or genealogy, but resembles the Son of God and remains a priest for ever. Jesus, the writer points out, belonged to the tribe of Judah, which had no connection with the Jewish priesthood under the Law. Thus Jesus has become a priest, not through a requirement of the Law of Moses concerning physical descent, but through the power of an indestructible and everlasting life. Accordingly, Jesus has also become the guarantor and mediator of a better covenant.

All this lengthy exposition, which may seem to us now somewhat over-fussy or even irrelevant, was clearly to the writer essential. It is thought that he was addressing a comparatively small church community of Christian Jews, based in or close to Rome in the

mid 60s AD, who may have experienced some persecution or were expecting this because of their unpopularity at that time with the Roman rulers. Perhaps they had nostalgic yearnings for the ancient Jewish practices and traditions - the hard-and-fast legal system of Judaism where everything was crystal clear - and found it difficult to adapt to putting their trust in what must have seemed the more nebulous guidance of the Holy Spirit. The writer's purpose was to show that, for those who have received the good news and have decided to follow Christ, the **only** certainty is the living Christ, that we must take our courage in both hands and venture out into the unknown future, trusting in God alone. Side by side with this, his aim was to point to Christ as the **only** way by which men can reach the right relationship with God. The gulf which exists between, on the one hand, humans burdened with the guilt of their own wrong choices and, on the other hand, the holiness of a just and righteous God, can only be bridged by one who is himself both God and man. And so this message is just as useful to us today. Are we too attached to the deeply rooted traditions of our own particular brand of churchmanship? Are we more concerned to discuss the peripheral niceties of faith and order, rather than to grapple with the vast problem of a mainly Christless world? We do well to remind ourselves, as the writer tried to guide his audience, that *“here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come”* and that in the meantime we are called to *“run with perseverance the race that is set before us”* looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who *“is the same yesterday and today and for ever.”*

To God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, be ascribed all blessing, honour, glory and power, now and for evermore. Amen.