

October 4, 2009

Psalm 8

O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

You have set your glory above the heavens.
Out of the mouths of babes and infants
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger.

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?

Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honor.

You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet,
all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Hebrews 1 : 1-4, 2: 5-12

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

Now God did not subject the coming world, about which we are speaking, to angels. But someone has testified somewhere,

“What are human beings that you are mindful of them,
or mortals, that you care for them?

You have made them for a little while lower than the angels;
you have crowned them with glory and honor,
subjecting all things under their feet.”

Now in subjecting all things to them, God has left nothing outside their control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to them, but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the

suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

It is fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, saying,

“I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters,
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.”

A Taste of Death, A Taste of Glory

This week at Clergy Convocation I was sitting on a low chair in the hallway of the hotel when two Tongan pastors came by. As they turned and went in opposite directions, they continued to speak to each other.

Now, I don't understand Tongan, and the two men were tall, and I was sitting very low, so literally they were speaking way over my head and I didn't understand a single word.

If they had been saying something to me, I certainly wouldn't have recognized it.

I felt like I was in an airport in another country, listening to the announcements in another language. The words were high above me, incomprehensible, and it would have been nice to understand, but I didn't. If they had been saying that my flight was about to leave, I would've missed it.

And who knows, maybe they were reminding each other of some fantastic activity, and I missed it!

We can miss a lot because we don't hear some announcement or because we just don't understand.

We need someone to catch our attention and interpret for us, explain things to us.

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews was writing to an audience that was probably comprised of Christians who were from both Jewish and gentile backgrounds. It was written in very educated Greek, the most polished Greek of any of the New Testament writings.

The identity of the author is disputed, with some scholars believing it was Paul, and others saying that it was a disciple of Paul, maybe Barnabas or Apollos, and maybe even Prisca, a woman who is mentioned by Paul as one of the leaders of the early church.

This dispute began early on. An historian named Origen, writing in the 4th century, said "only God knows who wrote it."

Whoever wrote it was writing very clearly about Christ's role as the highest of high priests, standing between us and God, acting as a mediator and a mediary.

Whether the first hearers of this letter were gentile or Jew, they were part of a culture that understood God in a very different way than Christians do, so the explanation was important.

Greek and Roman gods back then were beings who lived up on Mt. Olympus, who fought with each other, who talked to each other way up high, over the heads of people. They only came down to earth to interfere and mess up people's lives, or sometimes to have a fling with a pretty girl.

They weren't perfect. They didn't often help people. They could come and go at will and so they were not involved in human activities any more than they wanted to be.

People had to be careful not to incur the wrath of the gods because terrible things could happen if they got angry!

The Jewish people had a different way of understanding God. Going back even before Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, people who saw God did not expect to go on living.

People did not say the name of God out loud or even write it down. They said Lord or another word. They wrote YHWH, a shortened way of writing "The Great I AM." Even today many Jews write G-d, fearing to write the whole word out.

In the Jewish belief, God is too holy to see, too far above us to speak the name, too powerful and perfect for us to approach.

So both Gentile and Jew needed to understand God a different way, a new way, the Christian way.

Jesus Christ has three roles, three jobs to do----three functions. He is prophet, speaking God's word to us. He is King, ruler over all of creation, to be obeyed and worshiped. And he is priest, standing in the gap between Creator and created, connecting us to God despite our unworthiness, our sinful nature.

In the Jewish Temple, only the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies, where God was. Only once a year and only after offering a sacrifice to atone for his sin, the high priest would enter into the presence of God.

He couldn't stay too long, either.

God was too far above us for us to take his presence lightly enough for us to just casually go in and out from the Holy of Holies. God was frightening in power and might.

The Greek and Roman gods, too, were to be avoided for fear of their power.

So hearing that Christ is the highest high priest, standing between us and God (or the gods) was good news for all of the original hearers of these words to the Hebrews. Instead of being afraid, we have an intermediary to go between us and God.

And even though we live in a different time, this is Good News today, too!

Even if we haven't grown up in a society that taught us that we ought to be afraid of God, God is still the great unseen who is far above us, more powerful than we can understand, more holy and pure and perfect than we can even describe.

He is over our heads, operating in a different realm, and we have no words that can really express what God is like or where God is or how God thinks.

It's kind of like listening to those two tall Tongan pastors speaking in Tongan, or being in the airport listening to the announcements in a different language.

But then, Christ the high priest is there. Christ himself said that "Those who have seen me have seen the Father," and "No one comes to the Father but by me." Christ, standing between us and God, reflects God to us. Christ, the very imprint of God, brings God out of the realm of the unseen and shows him to us.

Knowing Christ we know what God is like. Being with Christ, it is safe to see God face to face. We can know what God is like and still live.

Christ came to earth to be fully human. Because he was fully human, he knew what being human is like for us, with all of our limitations and temptations.

The author of Hebrews calls Christ the "pioneer of our salvation." The word that is translated here as pioneer is Arkegos in Greek. It is more literally translated as "the one who leads in front."

The one who leads in front. Like a general who leads his army by going into battle at the front of the charge and doesn't stay behind his troops to be safe.

Jesus Christ leads us through life, undergoing all the struggles and temptations and suffering in front of us. He does not stay safe in his heavenly home. He joins us here, right where we live, right where we die.

Leading us in life as a person, Jesus Christ showed us how we can live, obedient, loving, loved by God, resisting temptation. He showed us that we can remain faithful to God and keep on loving others even when we are going through great suffering. He led the way by suffering himself.

He led in front to show us that he understands and is with us in our suffering. He led in front by going on to eternal life.

Jesus Christ, Arkegos, the one who leads in front.

We read that Jesus Christ "tasted death for everyone." Gods are not supposed to die! Their immortality means that they don't, by definition.

But Jesus Christ did! It wasn't just pretend. His death was real! He was fully human, and he died.

But he was also fully God, so he could defeat death. He tasted death for us

And now we can taste glory because he died! Because he defeated death!

When we celebrate communion, we sometimes refer to the "heavenly banquet." Our bite of bread and sip of juice is our taste of glory! Someday we will sit down at the heavenly banquet and eat until we are satisfied! We will be filled up until we are never empty again!

A taste of glory! For a brief moment we can know what God is like, we can be in the presence of the Creator and not die.

It will be like sitting in that foreign airport listening to the announcements in a foreign language and realizing that we can understand them, just for long enough to get on the right plane and not miss it.

It will be like listening to my Tongan pastor friends and suddenly knowing that what they were saying was admonishing each other to pray for their friends and family in Tonga in the aftermath of the earthquake and the tsunami.

It will be knowing that God loves each one of us personally and is leading us all the way to a place where the One Who Leads in Front will welcome us all home.

Taste and see that the Lord is Good! He tasted death so that we may taste glory!

Amen.