

Sunday Evening 6th October 2013 Kenneth Gray - Hebrews 8 “A new covenant”

Hebrews 8 ends with verse 13 *‘By calling this covenant “new,” he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and ageing will soon disappear.’*

Kenneth observed that we are all familiar with the term ‘built-in obsolescence’. In the manse there are no fewer than 5 obsolete computers in the loft. Statisticians have calculated that any brand new car will typically have a maximum 12 year life span before it will be consigned to the scrap yard. The recipients of this letter may have been less familiar with the concept of obsolescence than we are but they will have shared the typically human tendency to hang on to things that should be discarded. How often do we hang on to something ‘just in case’ when it is not only useless but its retention actually hampers our progress.

The writer to the Hebrews is contrasting the old covenant and the new. He is explaining that old rituals and old mind-sets are no longer appropriate or required. Gone is the need for animal sacrifices; gone is the requirement for a high priest to mediate between the faithful and the Lord God; gone is the belief that by our own good works can we earn ourselves a place in heaven. Now we have a unique High Priest, Jesus himself, who has died for our sins once and for all.

Extending the computer metaphor Kenneth further illustrated the point. If we try to access the internet on an obsolete PC we will be unsuccessful. The message on the screen will persist “you are not connected”. So it is with many people in Scotland today they are ‘not connected’ to the Living God. They have allowed their faith to be stunted and hampered by a stubborn determination to hang on to old mistaken beliefs and practices.

Throughout history God has anointed particular individuals to lead the people in faithful service or to perform priestly rituals. Once such, who is mentioned in various places in Hebrews, is Melchizedek. But the writer is at pains to point out that no earthly high priest, not even Melchizedek, can stand comparison with the High Priest of the New Covenant. All are as cardboard cut-outs compared with Jesus. *‘But the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises.’*

If there had been nothing lacking in the old covenant there would have been no need for God to have sent his Son to forge the new covenant. But the old covenant could not save people. When the high priests offered up the big annual sacrifices on behalf of the people in the holy of holies these did not save the people. These rituals were merely the forerunners of the glorious sacrifice that was to be made by Jesus by whose grace alone we are saved.

Kenneth commented that it was a bit like driving to faraway places. Before motorways were built journeys took far longer, more circuitous routes through numerous villages and towns before we reached our destination. Come the motorway and we bypass the diversions and go straight from A to B - we no longer take the inferior option of the old road.

Some of us might be tempted to say “if only I’d lived better, worked harder, given more of my time and money ... I could have made myself right with God”. But there is only one way our sin can be dealt with - we must lay it at the foot of the Cross.

We each have besetting sins that we seem to commit repeatedly. Occasionally we make a special effort and feel we have mastered a particular sin only to find that we fall back into old habits and succumb again to temptation - much to the delight of the Evil One. Our effort is not what overcomes sin. Our sin is nailed to the Cross and we stand clothed in the beauty and purity of Jesus. We must keep reminding ourselves of what Jesus came to do and we must live now as people of the new covenant who have laid their sins at the foot of the Cross, who have confessed their sins and their need of a Saviour.

In verse 10 we find one of Scriptures’ most beautiful passages: *“This is the covenant I will establish with the people of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their*

hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.”

One of those ‘better promises’ on which the new covenant is founded is that we will all know the Lord - ‘from the least to the greatest’ of us.

Kenneth recalled his boyhood when he and his peers were hugely impressed when a boy whose father had ‘connections’ was able to bring a football celebrity on a visit to the school.

The writer to the Hebrews emphasises that when we come to faith in Jesus we are each able to come directly into the presence of the Holy Living God - we don’t need any earthly high priest or someone’s dad with connections! That is the power and the privilege of the new covenant. So let us each ask ourselves ‘Do we know God like that?’