Confident in Christ

Text: Hebrews 10:19-25

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** Leviticus 16:29-34; Hebrews 10:19-25

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 145, 176, 279, 32, 313, 523

Series: Occasional (reaffirmation of faith and baptisms)

Theme: The confidence of believers in the finished work of Christ enables them to freely and boldly approach God, to openly confess their faith publicly and to actively encourage others as they meet together in congregational worship.

Proposition: Brothers and sisters, because Christ has opened up the way for us to come to God, let us do so with boldness, openly and freely confessing our faith with confidence and encouraging one another to actively live out our faith as we meet together to worship the Lord.

**Introduction**

We often hear today about ‘fake news’: that is false or misleading information which is presented as being true. It can be difficult to know at times whether a report you hear is accurate or not. Perhaps it is actually a hoax, a conspiracy theory, or a sneaky attempt to get you to buy some dubious product, or to vote for a certain political candidate, or to be convinced of the teachings of some cult or religion.

‘Fake news’ might be a new term, but it describes what has taken place throughout almost all the history of mankind…the wilful spreading of misleading or false information. For example, did you know that fake news is reported near the end of Matthew’s gospel, after his account of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead? At that time, the Jewish chief priests and elders gave money to the soldiers who had guarded the tomb where the dead body of Jesus had been placed. Here is the false report they were bribed to disseminate with the promise of personal protection from any trouble they might get into with their superior officer. ‘Tell people’, said the priests and elders to the soldiers, that the disciples of Jesus ‘*came by night and stole him away while we were asleep*’ (Matt 28:13). Matthew records that ‘they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day’ (Matt 28:15). Fake news was spread back then so that people wouldn’t believe that Jesus Christ is alive. One of the consequences of fake news is an undermining of people’s confidence that they can ever really know the certain truth about anything.

Blaise Pascal, the 17th century philosopher, theologian and mathematician, came up with an idea that is now called ‘Pascal’s wager’. Pascal argued that a rational person should live as though God exists and seek to believe in God. If God does not actually exist, he mused, such a person will have only a finite loss (some pleasures, luxury, etc.), whereas if God does exist, they stand to receive infinite gains (eternal life) and avoid infinite losses (eternal separation from God). Pascal’s approach to belief in God is a mathematical idea which appeals to people who don’t mind living with fundamental uncertainty about their standing with God

This morning we are going to hear true news from a section of the letter to the Hebrews, one of the 66 books which make up the Bible. Our focus will be on the words in Hebrews 10:19-25. In these words the main idea is the confidence that it is possible to have in the truth about Jesus Christ and the effect of that certainty on how we approach God, how we speak publicly and how we influence others we meet together with. This sermon is divided into three sections as follows:

1. Confident to enter in
2. Confident to confess
3. Confident to encourage
4. **Confident to enter in**

In our small, relatively relaxed country, our Prime Minister is quite accessible when she is out on official visits around the country or even just on holiday with her family. However, to have an official meeting with her, you would no doubt need to attempt to make an appointment and you may not necessarily get an audience with her. Rulers, even of parliamentary democracies like our own, are not freely accessible to us at all times, much less kings of ancient kingdoms.

The greatest ruler of all is God Himself, who created all things and who is almighty in power and authority over this universe. He is ‘set apart’ from all that He has made. That is to say He is holy. When He led the Israelites out of their slavery in Egypt through His servant Moses, He had them camp at the foot of Mount Sinai in the desert. Moses then brought the people out to meet God and they stood at the foot of the mountain. That was as close as they could get to Him because God set limits on their access to Him. He warned the people through Moses that if they broke through the ‘safety barrier’ at the base of the mountain then he would break out against them (Ex 19:22). His presence was at the top of the mountain which was wrapped in smoke and fire and which trembled greatly (Ex 19:18). God is holy and unholy people cannot just ‘bowl up’ to meet with Him and expect to live. Only Moses and Aaron went up the holy mountain to meet God. This was by special invitation only (Ex 19:24).

Some people think that God today is not like He was back in ancient times, or that Christians somehow worship a different God now to the Living God revealed in the Old Testament. Later in his letter to the Hebrews, the divinely inspired author writes: “*Let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire*” (Heb 12:28b-29). God has not changed. He is holy and for the unholy to approach Him is deadly for them.

After God met with Moses on Mount Sinai, He instructed the Israelites to make a ‘tent of meeting’ called the Tabernacle where His presence would dwell within the inner sanctuary which was called the Holy Place. When the Israelites settled in the land which God had promised to give them, a permanent Temple was constructed in Jerusalem which replaced the Tabernacle. God’s presence dwelt within the Temple in the inner sanctuary called the ‘Holy of Holies’. As we heard from the reading earlier from Leviticus 16, only the high priest could enter into the place of God’s dwelling and then only after careful ritual cleansing and the offering up of animal sacrifices. This special, very restricted, access was only possible on one day of the year: the Day of Atonement. This day is known to Jews as ‘Yom Kippur’ and is the holiest day of the year in Judaism.

