God Has Spoken
Hebrews 1:1-4

I want you to imagine a scenario. You're clearing out your house, and at the back of an old cupboard, you discover a letter. And you can tell by the look of it that it's old. And you take it to the light and you read it. But there's no signature saying who it's from, and nothing at the top about who it was written to, but the way it's written, and the sheer beauty of the words, leave you wanting to know more. Who did write it? And who was it written to? And Why did they write the way they wrote?

Well, today we're starting a new series on the Letter to the Hebrews, which if you don't know is one of the books in the New Testament, and we're facing just such a scenario. And it stands out because no one really knows who wrote it.

Plenty of people have been suggested as the potential author: Paul, Apollos, Barnabas (who, if you're interested, gets my vote!), or Luke. But the truth is no one really knows. What we do know is that whoever it was, had a big pastor's heart. Because it becomes clear that he loves the guys he's writing to. He knows them personally, and he understands their fears. And he mixes encouragement and warning, and he's firm and he's tender. He obviously cares for them.

But who are the 'them' he's writing to? Because if we don't know who the author was, we also don't know for sure who the recipients were. From the way the writer goes into detail about Jewish worship and the fact that when he quotes from the Old Testament he uses the Septuagint, the greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, it's a pretty safe bet that they were Greek-speaking Jewish Christians. And because of the persecution they were facing, and that they had obviously already gone through one bout and were on the verge of facing another, it seems likely that they were Jewish Christians living in Rome in the middle of the first century.

And that brings up the issue of why he was writing to them in the first place. Because, interestingly, not only does Hebrews differ from the other letters in that we don't know who the writer was or who he was writing to, Hebrews is also not your normal New Testament letter in terms of its contents. The majority of the letters all have a common way of starting: the writer introduces himself, gives some opening blessing and says who he's writing to. But Hebrews doesn't open like that. It doesn't start like a letter. In fact, the rest of the letter reads like a sermon. But then it ends like a letter would end. What the writer says at the end, in Heb 13:22 is that he has written to them a 'word of exhortation' and that is a phrase that was used to describe a sermon delivered in a synagogue. So, it seems as if Hebrews was written to be read aloud as a sermon in a church, as if the writer, who knew his people intimately, was there preaching it to them.

And he does it that way for a reason. You see someone has described the people he's writing to as 'a community in crisis.' If you piece together some of what he says to the people, it becomes clear that they're struggling. They have already faced persecution for being Christians and it looks like another, more intense wave of persecution, is coming. And some of them are weary. They're suffering. They've already lost their homes and faced imprisonment and things could be about to get a whole lot worse. And it seems as if some of them felt like giving up, and returning to Judaism. To go back to being a Jew, rather than a Christian.

You see, Judaism was an authorized religion in the Roman Empire, a protected religion – but Christianity wasn't. And the people he's writing to are already outcasts from their Jewish community, from family and friends and now the State is turning on them as well. And in that situation, wouldn't it be so much easier just to go back to being a Jew and drop the Christian bit? So they're frightened and in danger of falling back, of losing heart, of withdrawing from the church, of turning their backs on Jesus.

And so the writer wants to encourage them and urge them, 'don't do that, and here's why you shouldn't do that, here's why Jesus is worth every penny of any price you have to pay.' So, as we're going to see this is a very *real* letter, or message. It's been written to be read to *real* people facing *real* struggles in a painfully *real* world.

Which begs the question, why should *we* study it – here in comfortable Lausanne? What's the relevance of this letter, this message, to us, when on the face of it our lives seem a million miles from those who first received it?

Well, there are a few reasons. First, is the sheer challenge of it. It's been said that Hebrews is the New Testament book which whilst it has the most commentaries written on it, is the least read by normal Christians like you and me. Because whilst I suspect many of us could reel off some of the famous verses like Hebrews 11:1, 'Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen' or 12:1 'Let us lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us' or enjoy chapter 11 with its heroes of faith; there are other parts that are, frankly, hard to understand. And we get to the stuff about blood sacrifices or Melchizedek and we think, what has that got to do with me? And so we're going to look at this together to see just how much it has got to do with us.

But there are other reasons as well – because I'm not so sure we're so different from those who first heard this message. You see if you're not yet a Christian, or maybe if you are but your doubting, you may wonder, 'sure I hear all this about Christianity and about Christ, but why should I give that any more attention than any of the numerous other religions, or other gods I could choose from?' Well, as the writer sets out for us who Jesus is, he is going to answer exactly that question: why Jesus?

