

# ENTRANCE INTO THE HEAVENLY SANCTUARY

## HEBREWS 10:19-25

Bible Study for the LCA General Convention  
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Like the people addressed in the letter to the Hebrews, we face a crisis of confidence. As a Church we are all too easily unnerved by the difficulties before us, like the shortfall of the budget and our lack of growth, the challenge of the Pentecostal movement and the effects of social decay, the pressure for liturgical change and the need for liturgical stability. No wonder then that there is in our circles a mood of uncertainty and discouragement, if not a sense of pessimism and paralysis. How can we mobilize ourselves to launch out in new directions, when we barely have the resources to maintain our church as an institution? Perhaps it would be best to cut back and wait for the worst to happen. So the loss of institutional confidence can all too readily bring on institutional paralysis.

Yet such a loss of institutional self-confidence could in the long run be all for the best, for we may, in fact, have derived our confidence too much from illusions of influence and delusions of self-sufficiency. Such disillusionment may indeed be the presupposition for renewed confidence and healthy growth. It may make us receptive to the book of Hebrews which was written as a letter of encouragement to a spiritually discouraged Church (Heb 13:22).

The writer of this letter counters the pessimism and disillusionment of his people in a surprising way. Like an auditor who reorganizes an almost bankrupt business, he gets his people to exercise a kind of spiritual audit. In themselves they may be spiritually bankrupt, but in their worship they have supernatural resources at their disposal. Without knowing it they are, in fact, sitting on a proverbial gold mine. They have access to Christ and his entire estate; all his assets are their assets. With that kind of backing there is no room for uncertainty about the present or for pessimism about the future. They should rather realize their assets and use them productively.

Let's then examine what Hebrews 10:19-25 has to say about the privilege of divine worship and its relevance for us as a Church. Our study falls into two main parts. The first deals with the supernatural assets, credited to us in Christ and received in our worship, while the second considers how we can use these assets productively for ourselves and others.

Here is what it says:

**Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and**

**since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.**

## **1. What assets do we have at our disposal in the divine service?**

### **a. We have open access to the presence of the Father in the heavenly sanctuary (10:19).**

Access to power is the key to power. Hence lobbyists in Canberra cultivate members of Federal Cabinet to gain benefits for their clients. Access to wealth is wealth. Those people who are closest to the Prime Minister most influence the allocation of resources by Federal Government. Think too of your credit card or your credit rating! The right of access to your money is therefore always restricted to prevent it from falling into the wrong hands.

Access to the living God and his grace is also severely restricted. Think of the tabernacle, God's place of residence with his people in the Old Testament. Nobody could enter the Holy Place except the priests as they conducted daily worship for the people of Israel; only the High Priest was allowed to enter God's presence in the Holy of Holies once a year on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16). The same goes for the new covenant. By right only one person has the privilege of unrestricted entry into the Father's presence, the right of open access to him; that person is Jesus. Now the wonder of Christ's work is that he has extended his own right of access to us by his death, resurrection and ascension. That's what the Greek word means which is translated in the NRSV as 'confidence'. It means freedom of speech, freedom to address a person in power, the right of access, boldness in approaching a person in power (cf. Eph 3:12; Heb 3:6; 4:16; 10:35). We have the right of open access to the presence of God the Father in heaven itself. This authorization of entry does not depend on the fulfillment of any requirement or the accomplishment of any achievement by us. It is Christ's arrangement for us.

Complete confidence in another is very rare because unrestricted access to anybody is also seldom given. We therefore automatically assume that all rights of access have some necessary limitations. If I am invited to your house for dinner, I don't stay overnight. I exercise tact in my conversation with my best friends, because I know that for them certain topics are too touchy to mention. I wouldn't strain the generosity of my wife by making excessive demands on her.

My students have access to me at the seminary but not at home. Only my wife has the right of sexual access to me. The access that we have to our heavenly Father is not restricted in any of these ways. We have complete freedom to approach him where and when we will not by ourselves but together with Jesus. We have complete freedom of speech in Jesus. We can be sure that God the Father does not reserve himself from us or withhold any of his promised gifts.

Just think of it! In the divine service we have Christ's own right of open, unrestricted access to the heavenly King. We may approach him as if we were Jesus; we may come to him with the assurance that he will treat us just as he treats his own dear Son. In the Lord's Supper Jesus gives us his own flesh and blood as our physical way into the heavenly sanctuary. No curtain now excludes us from the Father's presence as it shut off the Israelites from the Holy of Holies at the tabernacle. The curtain has been replaced by Christ's flesh. His flesh now puts us physically in touch with God. By his body and blood Jesus comes to us where we are and ushers us into the very presence of the living God. As Luther said, he is our ferryman; he acts as our Jacob's ladder, our living, life-giving bridge between heaven and earth. Through him we override the restrictions of time and space and matter, so that we earthlings can already now join with the angels and saints in their worship around God's throne (Heb 12:22-24). By the presence of the risen Lord and by the gift of his body and blood in our worship we now have access to heaven here on earth in the divine service.

