Keeping Faith
Hebrews 3:1-19

I want you to imagine a situation where you make a decision to take a certain course of action – that might be something as a family, it might be a new business project at work, or to take up some new activity. And you're excited about it, and there's that energy of something fresh and new. But as you carry on you begin to face obstacles and difficulties. And what at first was exciting and energizing begins to carry a cost. And your resolve to see this new project through begins to waver, you begin to wobble, you're not so sure any more: do you carry on or not?

And that of course was the situation these Jewish Christians in Rome found themselves in as the writer of Hebrews writes to them. They'd known they excitement and the joy of coming to faith in Jesus. They'd known the thrill of discovering Jesus was the Messiah, they'd known the goodness of their new-found family in the church community; but then the trouble and the persecution had started, and it looked like it was about to get a whole load worse. And some of them at least were wobbling. And for them of course this wasn't just the inconvenience or stress of a business plan that wasn't working. This was about life and death as the apparatus of the Roman Empire began to turn on them.

So the Christians who first heard this letter being read to them are feeling isolated and alone; exposed and vulnerable in a hostile world. And they're thinking of quitting and going back to being a Jew, under the Law of Moses, with all the relative protection that afforded them in the empire.

Which, as I've said before, is not going to be your issue. For you and me, the reason to turn away from the Christian faith – or not to consider it in the first place – may not be trouble or adversity. You could simply be distracted by the busyness or fun of life, and that squeezes everything else out including your faith, or examining the faith in the first place. Or some good thing, someone or something else, can get your attention and seem, in comparison to Christ and the Christian faith, so much more attractive. And so, rather than it being trouble that drives you away, something more appealing can draw you away; or stop you seriously considering the Christian faith in the first place.

And the writer of this letter is writing to his friends to urge them not to let that happen. So we're going to draw out four things he says to them from chapter 3: Consider Jesus; daily live the truth; guard your heart and enter His rest.

Consider Jesus
Now to make sense of Hebrews you've got to keep in mind that he's talking to people for whom Judaism and the Law of Moses and the Exodus and the Old Testament was their heritage, their roots, and they are tempted to ditch Jesus and go back to that.

And so far he's impressed on them that Jesus is way greater than angels, the same angels who gave the law to Moses, so why would you go back to something lesser? But he's also told them that Jesus humbled himself and became lower than the angels, and became a man, like us, that he might die in our place, and pay the ultimate sacrifice as our High Priest. So we don't have a God who is distant and aloof, but one who knows us and understands us.

So he opens chapter 3 by saying (v1), '*Therefore*, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling," Ok, given all that I've just said about Jesus, given that because Jesus the Son of God shared in your flesh and blood, so you get to share in this heavenly calling, to be called to God by Him, given all this, v1, "Consider Jesus."

Consider Jesus. Think about Him for a moment. No not, for a moment, for more than a moment. Because the word he uses for *consider* is not 'just give him a casual thought now and again'; it's not sound-bite thinking, 140 characters of twitter kind of stuff. He's telling his friends, come on, give this some serious, reflective thought. Reflect on Jesus; use your brain here.

Now, I think that's interesting because you'll sometimes hear one criticism leveled at Christianity that you have to kiss your brains goodbye, and hang them up with your coat as you enter church. Luc Ferry, professor of Philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris says in his book 'A Brief History of Thought' that what distinguishes philosophy from the Christian faith is that philosophers think, but Christianity is not allowed to think, not outside the bounds of faith anyway. And regrettably of course there is some justification for that charge. In 1995, Mark Noll professor of History at Notre Dame university in the US, wrote a book entitled 'the scandal of the evangelical mind', and the scandal apparently is that there isn't one, that the evangelical world doesn't think, or at least it doesn't think deeply enough. To use a food analogy, rather than chewing slowly and then swallowing, we just swallow.

And yet a truly biblical Christianity should be a million miles from that. At the heart of Christianity is a call to think clearly, to reason, to examine the evidence, that rather than blindly following what everyone else around you is thinking and saying and doing and just drift along in the current of the world, to apply your mind. And in particular to think clearly about Jesus.

V1 again, 'Consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession.' And those two titles, apostle and high priest, sum up what he's been telling us so far about Jesus. Apostle means sent one – and he's made the case that Jesus is the definitive word from God, sent by God; and he's the ultimate high priest who has made atonement for our sins and bridged the chasm between us and God.

And he's saying 'come on, if the thought has entered your mind to turn your back on Jesus', or we might add– if you're not yet a Christian, to dismiss the Christian faith in the first place – 'just think, ponder who it is we're talking about'. Think carefully about the implications of Jesus' life, His death and His resurrection. And the tragedy of course is that most people don't do that. They dismiss the gospel out of hand, or walk away from it, without ever really coming to grips with what it is.