Or if you're already a Christian, you're unlikely to be facing the temptation to revert to Judaism, and you're not about to cave in under the pressure of Roman persecution. But when life is hard, or you're pressured with work, or you're suffering and life isn't working, or people have let you down or you have to pay the price of believing in Jesus, there is that temptation to throw in the towel and walk away. And you wonder, is Jesus really worth the cost? And whilst we may not be tempted to go back to a culturally safe Judaism, there is always the temptation to go back to a culturally safe Christianity, where our faith doesn't cost us anything, and where you try and keep Christ and His demands at arms length. And rather than being tempted to return to the forms of Jewish worship

as these guys were, there's always the temptation to go back to self-worship – where we're at the centre, instead of Christ.

And for the younger ones amongst us, whilst you don't feel the pressure from the Jewish community to come back to the synagogue, nevertheless face the relentless social pressure from so-called friends, to say nothing of advertising, to conform your life to the world.

And all that's without mentioning the problem of Christian immaturity, which the writer addresses and which plagues the modern church, or the vital issue of how we're supposed to approach God.

So what we're going to see is that this first century sermon, written to a people very different from us, remains remarkably relevant to everyone of our lives.

But that's enough introduction. Let's get to the text. Today we're going to look at just the first 4 verses.

Hebrews 1:1-4

When our girls were younger, they were always wanting to put on little plays or dance routines for us to ~~endure~~, enjoy. But if we let them, it would go on and on with no plot line and seemingly no end. So we told them, if you want to put on a show it has got to have a beginning, a middle and an end. Especially an end.

But the beginning is just as important, isn't it. If you want to communicate something to someone, you've got to get their attention. And that is what the writer does here. These four verses – which is just one long sentence in Greek - are like an on overture to a symphony. You know how sometimes a composer will weave themes that are coming later into the overture to whet the appetite? Well that's what the writer does here. And it's a hint: the symphony is coming. And these verses are a power-packed summary of what lies ahead.

He opens with this incredible, spine-tingling theology, about the glory of Christ: of who Jesus is and what He has done. And the implication is that those two things change everything. That the whole of life has to be seen through that lens.

But before we get there, the first thing the writer wants us to know, is that:

God Has Spoken

If you've seen some of the recent censuses or polling you'll know that a growing group within our western societies is what we could call 'spiritual but not religious' and some of you might even identify with that. These are people who want to sense or connect with the divine, but they're turned off by organized religion. And in some ways – and I don't mean this disparagingly - they're like those great radio receivers scientists point to the skies, in the hope of picking up some signal from distant galaxies. They know there is more to life than this physical life and in their desire to connect with the divine, they're turning their spiritual receivers this way and that in the hope of picking up a signal.

Well, the writer of Hebrews tells us that we don't need to be like someone searching in the dark. He tells us that God has taken the initiative and spoken loudly and clearly: v1, 'Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke.' So the message of the Bible is that God is not silent. He's got something to say. But interestingly what He has to say is not about you – not first off anyway. You see, often we want to know 'what has God got to say to me, or about me?' And the answer, of course, is 'lots' – He has lots to say to you and about you, but the truth is you're not the centre of His message. In fact, what God has to say is all about Jesus.

V1 again, 'Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets.' The writer's saying that in the past, in Old Testament days God's communication to His people was piecemeal. It was at different times and in different ways. It was a bit here and a bit there. It was fragmentary and diverse. He spoke by visions and dreams and angels and miracles and still-small voices and powerful prophetic words and through song and acted out parables. In the past, He spoke through the prophets.

But that was then. And they were just setting the scene. V2: 'But in these last days he has spoken to us by His Son.' In the past God spoke to our fathers, but *now*, in *these* days, when God is bringing everything to completion, He has spoken to *us*. And He has spoken to us by His Son, Jesus.

And He is the ultimate, the final, the decisive message from God.

But there lies the problem for our modern or rather post-modern ears. Because in our day the one thing that the tolerance agenda is really intolerant about is any claim to absolute or exclusive truth. And yet that's exactly the kind of claim the writer is making here: that Jesus is the final, the ultimate, the definitive word from God. And he'll go on to claim that Jesus is greater than anyone else God has ever spoken through: greater than Moses, greater than angels, greater than Joshua, greater than Aaron.

And if that's true, it will unquestionably affect how you see other faiths, or other belief systems. Because whatever truth or light they contain, Jesus – God's ultimate revelation - becomes the plumb-line by which everything else must be judged.

But why should Jesus be that plumb-line? Why should He be the one you listen to and the one you follow? Why, when frankly there is a multitude, a whole pantheon of other religious teachers or faith systems you could follow, why should Jesus be the one you turn to? Why should Jesus be the one these first century Christians should cling to?

Well, in these opening verses the writer gives us two reasons why: because of who Jesus is and because of what He has done.

Who Jesus Is

And without a doubt the writer presents a staggering picture. He tells us four things about who this Son, Jesus is.

