

1 January 2023; Hebrews 2:10-18; 1 Christmas; Pastor Fraser Pearce

As pastor here at Bethlehem, I regularly invite the congregation

To confession and absolution with these words:

Dear friends in Christ, Let us draw near to God our Father with a true heart, to confess our sins, and to ask him in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to forgive us.

This invitation is based on words

That come from the same book of the Bible as today's epistle reading:

They come from Hebrews.

These words acknowledge that we have a paradoxical unity:

We are together not because of our strengths and triumphs,

Rather we together acknowledge our common need for forgiveness,

And our common hope that in Christ Jesus we have a victory

Given to us through the cross of Christ.

Today I'm proclaiming Good News from God's word

From Hebrews, and that is that our flesh and blood brother,

Jesus Christ, has shared in our sufferings,

And through his death brings us unity with God and with each other,

So that we may share in the glory of the Father,

As we live as members of his royal household.

OK. Let's get into the text for today:

It was 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.

Let's first pick up on this word 'pioneer' – what's going on?

Well, we know what pioneers are,

Whether it's in exploration and settlement,

Or in a field of knowledge, or even in sport.

A pioneer is someone who goes out ahead of others

And prepares the way for them.

In our reading Jesus is called the pioneer of our salvation:

He is the one who has gone ahead of us

Into the glorious presence of the Father,

So that we may live as children in the royal household of God.

But did you notice how it said that it was fitting for our pioneer

To be *made perfect* through suffering?

At first this can sound a little troubling: Is it saying that Jesus wasn't *really* divine

Until he had gone through his suffering, death, and resurrection?
After all, we think of perfection
As something like getting a perfect score on a test,
And it sounds like Jesus wasn't quite 100% divine until he suffered.
But think about it this way:
In the bible to be perfect regularly means to have reached a goal:
To gain full stature and maturity.
So, in this sense, an acorn is perfect when it becomes an oak tree.
But there is nothing deficient in the acorn itself:
Its nature is the same, and as it suffers in growth
It reaches its perfection, its maturity, in being an oak.
And that's one way to understand what's going on here:
Jesus reached his goal as a real human being through his suffering,
Suffering that we all must bear as human beings.

Now listen to how the reading goes on: **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.'**

And again, 'I will put my trust in him.' And again, 'Here am I and the children whom God has given me.'

Because Jesus, our pioneer, has gone through sufferings,
He is not ashamed to call us, who also suffer,
His brother and sisters: to call us his family.

This is important for us to hear,
Because in the human community suffering is regularly tied up
With shame, and with people wanting to distance themselves from us.
If we suffer bodily sickness or disfigurement, we may sense
That people want to stay away from us,
Or that they feel uneasy talking with us.
If we suffer from poverty or a lack of intellectual acumen
Or if we are physically uncoordinated
People can go so far to mock us and reject us.
And it's especially the things about ourselves that we can't change,
Perhaps even especially about our *bodily* deficiencies
That cause us the deepest shame.
After all, our first parents in the fall experienced bodily shame,
And tried in vain to cover themselves and hide from each other
And from God.

But Jesus is not ashamed of us:
He knows what it is to bear bodily suffering and shame,
And so he stands with us,
Right in the assembly of the church,
Proclaiming praises to the Father with us,
So that we do not need to hide from each other or from God,
But live in the trust of the God who loves us.

Our text goes on to put it more strongly,
And to bring in imagery that ties in with this Christmas season:
Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham.

First of all, we share flesh and blood:
We have unity as human beings in having an embodied existence:
We are not spirits, we are not angels,
We are creatures are flesh and blood,
And so is Jesus: he shared in, he shares in,
Our real life as flesh and blood human beings.
This is what St John was talking about
When we heard on Christmas Day
That the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.
Now St John said that this Word dwelt among us full of grace and truth,
And our reading gives the same teaching
But spells it out in a different way.
In Hebrews we hear that the pioneer of our salvation
Shared in or flesh and blood humanity for two reasons.
The first was **so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil,**
The devil is the one who would separate
Those whom God wills to be unified.
If you read through the book of Hebrews
You'll find out how Jesus' death effects this destruction,
But for today, just remember how I began this sermon:
With words from our liturgy that come from Hebrews:
One way that our Lord destroys the power of death
Is by giving us a good conscience before God:
By leading us in confession and forgiveness,

By leading us with true hearts into the gracious presence of God.

The second reason we hear that the pioneer of our salvation
Shared in or flesh and blood humanity is that he might **free those who all their
lives were held in slavery by the fear of death.**

Of course, we will all undergo the tragic reality of bodily death,
But because our Lord has, as a pioneer, gone before us,
We can move from the life-long fear of death
To the daily life of praise of the God who gives life.

Our reading ends with these words of encouragement:

**Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that
he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a
sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested
by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.**

In life, when we need help, it can be more than frustrating
When those who are in a position to help us
Do not or cannot understand what we are going through.
Whether we are suffering from an illness, or from financial trouble,
Or from relationship difficulties,
If the people who can help us don't understand
From their own experience what it's like to be in our shoes,
Then the help they can give is to some extent limited.
But with Jesus we have a high priest,
We have someone who can help us with God,
Who knows what it's like to be a real human being.
Who has gone through the testing of life,
Including bodily, flesh and blood testing,
And so can be merciful with us in our need.

It is Jesus who has made atonement for our sins,
And he did this as an embodied human being,
As the real Son of Mary, born in Bethlehem,
Wrapped in tight bands of cloth, and laid in a manger.
Through his suffering, through his atoning death,
He reached the goal of sharing his holiness with us,
And so of giving us the gift of unity as we live as children of the Father.
And so let us put our hope in him,
And draw near to each other as we draw near to God our Father,
In Jesus' name. Amen.