

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Since Father Keith had been scheduled for sometime to return to celebrate this 5th Anniversary of the Founding of St. Francis with you, I had not programmed myself to prepare a sermon for this Sunday. Then Cindy called me and told me that Father Keith had injured his leg, would not be able to make it down, and asked if I could come over for today's Anniversary Service. A quick glance at my calendar prompted a quick "Of course, I would love to."

But I found myself in a bit of quandary, what should I say? Since I had mentally taken this Sunday off, I had to create a whole new mindset. So began the reprogramming to properly prepare this sermon. First, since this is not only the 12th Sunday of Pentecost, but the 5th Anniversary of the founding of St. Francis Congregation, I felt that I needed to prepare something special. However, I forgot to ask Cindy if we were going to continue with today's lessons or go to the lessons for the Anniversary of a Church appointed by the Prayer Book. – **or** if, in fact, we were going to use the propers of a saint for St. Francis.

So rather than do in the simple thing of picking up the phone and calling, I started to look at the options. I began, of course, with the appointed lessons for today. However, today's Gospel lesson with its troubling theme of judgment and an occasion that has one of Our Lord's harshest statements just didn't seem appropriate. Then I noticed something. Last week and this week **and** for the next two weeks, our Epistle lessons are from the *Letter to the Hebrews*. Then, would you believe it? The Epistle Lesson from the Propers for a Saint is also from Hebrews, but it doesn't stop there. The second lesson appointed for Evening Prayer on the Day of the Celebration of a Church's Anniversary is also from Hebrews. While I'm not a rocket scientist, I did think that maybe, just maybe, I should be looking at Hebrews for a point of departure. I have to be hit in the head only once with a two-by-four before I get the idea.

That is when I realized that our Epistle Lesson from last week is so appropriate for today. So let's back peddle for just a moment and read last week's Epistle Lesson from the *Letter to the Hebrews*.

[Read Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16]

Let's follow my usual formula of looking at the background of the Book, searching out the general context, and then interpreting the **specific** context and application for the appointed lesson. So we will begin an abbreviated look at the *Letter to the Hebrews*.

The *Letter to the Hebrews* is one of those relatively unknown books. My basic resource for this sermon, the *Interpreter's Bible*, in fact, declares that this letter is the **least** known of the major New Testament writings. Which is surprising since there are several concepts from this letter that are quite familiar; such as its comments on faith, the interesting name of Melchizedek, the priestly imagery, and several vivid figures of speech such as "the hope set before us;" "a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul;" and in terms of our instruction and understanding "You need milk not solid food." But are we aware of the total nature of the author's thoughts and message? While Hebrews will never rival the popularity of the Gospels or Paul's letters, it does contribute to the richness of New Testament Christianity and certainly merits careful study.

The author of one of my sources made the observation that the best way to approach a study and understanding of Hebrews is to proceed from the known to the unknown. This differs slightly from our normal approach. Usually, we approach a letter from the point of view of its context, its author, the time of its writing, and its literary style. We **then** proceed to its content and message. But with Hebrews, we will start with its content and eventually move to a consideration of just who wrote it and when.

The text reveals the author's religious ideas and his general purpose in writing. This purpose is clearly stated in Chapter 4, verses 14 - 16. Here we find: "We have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God...who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

The chief purpose of this letter, then, is to state the concept of the priesthood of Jesus and the effectiveness of this priesthood through which we have access to God's mercy and grace in time of need. At first, the declaration of verses 14 – 16, Chapter 4 may seem abrupt, but when we carefully read this letter, we can see that the author has been building to this point. First, the angels could not help humanity because of their angelic nature. Second, Moses was a man and not the Son of God, and then the priesthood of Aaron was not sufficient. The writer thus logically leads us toward the priestly principle for which we have been prepared by the phrase that summarizes the Son's earthly service, "when he had made purification for our sins" (1:3).

In Hebrews, we find a clear explanation of the concept of the priestly service of Jesus as the Son of God, a summary of the qualifications of a high priest, and how Jesus fulfills them. The author then tells us that he will now develop an understanding of this priestly concept beyond the limitations of the earthly priesthood but "after the order of Melchizedek" (5:6).