Firstly, he tells us, v2, that the Son is 'the heir of all things.' Now in Psalm 2, God promised that the Messiah would inherit the nations of the world, but the writer takes it even further here. Jesus isn't just heir of the nations; everything, *all things*, belong to him. And when that sinks in, for those who first heard this, and for us, it radically affects how you view your life, and your possessions.

Secondly he tells us in v2, that it was Jesus 'through whom also [God] created the world.' And that word *world* literally means *the ages* – the universe of space and time. So it's not just that God has granted Jesus everything as an inheritance, Hebrews says it was through Jesus that God made everything. So the most powerful things that you and I know, the awesome power of creation, in all its forms, and the vast expanse of endless galaxies, all their combined power was created though His power; that creation is just that – creation. And Jesus the Son is the Creator, infinitely more powerful than the power we tremble at.

Thirdly, the writer tells us in v3 that the Son 'is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature.' That just as rays of sunlight stream over the mountains at sun rise, so Jesus is the radiance, the manifestation, the showing forth of God's glory. To see Him is to see the divine majesty. And just like you could take a wax seal or a molten coin and imprint the face of Caesar on it, so the Son is the exact imprint, the very stamp of God. He is the ultimate image bearer.

And so ultimately, Jesus and Jesus alone is qualified to reveal God to us. So, the writer is saying, look, if you are really serious about wanting to know what God is like, if you are really serious about wanting to connect with the divine, then you don't need to look anywhere else. Look to Jesus.

And then fourthly he tells us in v3 that the Son 'upholds the universe by the word of his power.' He doesn't just make everything, He sustains everything. He doesn't just create the universe, and set it running and then walk off leaving it to spin out of control, He remains intimately involved in overseeing it. Which means he is intimately interested in you.

So if that's who Jesus is, the writer is going to say, doesn't it stand to reason that He should be the one who gets your attention, whose word you listen to and who you build your life upon, regardless of what anyone else says?

But he doesn't leave it there. Having told them who Jesus is he goes on to tell them…

What Jesus has done

Now, if you had to pinpoint what the problem with the world is, what would you say? When in the last century the Times newspaper asked some leading thinkers to answer that question, GK Chesterton simply replied, 'what's wrong with the world? I am. Yours sincerely, GK Chesterton.' And the Bible would agree with that assessment. It makes the case that the fundamental problem with humanity is sin. Now, whilst we are able to spot that in others – whether it's the greed of bankers or the corruption of politicians, or the violence of rebel groups, we're afflicted with a strange kind of partial blindness when it comes to our own sin.

And sometimes we have a hard time being as honest as GK Chesterton. But if we are honest with ourselves we know we have failed to love God and our neighbor as we should, which Jesus says are the two greatest commandments; and we can see the effects of that in our own lives and on our relationships, because sin slimes and it stains and it poisons and it corrupts and it defiles.

And we try numerous ways to deal with, to clean our act up. We try religion, as if by religious observance, or meditation we can wipe away the past or the present; we try penance, as if we can somehow pay off our debt with good works; we try separating ourselves as if living apart from bad influences will somehow deal with our inner problem. But if you've tried any of those, you know they are doomed to fail.

But the writer here says something remarkable. He says in v3 that Jesus made 'purification for sins.' Not just the global problem of sin, singular, but individual *sins*, plural. Your sins and my sins. As he's going to spell out for us later, by Jesus dying in our place on the cross, by Jesus making the ultimate sacrifice, He purifies us from our sin – He cleanses us, He washes us, He wipes the slate clean.

But then the writer tells us something else Jesus did: v3, 'He sat down.' He sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high, the place of supreme honour and favour. But just think about it, when do you get to sit down - especially you mums? When do you get to sit down? When the work's done. When you've done all there is to do, that's when you finally get to sit down. And Jesus sat down in glory because He had done all there was to do to secure your salvation. You see, the Jewish priests, they never got to sit down, because they were always having to offer one bloody sacrifice after another to atone for sin. And the person who thinks they have to earn their salvation, or pay off their debt to God or impress Him or earn his favour, they can never sit down because they can never do enough to get peace. But the writer tells us that Jesus has sat down, because he's done all there is to do. And if He's done it for you, there is nothing left for you to do. There's no debt left to pay, no stain left that needs cleansing, no point to prove, no requirement to impress God, all you have to do is look to Christ and put your trust and your hope in Him and what He has done for you. It's His grace to you.

And that means, as the writer is going to show us in the weeks to come, that you can approach God with a clear conscience, you can meet with Him and walk with Him and hear from Him. That what the 'spiritual but not religious' person longs for – something that will fill the void in our hearts - has been made available to us in Christ. That when we want to know which of all these religious voices you listen to, the answer is clear: God has spoken to us by his Son. That what we need to know when life is hard and suffering comes, is true, that Jesus is worth it all.

And the writer finishes his intro by telling us that Jesus has become 'as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.' But that, as they say, will have to wait until next week.