The first readers of the letter to the Hebrews were Jewish Christians who had been scattered away from their homeland; likely by the persecution of Christians under Roman Emperor Nero in AD 64. In the earlier chapters of his letter, the writer to the Hebrews has been reminding these Jewish Christians that Jesus Christ is the full and final sacrifice who enables people to have free access into God’s holy presence. This is something the Old Testament Jews never had.

Jesus Christ is the person who has made ‘atonement’ by providing Himself as a substitute in the place of many others. The word ‘atonement’ means removing the barrier which sin creates between God and a person or people. The consuming fire of God’s perfectly good, righteous anger against those who have rebelled against Him fell on Jesus when He was on the cross at Calvary. Jesus ‘atoned’ for all those He substituted Himself for as a sacrifice.

At the moment Christ died, the great curtain in the Jerusalem Temple which separated the outer areas from the Holy of Holies was torn from top to bottom (Matt 27:51). This reflected the free access which everyone who believes that Jesus died in their place for their sins has to enter into God’s holy presence. This truth is what the writer to the Hebrews expresses in verses 19-22: *“Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places 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 draw near”* (Hebrews 10:19-22a)*.* The ‘blood of Jesus’ refers to His death and is the fulfilment of all the blood that was spilt when animals were sacrificed to symbolize atonement in the Old Testament. The ‘new and living way that he has opened for us’ is the free access that all who trust in Jesus have to the holy presence of God. This way (ref. John 14:6) is ‘through his flesh’ that is through the fully human person of the divine Son of God.

Jesus Himself said "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*” (John 14:6). Jesus, the God-man, is the eternal high priest who enables all who believe in Him as their Lord and Saviour to confidently enter into the holy presence of God the Father. He also enables us to confidently confess, which brings us to the second part of this sermon.

1. **Confident to confess**

When you think of the word ‘confession’ it may well bring to your mind someone making a formal statement admitting that they are guilty of a crime. The root meaning of ‘confession’ is to agree that something is true. When someone makes a ‘confession’ in a court of law, they are agreeing with the charge that has been made against them. When the writer to the Hebrews uses the word ‘confession’ he is not referring to agreeing with a criminal charge, but to agreement with the Word of Christ.

In many churches, particular Reformed and Presbyterian ones, there are sets of words which members agree clearly express the truths of Scripture. We call these ‘creeds and confessions’. They are statements of belief – which is what the word ‘creed’ which comes from the Latin word ‘credo’ which means ‘I believe’. Today, John and Jane publicly confirmed their agreement with the ‘truth of the Christian faith which is taught in the Bible and confessed in this church of Christ’. They are ‘confident to confess Christ’.

In verse 23 the writer to the Hebrews calls his readers to ‘*hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful’.* Perhaps you’ve had the experience of saying goodbye to someone you love when they are leaving for a trip away. Often at these times we give the person a big tight hug. We don’t want to let them go because we know that we will miss them. For a few moments before they need to leave, we ‘hold them fast’. This is what Ruth did with her mother-in-law Naomi when she was told to go back to her homeland of Moab. Instead of leaving, Ruth ‘clung to’ Naomi (Ruth 1:14), she ‘held her fast’ and would not be separated from her. This is the idea in verse 23. It is to cling firmly to a confession of hope in Jesus Christ who is the way, the truth and the life, not letting go of Him. It is to be faithful in holding onto the hope that has been publicly stated in agreement with the faithful community of God’s people.

Now there is a close connection between this hope and Christian faith, as the writer to the Hebrews explains in chapter 11, verse 1: “Now faith is *the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*”. What is hoped for is the complete fulfilment of the faithful promise of God to have His children live with Him in a renewed world which is yet to be.

One of the ways in which Jesus Christ provides us with assurance of the reality of our being able to confidently come into the holy presence of God is through the outward sign of baptism. This is referred to in the words of verse 24 with the call to enter confidently into the presence of God “*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”.* The physical water of baptism is a sign and a confirmation of the spiritual cleansing of a person from the pollution of sin. This is the link between an inward heart ‘sprinkled clean from an evil conscience’ and a ‘body washed with pure water’.

In the past, both John and Jane have been baptised in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, just as Christ Jesus has called all His disciples to be (e.g. Matt 28:19). Today we witnessed the baptisms of their children. However, we do not know if these young people share the ‘confession of hope’ of their parents, or whether they will come to share this it later in their lives.

In the baptism of their children today, John and Jane publicly confessed their hope that God will graciously save both their offspring. This hope is based on the faithful promises of God who said to Abraham long ago: “*This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised*” (Gen 17:10). In Old Testament Israel, every male Israelite was circumcised to signify that they were part of the community of God’s people. Children were included in the community of God’s people then, just as they are now.