It is important that in order to understand the purpose of Hebrews that we remember that this letter was not written to the Jews, but rather it was written to Jewish Christians who were in danger of falling away from the faith. Evidently these Jewish Christians were falling back into Judaism. There **is** extensive historical evidence that some early Jewish Christians were referred to as the "Hebrews." Thus we have the title of the book *The Letter to the Hebrews*. The references to the Old Testament and the Old Testament concept of priesthood would have been well known and understood by these readers. As it stands, then, Hebrews is an argument for the finality of Christianity that rests on the foreshadowing in the Old Testament institution of sacrifice as the fundamental way for access to God. The Sacrifice of Christ is for all, Jew and Gentile alike. Thus the major thrust of this *Letter to the Hebrews* is to emphasize a concept that is central to our faith -- *that Christ died for us once and for all*.

Hebrews is unique in the New Testament. Even though it is called an epistle – a letter, it does not begin like one, however, it does somewhat end like a letter. Hebrews does not have the customary opening with the name of the writer and the typical salutation to whom the letter is addressed. In fact, one scholar has suggested that in reality that Hebrews was possibly a sermon, one that might have been written for use around Pentecost, because of some of its sub-themes.

As for the author, even though it is attributed to St. Paul. The **one** thing that scholars agree upon is that it is definitely **not** by Paul. The tradition of attributing this letter to Paul began early in the East and then was eventually accepted in the West, but it was not until the Council of Trent in 1546 that "official" attribution was given to St. Paul – even in light of very strong evidence to the contrary.

One of my resources suggests – and I quote "The long history of research on authorship has not been fruitless, however, two solid convictions have emerged: **(a)** that Paul was not, either directly or indirectly, the author and **(b)** that we **do** know the kind of man who wrote Hebrews in spite of our ignorance of his name."

This source continues, "The author of Hebrews is an independent thinker. His name is not Paul, nor is he a Paulinist. The evidence for this conclusion is cumulative, including style, arrangement of materials, the interweaving of long exhortations with the argument in a manner not found in any of Paul's letters, and the whole fabric and fashion of thought." In short, we cannot attribute Hebrews to St. Paul. Even the Eastern Alexandrian scholars, who argued most for the authorship of St. Paul, saw and acknowledged these elements. In fact, Origen who lived

about 182-251 AD and who is acknowledged as one of the first major Christian scholars wrote that -- only God knows who wrote this epistle.

So evidence from tradition boils down to the following results:

1. Hebrews was known and prized, especially in the East but also in the West, from the second century on. Thus it is clearly a very early writing.
2. Evidently it has always bore the title "To the Hebrews."
3. The author is never named.
4. Early discussion of authorship involved the greater question and argument of apostolic authority. And...
5. Pauline authorship, as proposed in Alexandria, made its way against serious critical objections and finally prevailed in the Church because of the Eastern tradition.

And now this brings us to this 5th Anniversary and how Hebrews may relate to us. In my short time with you, I have become aware of an unusual commitment to witnessing for Our Lord in the tradition of the Episcopal Church in this community. I have noted an unusual dedication to both our Lord and to each other. I have heard you describe and talk about your own personal growth in the Faith. I have experienced a richness of community and devotion that is truly unique in my experience with the Church. I am both in awe and impressed with who you are.

In talking to you, in listening to you, and in reading your letter to the Bishop requesting Special Congregational Status, I am reminded of the opening verses of last week's Epistle Lesson from *Hebrews*, which I reread to you earlier: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." I have seen that faith here as you seek to establish the Congregation of St. Francis.

In your letter, you wrote "With a foundation as Christians, Anglicans, Episcopalians and members of the Diocese of Colorado, we are a body of believers made up of full time South Fork area residents, summer residents, vacationers, and visitors to the area. As a group we have demonstrated an openness to different approaches in how we understand the scripture, how we grow in our knowledge of Christianity in today's world, and an acceptance of people's diversity."

Following your Model of Ministry: *Worship, Fellowship, Discipleship, Service, and Evangelism*, you have grown in the Faith. Like Abraham in our lesson, by faith you have set out for an unknown place, by faith you have committed yourself to building a vital, active, and loving church. In just, five short years, you have accomplished much and this is what we celebrate today. Certainly, there have been times of frustration and even disillusionment and discouragement, but these are the times in which we must remember the blessings that you each have received and that you each have given. To paraphrase our lesson from Hebrews: "Therefore God is not ashamed to be called your God; indeed, he has prepared a place for you."

We do not know what the next five years will bring, but if we continue to witness to the nature of the High Priesthood of Christ; continue to emphasize the precept *that Christ died for us once and for all*; and continue to provide the witness of a liturgical, sacramental presence in this community, God will bless the Congregation of St. Francis, South Fork.

My Prayer for you is that His will be done and that you will continue to truly respond to Him -- and if so, you **will** continue to grow in the Faith and to expand your witness and service to each other and this community.

Amen