Worship then is a supernatural mystery based on the work of Jesus in arranging our access to his Father's presence. Its operation does not depend on our decision to meet together but on God's call for us to join with Jesus in sharing his divine life as God's Son. That is our heavenly vocation (Heb 3:1, 14)!

**b. We have Jesus as our great Priest and Liturgist in the Divine Service (10:21).**

The right of access would not in itself encourage us to approach the living God fearlessly and confidently in worship. Even if I had a letter from the Prime Minister inviting me to visit him whenever I came to Canberra, I would not be game to drop in on him, unless somebody close to him, a friend or relative of mine, would arrange my meeting with him. It's the same too with God. We need somebody close to him to arrange our meeting with him, otherwise our right of access would be much like an uncashed cheque. We have such a person in Jesus who is not only close to our heavenly Father, but also close to us. He knows our needs as well as God's requirements (Heb 2:17). So as the priest in charge of God's house (Heb 10:21; cf. 3:6), his temple, the church, he mediates between the Father and us (Heb 12:24).

In the Old Testament the priests led the worship of God's people. Under God's direction and supervision they arranged the meeting between God and his people

at the temple. They were responsible for the correct administration of God's grace and blessing to his people in their worship. By virtue of their privileged position with God the priests performed a double work of mediation. On the one hand, they brought the people and their needs to God as their representatives by offering sacrifices and prayers for them. On the other hand, they brought God and his grace to the people as his representative by announcing his acceptance and blessing to them.

Jesus is our high priest (Heb 2:17; 3:1,2; 4:14,15; 5:10; 6:20; 7:21,24; 8:1; 9:11; 10:21), our liturgist in the heavenly sanctuary (Heb 8:2, 6) who officiates on behalf of us (Heb 9:24). Since Jesus leads our worship in God's house, we can be sure of getting a favourable reception from his heavenly Father (Heb 4:14-16). By his death and resurrection he arranged the worship of the new covenant which he himself conducts. He is our chief celebrant; the success of our worship depends on him, and not on us. As the priest in charge of our worship he mediates between God and us. As our representative he intercedes for us and brings us to God (Heb 7:25). He takes our prayers and makes them his own. We may therefore stand before God in the shoes of Jesus and pray in his name. As God's representative, he brings the Father and his help to us in our worship (4:16). Through the declaration of absolution and the proclamation of the Gospel, through the gift of his own body and blood and the pronouncement of blessing, he offers the mercy and grace of God to us.

So the fruitfulness of our worship does not depend on the spiritual performance of either pastor or congregation, but on the presence and activity of Jesus as our great priest in the Church. We come to God the Father and present our offerings to him *through* Jesus (7:25; 13:15). Through Jesus we offer acceptable service, worship that pleases him (Heb 12:28; 13:16, 21).

### **c. We have the gift of a good conscience (10:22).**

Besides our right of access to God the Father and Jesus as our priest to arrange that access, we have one further final asset. That asset is the gift of a good conscience through the operation of the Triune God in our baptism.

We human beings can ever be entirely comfortable by ourselves with God, just as a criminal on the run can never be at ease in the presence of a policeman. We all know that we have defied God in many ways; we all know that we are not as we should be. We therefore feel awkward and unclean in God's presence; we rightly expect criticism and condemnation from him. Our guilty conscience distorts our perception of him by turning everything he says into evidence of his disapproval of us. So nothing good can come to us from our worship unless we are somehow rid of our guilty conscience. Only the pure in heart, those who are holy, ever see God (Matt 5:8; Heb12:14).

The writer to the Hebrews reminds us that we have been cleansed and sanctified by God himself in our baptism. We share Christ's purity and holiness. Baptism qualifies us for admission to God's presence. Unlike the priests in the Old Testament whose bodies were cleansed and sanctified for admission to God's presence, our hearts have also been made clean and holy by Jesus. We are entirely pure and blameless before God; we are holy in body and soul in Jesus. He has taken upon himself all our impurity. We have, as it were, borrowed his purity and holiness so that we can now use them as if they were our very own. Through him we have a clear conscience.

We are totally and completely acceptable to God in every way. God does not reject any part of us; he accepts the whole of us for life with him, for through baptism we have been made physically, mentally and spiritually whole. All this comes from Jesus who has purified us and who keeps us pure. We therefore come to God as forgiven sinners. That's why we begin our worship with the confession of sins, for only as long as we continue to borrow Christ's purity and holiness can we escape condemnation and possess the good conscience we need to receive the promised benefits from God in our worship (Heb 9:14).

