

## Vanhoye Chapter 14 (Heb.10:19-25)

Having discussed the theology of the priesthood and the sacrifice of Christ, the letter to the Hebrews now turns to the implications of this theology for Christians. The author of the letter regards this passage as being very important for us who are privileged to live in the era of the New Covenant. Vanhoye regards the section of the letter as a 'programme for Christian life'.

In the era of the New Covenant our faith and worship are on a sound foundation as God has gifted us the means of ensuring ease of communication and of developing a close intimacy with Him. Neither of these gifts were available in the First Covenant. In fact the First Covenant worship was impaired by a series of separations. The precious gifts of the New Covenant are the availability of:

- i) **An entrance** to the heavenly sanctuary, obtained for us by the perfect faithfulness of Christ, symbolised by the shedding of his blood. (Heb.10:19)
- ii) **A new way** into intimacy with God in the heavenly sanctuary. This way is the glorified human nature of Christ. (his flesh) (Heb. 10:20)
- iii) **The perfect guide** who is Jesus the High Priest of the heavenly sanctuary. (Heb.10:21)

As with all gifts we have three options a) to decline the offer of the gift b) to accept the gift but leave it unused c) to unwrap and use the gift. The next four verses (Heb.10:22-25) invite and encourage us to avail of these precious gifts by committing ourselves to develop our relationship with God.

Vanhoye points out that the Greek word translated as “confidence” in verse Hebrew 10:19, means more than being confident; it also indicates having the freedom or right to come and express oneself, similar to the right enjoyed by Greek city citizens to speak in the city assembly so as to express and defend one’s position. This right was not given to travellers of slaves.

The Christian has the freedom of the children of God; that is s/he has the full right of entrance into the divine sanctuary as none of the legal separations of the First Covenant remain.

In the worship of the First Covenant there was a series of separations;

- i) The people were separated from all worship activity of the priests as they could only stand in the courts of the temple and were not allowed to enter the temple building under pain of death.
- ii) The simple priests were also separated from the worshipping of the High Priest. They could only enter the ‘Holy’ division of the temple which was separated from the Holy of Holies by a curtain. While only the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies but only once a year.
- iii) The priest and the victim were also separate and distinct. The priest could not offer himself since he was neither worthy nor capable. Instead he offered an animal as victim though it was incapable of purifying or sanctifying him.
- iv) There was also a separation between the victim and God, since an animal cannot enter into communion with God.

What follows is theologising on how the offering of Jesus has overcome these separations and given us an entrance, a way and a perfect guide to the heavenly sanctuary.

Jesus has abolished the separation of the victim and God since He is a victim “without blemish” who is always pleasing to God because of his faithfulness in lovingly fulfilling the will of God. The separation between the victim and priest is likewise abolished, since Jesus is priest and offered himself as victim. God accepted both the priest and the victim. Finally Jesus abolished the separation between the people and the priest since Jesus’ life was offered in total solidarity with all of us.

Vanhoye says it was an act in which the priestly consecration conferred on him was simultaneously communicated to us. (Heb 5:9 & Heb.10:14)

## **Further Insights into Jesus, - the Entrance, the Way & Guide**

### **The Entrance**

The offering of Jesus gives us the possibility of full freedom of access to God the Father. This is a radically new situation not found in any previous dispensation. St. Paul says; *‘in him we are bold enough to approach God in complete confidence, through faith in him.’* (Ephesians 3:12)

Because of this new situation which the offering of Jesus brought about, the letter to the Hebrews calls the offering of Jesus ‘the blood of the new Covenant’; *‘...anyone who treats the blood of the Covenant as if it were not holy ... will receive a far greater punishment’.* (Heb.10:29) and *‘I pray that the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the Great Shepherd of the sheep, by the blood that sealed an eternal covenant’* (Heb. 13:20)

Another aspect of the blood of the new covenant is it establishes human communion with God and communion among the people. Just as our blood establishes a vital communion among the cells of our body, in a similar way, the blood of Christ establishes communion in the body of Christ of which we are members.