John and Jane’s children are members of this church who are loved, cared for and taught not only by their parents but by all the members of this ‘covenant’ community. Their children are set apart by God and called holy (1 Cor 7:14); being the children of believing parents. Whilst the inclusion of male children in the community of God’s people was signified by circumcision before Christ came to this earth, now the inclusion of all children is confirmed by the outward sign of baptism (Col 2:11-12).

The baptism of John and Jane’s children this morning is not expressing a presumption that God will definitely save them, but a confident hope that He may do so, based upon His Word. All those who trust in Christ alone for their access to God have: freedom to enter into His holy presence, confidence to hold onto the confession of their hope in Jesus and also to be able to encourage others as they meet together, which brings us to the final part of this sermon.

1. **Confident to encourage**

Have you ever had trouble staying awake in a church meeting? Sleeping through sermons is nothing new. Here’s a chilling piece of history: “*On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the next day, and he prolonged his speech until midnight. There were many lamps in the upper room where we were gathered. And a young man named Eutychus, sitting at the window, sank into a deep sleep as Paul talked still longer. And being overcome by sleep, he fell down from the third story and was taken up dead*” (Acts 20:7-9). It does sound like Paul’s sermon was a long one! If only someone had nudged Eutychus to wake him up!

Well it seems that puritan congregations in New England came up with a solution to the problem of snoozing church members. Apparently, the churches were sometimes patrolled by a man who held a long pole. On one end was a collection of feathers to tickle the chins of old men who started snoozing. On the other end was a hard wooden knob to alert giggling or sleeping children.

The idea of stimulating someone by prodding them sharply is the concept behind the strong word translated ‘stir up’ in verse 24. *“And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works”.* To ‘stir up’ others who share in a common confession of Christ is one of the reasons why the church gathers regularly. The word in verse 25 ‘meet together’ is closely connected to the Jewish word ‘synagogue’; though distinct from it.

The main emphasis in this verse is on the regular worship meetings of the church every Lord’s Day, although other gatherings are by no means excluded. It is clear that some individual church members were not regularly attending worship services during which the whole congregation are able to confidently enter into the presence of God and to hear their shared confession of hope in Christ through singing praises, praying and also speaking ‘pointedly’ to each other.

In order to simulate each other, the Christian church is called to meet together so that individual members can confidently encourage each other to live out their faith in Christ by loving God and loving others and by works of service. That’s why faithful members of this church come together every Sunday to worship God and to fellowship with one another. This is the practice of John and Jane and their family who regularly come together with us here and encourage us all. Their presence and example of faith and service stir many of us up to love and good works. I am so thankful to have you with us John and Jane.

Here’s how the writer to the Hebrews expresses this confident stimulating encouragement in verses 24 and 25: *And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.* The Day which he refers to as ‘drawing near’ is the return of Jesus Christ at the end of this age. On this Day, all people will be judged by the Son of God (e.g. 1 Pet 4:5).

Those who have already had access to the holy places through Christ will find that they are judged as being ‘not guilty’; not because they lived good lives, but because they trusted in the only person ever to have lived a perfectly good life, the One who has died in their place as a sacrifice of atonement. The barrier between them and God having been removed they then gain physical entry with a new body into the presence of the Holy living God forever.

In contrast, those who did not gain entrance into God’s presence through the living way that Jesus Christ has opened up will continue to be separated from God forever. That is the essence of the torment of Hell. To be eternally apart from all that is good, true, lovely, pleasant, joyful, peaceful and life-giving. The Bible in plain truth puts this contrast in these words: “*Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him*” (John 3:36).

Where is your confidence for the future today? If it is in yourself, what you own, who you know on this earth, what you’ve done, what you plan to do – know for certain that all these things will eventually fail you. If you’ve decided to take up ‘Pascal’s Wager’ and you are trying to live as though God exists in case maybe He might be real, then you clearly do not have the confidence that results in the ‘full assurance of faith’, the ‘hope without wavering’ and the ‘love and good works’ which the writer to the Hebrews reveals as being truly possible.

Here is the only way to draw near to the Holy Living God: through Jesus Christ His Son. Believe with your heart that He died in your place. Trust that He lived a perfect life so that His complete obedience to all that God commanded of Him was fully achieved. Confidently approach God, humble yourself before Him, repent of your sins, joyfully trust in and love Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour. Resolve to forsake the unbelieving world, to put to death your old nature and to lead a godly life. This is what John and Jane have done and this is what they, and we, pray that both their children will one day do themselves.

There is plenty of fake news around today, there always has been. In the midst of this the truth of God stands firm. Ultimately only God’s truth – the Word of Christ - is completely reliable. Hearing and doing the words of Christ is like building your house on a firm rock (Matt 7:24-27). Just as such a homeowner has confidence no matter what happens, so by listening to the truth about Jesus and doing what He says we can have:

* Confidence to enter into the holy presence of God
* Confidence to confess the Word of our Saviour openly
* Confidence to stimulate one another with encouragement to love God and others and to serve our Lord as we work in His kingdom.

AMEN