

Prayer

Jesus Christ, we find our peace in you. In You, we may know the victory of the Cross, the love of the Father, the care of the Christian community, the empowerment of the Spirit, and the wisdom of Your Word. May we never find ourselves doubting the extraordinary power of Your love for us, made real in all these ways. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Church Community

This week, we will pray for the many communities of Christians which make up the church. Each group represents the Body of Christ in some way, and should relate to others, and no one church is the Body of Christ by itself. Pray that the people in the churches you know will have the courage to discern their role and place within the greater Body of Christ.

Meditation

(A reflection on Christ on the Cross)

Did You look out upon the people, Lord and see the truth in people's eyes?
Did You see the Marys, the jeering crowds, a few disciples far away?

And did You know which of the people would go all the way with You;
And who would turn away, even some of Your own people?
Did You wonder whether they would turn to You again, or go their way, forever?

Or did you know, from within the way they looked at You;
In love or hate, in trust or suspicion, from the way their eyes caught yours
Which ones were going to say a Yes, and which ones, a very definite No?

And when the crowd's confusion and rejection stared You in the face,
You knew the eternal consequences through and through,
But still You always looked to find in them the 'Yes' and never took the 'No'.

Because that's Your love for us, exalted Saviour,
Until the Father judges all, and takes us home.

Bible Study - Hebrews 9:1-5

¹ Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly sanctuary. ² A tabernacle was constructed; the first one, in which there were the lamp stand, the table, and the bread of the Presence, was called the 'Holy Place'. ³ And behind the second curtain was a tabernacle called the 'Holy of Holies' ⁴ which had the golden altar of incense, and the Ark of the Covenant covered entirely with gold. In this was the golden jar containing manna, Aaron's staff that budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant. ⁵ Above it were the cherubim of Glory overshadowing the mercy seat, but we cannot now speak of these things in detail.

Review

In yesterday's passage, Hebrews explained how God had promised He would establish a new covenant, using a great prophecy from Jeremiah. Now, the writer embarks on a long chapter which eventually explains the new covenant and the priestly work of Christ for all people. In order to do this, he firstly describes the magnificent scene of the place where the first covenant was celebrated. The reason he does this is because by describing the wondrous and awe-inspiring magnificence of the ancient tabernacle (made according to the instructions of Moses as in Exodus 25,26), he builds up to saying that Jesus' priestly work and the place where it is done are far more wondrous and glorious than what went before! Hebrews consistently refuses to abandon knowledge of the past and all the ancient revelations of God given in Old Testament times, even though it was less than what was revealed in Jesus. For the writer of Hebrews, understanding what happened in times past helps us appreciate all the more the glorious opportunities we now have by means of God's revelation through Jesus Christ.

If we read the passages in Exodus which contain the original specification for the tabernacle, it is possible to make out the general details of what is described in Hebrews. Two tents are described, a large outer tent creating a holy sanctuary, and a central tent within it which housed the Ark of the Covenant. Exodus also describes a 'mercy seat' (Ex 25:17) which is not mentioned in Hebrews, and this covered the Ark and was overshadowed by two great cherubim, all in gold. Clearly, the contents of the Holy of Holies was intended to be magnificent, but it was only seen by those who made it and the priests who had the right of entry to perform priestly duties.

The only difference between the description in Exodus 25 and 26 and that in our passage of Hebrews was the jar of manna which was kept for storage in the presence of the Lord (Ex 16:31f.) before the Tabernacle was built (Exodus 25,26). In addition, the rod of Aaron which budded came from a much later incident in the journey of the people of Israel through the desert (Numbers 17:6f.), and its importance lies in the fact that it symbolised God's choice of the line of Aaron as priests according to the old covenant. The story goes that there were complaints to Moses about access to God in the holiest places, so Moses placed a staff belonging to each of the tribes of Israel in the presence of God in the tabernacle. The next morning, Aaron's rod had budded and borne fruit! If you read the incident as it is recorded in Numbers 17, then it is fairly obvious that the rod would have remained in the Holy of Holies. Lastly, the altar of incense was not in the original specification of the Holy of Holies, but was added later (Exodus 30) as the place where incense was offered each evening, and once a year, a sacrifice was made for the sins of the people (Exodus 30:10), the famous 'rite of atonement'.

All these things were wondrous and remarkable, and in the days of Jesus, they were known about only in the writings of the Old Testament. We do not know for sure what happened to the tabernacle tent after the people of Israel came into the Promised Land, but the Ark itself is recorded as being brought into Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6f.), eventually being placed in the central chambers of Solomon's Temple, a new 'Holy of Holies' (1 Kings 8f.). Even this was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC, so it is no wonder that the writer of the letter to the Hebrews says that 'we cannot now speak of these things in detail' (9:5).

Few of us, however, can fail to be impressed by the scale and grandeur of these physical representations of the religious devotion of the people of the old covenant. But we know full well where Hebrews is heading. All this is nothing compared to the value of knowing the one true revelation of God which is found in Jesus Christ! No religion or form of it can compare with knowing God personally through Jesus, and the reason why God gave His people such amazing things as the tabernacle was that we might see the glory of Jesus Christ as greater than such religion symbolism, with its gold, its symbols, its rituals and great history. To this day and forever, Christ stands above all things, in a far greater glory.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. In what ways do people construct things which are used for the worship of God, and how do they help or hinder true worship?
2. How helpful is it to have reminders of God's work amongst us within our church buildings?
3. Imagine yourself what the 'Holy of Holies' looks like. Within your group, discuss what you can picture, and what catches your attention in this mental picture.

Discipleship

Do you think that it is wise or helpful for Christian to have visual reminders of the works of God decorating the walls of their churches? Christian people about 300 years ago would have been aghast at the idea of placing any objects within a church building, and many threw out statues and covered over murals. English churches, for example, display a very mixed approach to this question. My question remains important, however, for each of us must sometimes make sure that we are not becoming attached to the trappings of worship rather than our Lord Himself. Honour Him, and let all else take its place.

Final Prayer

Help me, Lord Jesus, by the power of Your Holy Spirit, so to open my heart that I may appreciate my brothers and sisters in Christ wherever they may be, and whatever circumstances they live in. May I always be prepared to learn from them more of the workings of the Body of Christ, and be encouraged by their worship of the true and Living God. AMEN