In order to enter the heavenly sanctuary we need more than the right of access; it is necessary to have a way to follow and a guide to precede us on that way.

### **The Way**

Christ is both of these; *he is the new and living way which he opened, for us through the curtain, that is his flesh'* (Heb.10:20) in Hebrews chapter nine we read; *'the Holy Spirit is making clear that the way into **the holy place** had not yet appeared as long as the old tabernacle was standing'* (Heb.9:8) In other words the way was unknown until it was revealed in the offering of Christ. His Paschal Mystery established and revealed that the way to the holy place, or heavenly sanctuary, is his glorified body.

This is a **new** creation and the Greek term used here to indicate new is also found in translations of the book of Ecclesiastes/Qoheleth where the author says; *"There is nothing **new** under the sun"*. (Qo. 1:9) Qoheleth is in effect saying we live in a cyclic world, it is always the same old things returning which give an impression of newness but in reality they are not new.

The letter to the Hebrews contradicts this view of Qoheleth; there is a wonderful newness and we are no longer limited to a cyclic world view. We have a new perspective opened for us by the resurrection of Christ. It is a living way since it the risen glorified Christ who is living par excellence! *'Christ being risen from the dead will never die again. Death has no longer any power over him'*. (Rom. 6:9)

This new and living way is Christ himself which is also expressed as *“the greater and more perfect tent”*. (Heb 9:11) through which Christ has entered into the divine sanctuary.

We need to develop an appreciation of the extraordinary newness brought into the world by the resurrection of Christ. It gives us a new mental outlook and approach to life. *‘Do not model your behaviour on the contemporary world, but let the renewing of your mind transform you, so that you may discern for yourselves what is the will of God, what is good acceptable and mature’*. (Rom. 12:2)

*‘Your mind must be renewed in spirit so that you could put on the New Man (Nature) that has been created on God’s principles, in the uprightness and holiness of the truth’* (Eph. 4:24) We are called into a new world with a new heart and a new spirit. And earnestly searching to do the will of God introduces us to this newness as the will of God is on-going rather than a fixed code.

Vanhoye quotes a few lines of a poem written by a friend, Fr. Rimaud;

*‘Make with your God the future that he gives you.  
With your God make the whole world more beautiful’.*

We must always strive to find Christian newness, which is like an inexhaustible spring continually created by God.

## **The Guide**

*‘And we have the high priest over all the sanctuary of God’* (Heb.10:21). This gives the first hint of a priest who is worthy of trust and so commands authority. This idea is also found in chapter three: *‘therefore, holy “brothers”, sharing in a heavenly calling, reflect on Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, who was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in [all] his house’*, (Heb.3;1-2) *‘Christ was faithful as a son placed over his house. We are his house if [only] we hold on to our confidence and*

*pride in hope*'. (Heb.3:6) Therefore we have a priest who guides us toward God so as to present us to him. The New Covenant is a person, the risen Christ. It is not an impersonal institution as the First Covenant was.

Our situation is a privileged one having as we do the right to enter the sanctuary the way and the guide. We lack nothing so the author begins an exhortation inviting us to be on our way using our freedom and other privileges. The freedom to access the sanctuary is in marked contrast with the First Covenant prohibition against approaching the sanctuary. Instead of a prohibition we are all invited to come near to God, to enter into intimate contact with him. The author of Hebrews speaks of the blood of Christ, the flesh of Christ as Jesus spoke of them in the discourse on the bread of life in chapter 6 of St. John's gospel. This plus the fact that the author was a travelling apostle, leads Vanhoye to suggest the probability that this magnificent homily, 'the letter to the Hebrews', was very probably composed as a homily to be preached in Christian assemblies that involved the celebration of the Eucharist.

The exhortation is not a moral exhortation but a theological one. The author names the three theological virtues; faith, hope and charity when he could have used the moral or cardinal virtues [prudence, courage/fortitude, temperance and justice]. His reason was that the cardinal virtues do not have a direct relationship with the New Covenant whereas the theological virtues are essential for the life of the New Covenant as they concern our relationships with God and with our brothers and sisters. These relationships will feature in the remainder of the homily. In chapter 11 the author will speak of faith; in chapter 12 of hope and its special endurance and in the final part of the homily he will speak of the relationship with God and love among our brothers and sisters.