But you might say, yeh, but come on Martin, it's all very well talking about thinking hard and deep about Jesus, but what good is that when you're living in fear of Roman soldiers knocking on your door in the middle of the night and dragging you off to prison and from there to the Colosseum. And for ourselves, what good is thinking hard when life is hard and you feel like quitting or life is good and other things seem so much more attractive than Christ.

Well, listen to what the writer says, v1-2, 'Consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, who was faithful.' Before you think about quitting, before you think about drifting away, before you dismiss this out of hand, think about the one who didn't quit, the one who didn't drift away, the one who didn't dismiss you out of hand. Because Jesus himself knew what it was to be taken in the night by the Romans and led to His death just like these guys might. And because He stayed faithful – you can too.

You see, when you understand, in your head and in your heart, how much God loves you, when it sinks in what Jesus has done for you in humbling himself and dying in your place, and staying faithful even to the point of death, for you; you won't want to turn away. In wartime, the comrade who risks his life to save the life of his friend, will always have that friend's loyalty – because he owes him his life. And Jesus didn't just risk his life for us, He gave it – and through the power of His resurrection life we can find both the willingness and the strength to stay faithful in the good times and the bad.

And to drive that point home, the writer uses their favourite hero as an example. He uses the very man they were tempted to turn back to: Moses. V2 again, 'Consider Jesus… who was faithful to him who appointed him, just as Moses also was faithful in all God's house.' Now, he doesn't diss on Moses. He's saying, 'look, Moses, your hero, he was faithful to God and His calling, even in the face of opposition, even in the face of people wanting to go back to Egypt and refusing to enter the promised land, he was faithful even when things weren't working out.' And then he says, v3, and 'Jesus has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses.'

Because they're thinking, 'can't we just go back to Moses, and Judaism, because we're safe there?' And the writer is saying, no – v5, 'Moses was faithful in all God's house *as a servant.'* Moses was a servant, an exemplary servant of God and His people, a man with whom God spoke face to face, but still a servant. And in particular he was a servant, 'to testify to the things that were to be spoken later' (v5). Which means, that Moses and the Law wasn't the final deal. That wasn't the end. In fact, Moses and the Law was all about advance warning, that something else, bigger and better was coming down the line. The Exodus that Moses led, the delivery of people from slavery in Egypt, that was just the warm up act for the far greater Exodus and release from slavery that God had planned in Jesus, for you and me.

You see, whilst Moses was faithful as a servant *in* God's house, v6, 'Christ is faithful *over* God's house *as a son*.' Moses served, but ultimately Jesus rules. Moses was just testifying of what was to come, but Jesus is that ultimate thing Moses was testifying to. So not only is Jesus greater than the angels, as the writer told us in Chapter 1, He's also greater than Moses. So why would you turn away from something more glorious, to something less?

And of course, whilst it won't be Moses that might be making you consider turning away, it could be any number of good things that seem more attractive. But to see their real value in the light of the value of Christ, you've got to think clearly about Jesus.

Daily Live the Truth

Now, all this talk about Moses being a servant in the house and Jesus being a Son over the house prompts the writer to say in v6, 'and we are [God's] house if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope.' In other words, we are members of God's people, we're in the family of God, if we don't turn away, if we hold fast to Jesus, if we nail our colours to the mast, if what we glory and boast in is what Jesus has done for us.

And then in v14, the writer says something similar: 'For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.'

So as a Christian, you're a member of God's people – you're his house. And you're a sharer in Christ: you get to share in his victory, in His resurrection life, in His joy, in his inheritance, in his Spirit, in his kingdom. You name it, if it's His, you share it.

But the real test, the writer says, of whether or not that is true of you, the evidence of whether or not you are all those things, is: do you hold fast, do you hold firm to the end? And it's that perseverance in the face of the good and the bad of life that demonstrates: this faith is real.

You see, there is something that we could call a passing faith, a faith that doesn't hang in there, and that's not the real deal. In his parable of the seed sown on the ground, Jesus describes some seed that falls on rocky ground and it springs up, and there are all the signs of life, but the ground is shallow and it's rocky and when the sun comes up, the plant was scorched and withered away – it had no root. And when Jesus explained the parable he said, this plant is like people who endure for a while, but 'when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, they fall away' (Mk 4:17).

Now you might hear that and think, 'but Martin does that mean that I might fall away if times get hard?' And the answer is, if you have come to share in Christ, then you will make it to the end, because this isn't about you clinging on for dear life – and your fingers slowly losing their grip – it's about Him holding you and He says that no one can snatch you out of His hand. You see, in the end, your faithfulness and your confidence doesn't depend on you, but on Him.

And that means that these early Christians and you and I are simply to live out daily the truth of what Jesus has done for us. We could look into the future and be consumed by the fear of 'what if?' But what the writer drives home here is 'its about today' – are you listening and open to God today? Because life is just a succession of todays. And if you are still trusting Jesus, today, even when life is hard, or your marriage is struggling, or you're getting flack from friends; if you are still looking to Jesus as your ultimate treasure even though prosperity and happiness are yours and life is good, then that keeping-on-holding-on is the evidence that God has begun a work in you and will bring it to completion.