So then, the quality of our worship does not depend on our enthusiasm, which is often merely the dead work of a guilty conscience. It depends on our possession of a good conscience through the assurance of divine pardon. Without a good conscience and the full assurance of faith that comes from a clear conscience we cannot receive God's grace and share in his holiness, no matter how impressive and moving our worship may otherwise be.

## **2. How can we use the assets we have in the divine service?**

Since assets are useless unless they are used, the author of Hebrews next urges us to make use of our spiritual assets in three ways, as beggars, optimists and stirrers to build up our faith and hope and love.

### **a. We may approach God the Father in the full assurance of faith (10:22).**

Our biggest problem is that we don't use the assets we have in worship for the work of our church. We have the right of unrestricted access to God and his heavenly riches. We are like a beggar who has inherited the estate of a millionaire but never claimed his inheritance. You would expect that if we were fair dinkum about justification by grace and our faith in the inexhaustible generosity of the Triune God, we would be, above all else, a praying church. But I'm afraid we aren't noted for that; at least I don't think we are.

Let me mention four areas of concern in this regard. First, we are all very ready to criticize and condemn our leaders for their personal, administrative, and doctrinal shortcomings. Yet little, or nothing, is ever accomplished by such criticism and

condemnation. It doesn't turn them into the super-people we expect them to be. Wouldn't it be better if we prayed for them instead? Secondly, we worry ourselves sick by the mounting problems in our society that threaten our future stability and prosperity. We therefore support all kinds of crusades against evil and corruption, even though they usually only tackle the symptoms of the sickness. Wouldn't we, in fact, accomplish much more if we, in **the Prayer of the Church**, made specific supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings for all people and especially those in positions of responsibility (cf. 1 Tim 2:1-6)? Thirdly, we are rightly dismayed at the shortfall in the budget of the LCA and at the threat of cutbacks to our program. Instead of first devising strategies to drum up the cash required, shouldn't we first commit the matter to him in prayer? Fourthly, we are demoralized by the loss of members and the lack of growth in the LCA. And so we either resign ourselves to gradual extinction or else clutch at ready-made programs for church growth that never seem to have any lasting effect. But we neglect the obvious thing; we don't pray for each other and the people in our communities. Shouldn't we first pray people back into God's family before we go out to gather them in?

You see, prayer is faith in action. In corporate prayer the church most obviously confesses and exercises its faith in God. The more assured we are in faith, the more confident we will be in prayer. Take the stories of the people who came to ask Jesus for healing in the Gospels! They had faith in Jesus. That's why Jesus praised them and only them for their faith. Little faith leads to reluctant and fainthearted prayer, while full faith leads to bold and whole-hearted prayer. Through prayer we acknowledge that we are spiritual beggars totally dependent on God's charity for our livelihood. Through prayer we actually live by faith in God's grace and work faithfully with him in the administration of that grace. The work of the Church then must be based on prayer, if it is to be God's work.

Let's then as a Church shake off our illusions of self-sufficiency; let's acknowledge our inability to carry the mission of God by ourselves, and approach the Father with the full assurance of faith. He is waiting for us to pray and is eager to lavish his gifts upon us. We can then pray confidently and expectantly, because he has commanded us to pray and has promised to hear us.

#### **b. We may hold fast our confession of hope (10:23).**

In the history of the world, as in human lives, periods of optimism usually alternate with periods of pessimism, as people either overestimate their abilities or their difficulties. The same too happens in the Church. It seems to me that we have entered such a period of pessimism in the history of the LCA. That in itself would give us little cause for alarm, if it were merely a healthy skepticism about our supposed achievements. But I believe that it goes much deeper than that. Our pessimism betrays a loss of hope in Christ and his promises. We no longer expect

him to do great things for us. Or do we?

It is true that we do have every reason to be pessimistic about ourselves and our own abilities. But we don't have any warrant to be pessimistic about Christ and his Church. Our hope depends on his mission for us which has given us a new heavenly basis for our life and work as disciples of Christ. By faith we share in Christ (Heb 3:14) and have the heavenly gift of the Holy Spirit (Heb 6:4). Jesus builds his Church on himself and his fellowship with his heavenly Father. The Church is his supernatural project. Our future as Christians is guaranteed by him and not by us.

Calvin once remarked that the history of the Church consisted of a series of resurrections from the dead. At the point where human beings discover their spiritual bankruptcy and experience the apparent triumph of evil, the grace of God often triumphs most powerfully and produces its greatest achievements. Think of the death of Jesus! Think of the amazing growth of the Chinese Church in the last two decades after its apparent extinction during the Cultural Revolution! God can yet accomplish great things with the LCA, for he remains faithful to his Church and always keeps his promises. But there is one proviso for this: our faithfulness in worship and our dependence on his promises.