There was a strong emphasis on faith in the Hebrew bible with many complaints by the prophets that the people were not living up to their faith. This led to an increasing preoccupation with demanding perfect observance of all the commandments and traditions. In the New Testament the emphasis is more on faith, hope and love with less insistence of legal observances.

## **Faith**

The first condition in the letter to the Hebrews for coming close to God is faith in God through the mediation of Christ. Hebrews criticises the Law as it is unable to offer either an effective sacrifice or a valid priesthood or an irrevocable covenant. St Paul also criticises the Law because it was not capable of justifying people through the forgiveness of sin.

The invitation to faith, in the letter to the Hebrews, is based on the efficacy of Christ's sacrifice and priesthood which ensures perfect mediation with God. *'So as we go in, let us be sincere in heart, and filled with faith, our hearts sprinkled and free from any trace of bad conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water'*. (Heb. 10:22)

As we are reminded in the Hebrew bible, the human heart can be devious. And we are gifted with a sincere and faithful heart through the internal effect of the rite of Baptism.

## **Hope**

And having obtained a clear conscience and sincere heart the author encourages us to persevere without wavering in a firm hope. Throughout the letter to the Hebrew hope is always linked inseparably with faith: even the author defines faith in relation to hope. *'Only faith can guarantee the blessings we hope for or prove the existence of realities that are unseen'*. (Heb.11:1) Faith is a way of possessing in anticipation the things we hope for. The heart of

matter is that what is revealed to us is *a person who is the way, the truth and the life*'. (John 14:6)

**While many precious gifts have already been communicated to us in the new covenant we look forward to a complete fullness, “the promised inheritance” of Hebrews chapter 9.** [*And so he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that all those who are called may receive the eternal inheritance he has promised, since he died to set them free from the violations committed under the first covenant*' (Heb. 9:15)] **and to enter “a heavenly homeland” of Hebrews chapter 11** [*but in fact they were longing for a better homeland, their heavenly homeland*'. (Heb.11:16)] **that is, into God's rest** [*and whoever enters into God's rest, rests from his own works as God did from his. Therefore let us strive to enter into that rest so that no one may fall after the same example of disobedience*'. (Heb. 4:10-11)].

From the moment that Christ reached his destiny, our hope is secure, as the author says in chapter 6. '*so that we who have found refuge in him may find strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us through those unchangeable things, since it is impossible for God to lie. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, sure and steadfast, which reaches inside behind the curtain, where Jesus our forerunner entered on our behalf, since he became a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek*'. (Heb. 6:18-20)

### **Christian Love**

The author literally invites us to “a paroxysm of love”. '*Let us be concerned for each other to stir up a response in love and good works*'. (Heb.10:24) Christian love has two dimensions, union with God and union with our brothers and sisters in generous service. And in the following verse the author makes a still more pressing



exhortation. *'And all the more as you see the day drawing near'*. (Heb.10:25).

The prophets spoke of that day and Jesus predicted this day. [*Jesus was leaving the Temple, and as he was going away his disciples came up to draw his attention to the Temple buildings. He said to them in reply, 'You see all these? In truth I tell you, not a single stone here will be left on another; everything will be pulled down'*]. (Mt. 24:1-2. Vanhoye says 'that day' refers most likely to the first uprising in Palestine about the year 65/66 C.E. which led to the Jewish War during which Jerusalem was destroyed and the Temple burned. Aware that the dreaded day was approaching the author of Hebrews uses it as a motive to urge Christians to be more fervent and active in charity. The era of the new covenant is a privileged one where communion with God and his people is made possible by Christ. So in prayer let us give thanks to the Lord for having put us in this privileged situation. Let us offer ourselves to him, so as to respond to his gifts with a great faith, with an indescribable hope and with a generous charity.