And when you know that, it helps you face the future not with fear, but with hope. You can say with Paul, 'I can do all things through him who strengthens me' (Phil 4:13) because this isn't about you living out of your strength, but his. It

means you can face whatever life brings because of what He has done and is doing in your life: that it is a good work that He is bringing to completion, even when it doesn't feel good.

But the writer's call to his friends to daily live out of the truth – which he gets from Psalm 95, 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts' is necessary because if Jesus is *the* example of faithfulness in the face of adversity, those who followed Moses out of Egypt, were anything but. And the writer doesn't want his friends to make the same mistake.

Guard the Heart

And the writer quotes from Ps 95, because it uses the example of the Israelites in the desert to urge us – learn from their mistakes. Because the Israelites were on the verge of entering the Promised Land. They had almost arrived. Their trek was almost over, and yet they baulked at the opposition they faced in Canaan if they were to try and take the land. So they rebelled and they refused to listen and they hardened their hearts – and they died in the desert. They had come so far, but they failed to cross the finish line, because they refused to trust God. Now, can you see why that would speak to the people who first heard this? You see if the ancient Israelites felt like grasshoppers in comparison to the giants that inhabited the Promised Land, so the people he's writing to probably felt like grasshoppers in the face of the Roman Empire and a world system opposed to them. And sometimes when you're facing adversity, or temptation, or the pressure of friends to conform, you can feel very much the same.

And because that's the case, the writer says, v12, 'Take care,' watch out, be careful, 'lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.' And repeatedly he says to them, don't close down, don't switch off to God speaking to you, don't harden your hearts and don't let sin harden your hearts to what God is saying to you in Jesus.

Because this issue of our hearts becoming hard and insensitive, like hard-baked clay rather than soft, malleable clay that the potter can mold, can be either active or passive. When he quotes the psalmist and says, 'do not harden your hearts' – that means we can harden them, by actively choosing to turn away from God and disobey. But there's also a passive hardening that can go on. V13: 'that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.' Sure, someone can choose to harden their hearts, but there's also this subtle, under the radar, hardening that happens because of sin. It's not that someone flat out chooses to harden themselves to God, but in choosing sin over Him, there's a hardening of heart that can set in.

And the writer says that's because sin is deceitful. It promises you something that it can't deliver. It says, 'if you have this, or do this, or think like this, or live like this, your life will be happier, you'll be more content, more fulfilled. But it's empty promises. And there's an exchange that goes on – we believe the promises of sin, instead of the promises of God.

You see, the person who steals from his company, or commits adultery with his secretary or sleeps with his girlfriend, or holds on to wealth rather than be

generous with it, doesn't believe that God's plans are for his best. He disbelieves what God says, and believes instead in the deceitfulness, the empty promises of sin. And the result of that is that his heart becomes increasingly hard to God. And the writer is saying, 'hey, don't let that happen to you.'

And he tells us a way to guard against it. V13: 'But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."

So this isn't just about 'I guard my heart and you guard yours'. It's about watching out for one another, watching one another's backs. You see, when it comes to sin playing tricks on us it sure helps to have another pair of friendly eyes to spot the slight of hand. And if we're serious about avoiding falling for the false promises of sin, then we need each other, to encourage and strengthen and warn and exhort and comfort one another. Because to keep us strong in adversity and accountable in prosperity, we need to know that we're not alone, that we have friends looking out for us. So the writer's saying, 'church, get that encouragement and support thing going among you.'

And this from the man who just in the last chapter told us the blessings of the fact that Jesus became like one of us. It's as if he's saying – and as wonderful as that is, there is still something of God's grace that He transmits to us through one another. It's as if Jesus comes to us in a fresh way through one another. Which is why being part of the community of the church, and finding your place in a homegroup, where we can practically live this out, and getting accountable, and praying for one another, and sharing life together, isn't just fun, it's life-saving.

But as the writer draws chapter 3 to a close he begins to talk about something that he's going to go into in detail in chapter 4, so this is only the briefest of tasters of what's coming next. You see, if we are to consider Jesus, and daily live out of the truth of what He has done for us, and if we are to guard our hearts, it's for a reason and that is that we might enter God's rest.

Enter His Rest

In a run of five rhetorical questions in v16-18, the writer wants his friends and us to see that the Israelites, who had experienced this incredible deliverance from slavery and from under the power of the tyrant Pharaoh, rebelled against God and failed to enter the promised land; they failed to enter into all that God had for them, into God's rest, because of unbelief and disobedience.

And what the writer is going to show us in chapter 4, is that that promise of entering God's rest, the promise of the Promised Land, still stands, it's available, on offer to you; and more than anything, he doesn't want his friends to miss out on it through their unbelief and disobedience – but that, as they say, is for next week.