One of the privileges of being Dean of Coventry is that I regularly get an invitation to one of the Queen’s garden parties. It’s rather a smart invitation – embossed and all that. Last year, we got our invitation and I replied saying yes but we’re getting rather blasé. Something came up and we just didn’t go. I doubt whether Her majesty noticed but actually – that was the same as refusing – or worse – because it prevented someone else going instead.

As we come to the end of the letter to the Hebrews, our writer issues a challenge to all Christians – chapter 12v25:

“See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking; for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven!”

Through this series in Hebrews, our author has been stressing that Jesus is best – better than angels, Moses, Melchizidek and anyone else that you care to mention. As he comes towards the end of his letter, he continues to underline how Christians are the most privileged of people:

We have been forgiven, set free, have peace with God and can come into his presence at any time, invited to the best party of all time – don’t refuse it.

True the old covenant mountain was tangible – v18 and visible – v19 whilst the new covenant Mt Zion is heavenly and therefore invisible – v22

But still – how much better the Christian heritage – not a lonely mountain but a city with innumerable angels in joyful assembly – v22 and Jesus himself – v24.

No wonder that he says – v25 “See to it that you do not refuse the one who is speaking”

The Christians to whom Hebrews was written had faith but their faith was flagging and their spirit faint. They were discouraged by the trials and afflictions they faced. Once they had gladly accepted the invitation, displayed on their mantle piece but now, they were in danger of neglecting it, not turning up – refusing it in effect!

Every generation of God’s church since has known that pressure to go back. It’s ok here at cathedral Praise on Sunday evening but tomorrow morning, the pressure rises as you go back to work and a boss who ridicules your faith, to college and tutors who have no time for Christ.

Well Hebrews ends with some practical tips – some pointers as to how to keep living in Kingdom lifestyle

1. Peace – v14 – “Pursue peace with everyone”

In Hebrew thought, shalom peace is intensely positive.
It’s not freedom from trouble.
It is everything that makes for a person’s highest good.
In particular “peace” means right relationships between people – a state where hatred was banished and each person positively wishes his neighbour’s good

Cf – the greatest commandment

Are you in that kind of peace with all?
Do you want the best for your neighbour – or are you storing up invectives because he insists on parking outside your home?
Are you at peace with your work colleagues or are you anxious to keep them in their place?

Are you at peace with all your fellow Christians at church?
As a pastor, I sometimes become aware of disputes within the body of Christ.
That’s OK. Like most families, we are most easily hurt or irritated by those closest to us – and vice versa.

That sort of thing will happen – but it mustn’t be allowed to continue.
Otherwise it turns to bitterness – v15 – an acid swilling inside that will spill over sooner or later.

Is there someone who has upset you?
You need to forgive and make peace.
Oh yes, I know you’re in the right.
That should make it easier!
Easier to take the initiative – write a letter, send an email, make a telephone call, say a word – “Do not refuse him who speaks”

2. Purity – v14 - “pursue peace with everyone and the holiness without which no-one will see the Lord”

Like peace, purity involves both a negative side and a positive.

Negatively, we must keep ourselves from defilement – in particular from sexual immorality – v16.
That is never easy – but in our culture that shouts sex at every opportunity – it’s particularly hard.

Be practical – Christian women – don’t wear provocative clothing. We know that you know that we men find it difficult not to look at certain parts of your bodies so don’t make it more difficult for us by drawing attention to them.
And Christian men – watch your language – don’t flirt unhelpfully.

Positively, we must all be consecrated to God.

What a contrast to Esau who swopped his spiritual blessing for material gain – v16+17.

He received all that this world could give and became a prince – but he never got back his spiritual leadership!

Are you under pressure this evening? Tempted hard in this area. See to it that you don’t refuse God who speaks

3. Praise – v28+29

“Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; 29 for indeed our God is a consuming fire.”

We live today in a world where what seems most secure one day can be utterly shaken the next – banks and pensions, nations and systems, earth and heaven – v27

But some things cannot be shaken – God’s word, His love, His kingdom – v28

If we are under pressure to doubt or go back to old ways tonight, nothing will keep us more than to respond with thanksgiving and worship. That’s why gathering together on Sundays is not an optional extra – it’s vital for our Christian lives.

If you could speak to God this evening – what would be top of your agenda? Complaint? – about your situation, your unanswered prayers, your hurts or on behalf of a friend or relative.
Fling such stuff aside and instead – praise him! Concentrate on the hope of glory – the heavenly Jerusalem. Think of Jesus, crowned with glory, apostle and high priest, author and perfector of faith – and with thankful hearts – praise and worship him – and do so with reverence and awe for “our God is a consuming fire” - v29

Peace, purity, praise and I have one more sweet P in my Posie tonight – I’d call it:

4. **“Practical love”** – 13v1 – “Let mutual love continue.”

Two ways of showing practical love

1. **Hospitality** – v2 – “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” In other words – don’t just have your friends round for food and drink – invite the stranger, the foreigner, the poor: who knows – you may be entertaining an angel unawares!

2. **Remember the prisoner** – v3 - “Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured”

Today is prisoner’s Sunday. Of course, many deserve to be there but God still loves them and so should we. Praise God for Alpha in 80% of our prisons. Some may be called to be involved, to help those trying to re-establish their lives afterwards. God’s heart is for them.

When you do go to the Queen’s garden party, there’s quite a mixture of people – clergy dressed up in frock costs, soldiers in uniform, ladies in smart hats and struggling with high heels in the grass – but all look very respectable.

Jesus party at the end will be bigger by far and include all sorts of those whom the world consider at the bottom of the heap – prisoners, thieves, tramps, foreigners – all there because of the amazing grace of God – freely forgiven because of Jesus.

See to it that you’re there.

“Do not refuse”

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