We claim to be a confessional Church, and rightly so. Yet it is not enough for us just to think, talk and theorize about our confession; we need to live by it and enact its fullness in our worship; we need to practise it by acknowledging God's gracious presence and by praising him for his goodness with hearts and hands and voices (Heb 13:15). For apart from his gracious presence with us in our worship and our dependence on his grace, we have no cause for optimism about our Church.

As a confessional Church we called to be a community of praise. In praise we turn away from our apparent successes or failures; we concentrate, instead, on God and his great achievements. This praise of God is based upon his promises rather than on our personal experiences. His promises show us what we may hope for from him; they give us a glimpse of his amazing vision for us. Let's then become optimistic visionaries who expect the fulfillment of all God's promises for us. Let's hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for only as long as our hope is set with God in heaven can we accomplish his mission here on earth.

**c. We may stir up one another to love and good works (Heb 10:25).**

The right of unrestricted access to God and the reception of his gifts in the divine service are meant to stir us up to act provocatively with each other. They are meant to provoke us to become provocative people, holy stirrers. It is true that we don't usually like stirrers. By their criticism and ridicule of us they irritate and

annoy us so that we, in turn, stir them. Their hostility to us provokes our hostility to them. Well, Hebrews 10:25 speaks of a much more positive kind of stirring; we are urged to provoke each other with love and good works, for love provokes love, just as generosity provokes generosity. We are to stir up and so bring out the best in each other. God knows that we could do with many more stirrers like that.

This provocation of each other comes from God's provocation of us in our worship. There he lavishes himself upon us; there he demonstrates his love for us, tangibly, and does good works for us. Through Christ he makes us extraordinary people, saints, his royal children, and aims to achieve something extraordinary through us. As members of his royal family we are no longer ordinary people; we are princes and princesses who are loved and privileged beyond conception. We live on this world as citizens of heaven. Despite appearances to the contrary, Christ is among us and in us with all his gifts and graces. We are all saints who share in God's holiness and will, one day, share in his glory. Since we are all members of Christ's body, he demonstrates his love to us and offers his help to us through each other. So whenever we meet together in worship we build up each other in love and anticipate our eventual glorification with Jesus on the Last Day.

We find it hard to believe in our ascribed status and worth as children of God; so while we can never forget that we remain sinners while we live here on earth, we need to be constantly reminded that we really do belong to the communion of saints. We find it far easier to recognize the spiritual gifts of others than our own giftedness. That's what makes the attendance of public worship so necessary for all of us. We need to affirm and build each other up as saints. We need to be activated and energized spiritually by our contact with each other. More correctly, we need to let Christ enrich and empower us through our fellow Christians. We commit spiritual suicide by isolating ourselves from the body of Christ. If we withdraw from our congregation we lose our power and become inactive members; we drift away from Christ and lose our place in heavenly Jerusalem. And our congregation will be the poorer for our absence.

In the divine service we meet together as a kind of Saints Anonymous for mutual encouragement and support. And that's far more important for us than we usually allow. Just as your absence from worship demonstrates your disregard of me as your brother in Christ, so your attendance of worship together with me in our worship proves your love for me in a very practical, concrete way. There your recognition of me as a fellow saint, despite my sins and shortcomings, provokes me to appreciate you and your contribution to my spiritual welfare. So, by meeting together in God's presence we encourage each other, as we anticipate the glory to come and rehearse for eternal life with God.

Would that we had more stirrers like that in our church! As people who have access to God's goodness and love in our worship, we should be provocative

lovers and do-gooders. Just imagine what our congregations would be like if we stirred each other up to act as saints rather than as sinners. How magnetic and attractive our congregations would be if we studiously regarded each other only as God regards us! Let's then do our level best to provoke one another to love and good works; let's do this without showing off or putting others down.

### **3. Conclusion**

An electric light globe cannot shine unless it remains connected with a source of power. A tap cannot gush with water unless it receives water from a reservoir. A branch cannot produce fruit unless it is kept alive and nourished by a tree. So the church cannot do the work of God, unless in its worship it shares in God's life and draws on his power to nourish its faith, hope and love. We have been chosen to share in the divine life of God so that he can use us to share his life with others. Yet in our desire to carry out our mission we must never short-circuit God's work by neglecting or diminishing our worship.

Christians have often been accused of being too heavenly-minded to be of any earthly use. I would hold that unless we remain heavenly-minded and derive our life and strength from God himself in our worship we will ultimately be of no earthly use at all.