

Pentecost 19th Sunday “Twice Honored by God” Hebrews 2

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing unto You, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen!

In the epistle to the Hebrews, Paul has a twofold argument to make to his audience. The first two chapters are dedicated to the idea that Jesus, God incarnate in man, is superior to angels. We guess that his audience is a learned community of Jews, likely out of the priestly families. We say that because he never explains any of the rituals or obscure Old Testament references that he makes. He assumes the reader can follow that.

We also know that the Jewish communities at the time were heavily influenced by Neo-Platonism, a dualist approach to life in which the world in which we live, the physical world, is a shadow of the heavenly reality. This helped them make sense of the temple rituals, which were then seen to be reflections or shadows of the heavenly temple in which God was actually to be found.

This Neoplatonism tended to diminish the value of the physical world in which we live, and the humans who live in this world with us. In this view, the real life is found in heaven, not here. This idea can still be read in a great deal of Christian popular thinking and writing. Any time someone says that a person is better off now that he or she is dead, may in a small way subscribe to this Neo-Platonist idea. However, heaven's superiority is only truly realized at the point of resurrection, when, with a body restored to us, we are given to enjoy heaven's food and other physical delights. The idea that a disembodied spirit is somehow a superior existence to a bodily existence is quite alien to the Bible and seems to be what Paul is arguing against.

The people seem to want to be like the angels, but Paul reminds them that Jesus shed real live red blood on a physical wooden cross for flesh and blood like them. He shared with us in our physical nature and that renders our physical nature superior to the ethereal existence of the angels.

Yes, in one very real sense we are lower than they are. But since the incarnation, we are united to Christ physically, and that makes our physical bodies terribly important.

So do not pine for some “higher plane;” there is no higher plane. Jesus, in walking on this dusty earth, breathing our polluted air, dying our miserable death, has made this physical life that we live to be a very good thing.

Today’s particular lectionary provides an opportunity to connect the text with the overarching storyline of Scripture. At the heart of this reading is the quotation from Psalm 8 regarding how God made man a little lower than the angels, but crowned him with glory by giving him dominion over the works of his hands. The psalmist cannot help but wonder about how it is that God is so mindful of human creatures that He gives them (and give us) a role of privilege and responsibility within creation:

Psalm 8:4-6 and Hebrews 2:6-8 are nearly identical, saying,

“What is man, that you are mindful of him,
or the son of man, that you care for him?
⁷You made him for a little while lower than the angels;
you have crowned him with glory and honor,
⁸putting everything in subjection under his feet.”

Now, there has been debate as to whether this text refers to Adam and Eve or if it refers to Christ. The answer is probably yes to both. The language of Psalm 8 cannot help but evoke in the reader’s mind the imagery of Genesis 1:26–28 in which God gave Adam and Eve dominion over the earth, saying:

²⁶Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

²⁷ So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

²⁸ And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

At the same time, this Hebrews text clearly connects to Christ. So, how might we do justice to both at the same time? We can do so by setting them within the overarching story of Scripture. Psalm 8 brings the past and future together.

First, Psalm 8 echoes the language of Genesis and asserts the humbleness of humans as creatures of God. What is man that God is mindful of him? He is simply a creature along with all the other creatures. Yet God has made him a little lower than the angels and given us dominion. Such dominion was to reflect God’s own dominion over creation.

So how does God rule so that everything blooms and blossoms like in a well-watered garden (Isaiah 58:11)? God rules so that everything flourishes by His work. That includes the creation of animals, and humans and all things visible and invisible. That was God’s vision for his creation. And that creation became our responsibility as image bearers of God and His stewards over creation. That brings us to how the author to the Hebrews connects Psalm 8 to Christ.

Verse 8 of Hebrews 2 notes that we don’t see that dominion that God intended. Clearly something has gone wrong with the original intention. Humans did not rule for the benefit of creation. They did not want to rule as a reflection of God’s gracious rule. They wanted to rule and be in control as God himself. They wanted to rule for their own benefit. And as a result, everything has gone wrong.

Verse 9 then points us to Christ:

But we see Him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

Of interest is the language of Colossians 1:16 picked up here by speaking of the Son of God as the creator:

For by Christ all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.

Now we see a double honor by God. Not only did God honor us with the role of being responsible over creation, He now honors us by becoming a human creature so that in Him, that right dominion would be restored. The Creator enters his creation by becoming incarnate. The wording about Christ, that “for a little while” He is made lower than the angels, suggests the state of humiliation. Jesus voluntarily set aside the divine majesty that had been shared with his human nature in the incarnation so that He might suffer and die for us. And even more, that He might be raised up and seated at the right hand of God for us.

In this, as a man, the Creator becomes our brother. The man Jesus rules over all creation. As God, he had always ruled. But it is as man that he reacquires the proper dominion over creation as God had given it to Adam and Eve. He does so as one of us, as our brother. In this we see the double honor God has bestowed upon us: (1) Honored by God with the privilege of looking after his creation, (2) Honored by Christ’s incarnation and dominion.

We have vivid language and imagery of the “kinship” Christ restores with us. It says, He brings many “sons’ to glory. That is why He is not ashamed to call them “brothers.” Since the “children” share in “flesh and blood”, He Himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death He might destroy the one who has the power over death, that is, the devil. And lastly, Heb 2:16 tells us, “For surely it is not angels He helps, but He helps the offspring of Abraham.”

Jesus serves as a merciful and faithful high priest who provides God's pardon to his people and shares His own holiness with them. He therefore appeals to us as members of His holy people having royal status, as it says in 1 Peter 4:9,

“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

Since we are now brothers and sisters of Jesus and members of God's family, we need not be ashamed of ourselves as insignificant people in a society that is hostile to us and our aspirations. Just as the world that God created was ruled by Adam as the father of humanity, so the world to come would also be ruled by a “man” rather than by the angels.

So, what does this mean to us, my brothers and sisters? It means that we are adopted into God's royal family by Word and Sacrament. In the water and the Word of Holy Baptism, God washes away our sins and gives us the righteousness of Jesus as we become children of the heavenly Father, brothers and sisters of Christ and share in His righteousness. In Baptism, “all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death. We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in the newness of life.”

(Romans 6:3-4)

This newness of life, this re-birth, means that although we still live in a fallen world and wear fallen flesh, our sins have all been paid for and we have been credited with the righteousness of Jesus. Jesus, the One who came to set the captives free, has freed us from the chains of sin and death.

And the promises of God release us from all guilt and shame. In daily confession and repentance, our God is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. This promise is for you. Freed from these chains, you are now free to also forgive and love your neighbor.

And may the Love of God and the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit abide in you to life everlasting. Amen!