

Hebrews 4:12-16**Boldly approaching the throne of grace**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

One of the most interesting aspects of our modern digital world is just how much information some people are willing to share with complete strangers. Gone are the days when youthful antics were kept hidden from your parents and the authorities. Now people put everything on social media for the whole world to see, seemingly with no shame. But that's not entirely true. Everyone still keeps certain things hidden, still presents a certain image of themselves to the world, whether it's online or in person. We do not cope well with having our souls laid bare.

It can be a bit confronting, then, when our second bible today reading reminds us that before God, "no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account." (Hebrews 4:13, NRSV)

God knows all and sees all. There is no option to conceal our actions or our thoughts from God. This serves as a warning to us, but it's more than just that. The image given is that of a two-edged sword that sounds more like a supernatural scalpel, able to cut along the fine lines between joints and marrow, soul and spirit, and even to judge the thoughts and intentions of our hearts. This recognises that in ordinary life people go along with much that is hidden, like the internal workings of the body and mind beneath the skin. Into this, we have the activity of God's Word like a form of precision surgery. The sharp instrument is used with skill in order to open things up in a manner that the surgeon can see. The goal of surgical treatment can be bringing things to light so that they can be treated and thus improve the life of the patient. That is what the Word of God is designed to do to us as well. God opens our lives in order to treat them, to cleanse them of sin, and to restore us to live as he first designed us to live. In this, the cutting is necessary to receive the gift of healing.

Then we jump into a completely different picture – that of the high priest. Under the old covenant, the high priest was primarily responsible for the temple sacrifices. They were the ones who brought offerings to God on behalf of the people of Israel, making atonement for their sins. Their role wasn't really among the people bringing consolation or counsel, but as the people's representative before God. But Jesus is said to be a great high priest who can indeed sympathise with us. This is a different kind of high priest. The role is given a new definition with Jesus.

Jesus understands human vulnerability since he has experienced it. And Jesus' response to human vulnerability is one of grace, which brings healing. And he does this by offering the most effective single sacrifice for sin ever made. His intercession and sacrifice for us on the cross opened the way not just into an earthly temple dedicated to God, but into the eternal holy place, into God's heavenly realm. Because of this, the tone of the earlier verses in this passage dramatically shifts to one of confidence and boldness. The warning that we are laid bare, and perhaps the associated fear of sin and guilt being discovered, is replaced with a welcoming embrace.

We are invited to approach the throne of grace with boldness. We sinful human beings who constantly and repeatedly disobey God's good and perfect will are invited to boldly enter the presence of a Holy God. And we are assured of receiving all the help we may need. And God certainly knows that we need it. After all, God knows all and sees all, as we have just been reminded. But Jesus our great high priest intercedes for us.

Because of his sacrificial death on the cross for us, we are able to enter God's holy presence. Because Jesus has washed us clean with the shedding of his blood, we can have confidence to approach an almighty God. And Jesus does this for us while truly knowing us. Though Jesus reigns at the right hand of the Father, he understands our human frailty. We get this great double negative: "we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses." (Hebrews 4:15, NRSV)

Whatever trial faces us, Jesus has faced that test as well. He faced the worst of it in the hostility, pain, and degradation of his journey to the cross. Jesus has certainly experienced all the trials of being human. When the leaders of the early church were composing what we now call the Nicene Creed they chose quite deliberate wording, saying that Jesus was, "incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human." This had been a point of contention, with some saying that Jesus just appeared to be human, but wasn't really. But scripture teaches and we confess that he is true God and true man.

Knowing that the powerful eternal Son of God is at the same time the incarnate Son who knows our lot gives us new courage. However vulnerable we may be before God, we can approach the heavenly throne boldly, knowing we come to a throne of grace where Jesus offers help to those who are sorely tested.

In practice, we do this every time we gather for worship. Right up front, we confess our sins and our need for forgiveness. We approach God and ask, "for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us". At this moment we may well be thinking of specific sins we have committed. Perhaps as you walked into church this morning you remembered some failure of yours during the week. Maybe as I read today's gospel reading you realised how much you look to earthly riches for security, instead of trusting in God alone. That is God's Word at work in you. That's the two-edged sword laying bare your sin and guilt.

I then get the great privilege of declaring forgiveness on behalf of Jesus, and of giving you the body and blood of Jesus for the forgiveness of all your sin. We boldly approach the throne of grace and we do receive exactly the help we need. We do this together as a congregation in Sunday worship, but you do also have the option of doing this individually. It's not a very common practice in our church, but you can meet with me to hear God's words of forgiveness for you specifically and individually.

Either way, we are blessed to be able to approach the throne of grace on account of Jesus. And we honour this by standing firm in our profession of faith. We honour this by a life of witness, by serving our neighbour in their time of need, by seeking good and not evil, and by always turning to Jesus whenever we realise that we cannot handle it on our own. So may you know that God's heavenly throne room is always open to you through Jesus the Son. May you turn to God for help in time of need, trusting in his grace and mercy. And may you rejoice in the forgiveness we have in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.