

Hebrews 10:25 says, “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another - and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

I remember being at a Scripture Union barbeque one time when I was at school and the speaker who had been invited along fanned into flame some coals on the barbecue until they were red hot and invited us all to watch as he got some tongs and took one of these red coals out of the centre and set it on a tile on its own nearby. I was close enough to feel the heat of both the barbecue and that individual coal as it was set down.

He didn't say anything for the next minute or two, we just stood and watched as this little coal's light grew dimmer, and dimmer and eventually faded away until all that was left was a little black nugget coated with a thin layer of grey ash. He later went on to preach on the text that we are going to look at this evening, Hebrews 10, and to be honest I don't think I could tell you much about how he preached on that text, what he said or how he said it but I remember that little coal, without the heat or support of the others growing more and more dim and fading eventually to a cold blackness.

The book of Hebrews is a book of encouragement and a book of warning. It is a book that goes into great detail to explain to its readers exactly who Jesus is in relation both to them and to God. It shows the importance of Jesus, that he is no mere messenger of God, no mere servant of God but rather he is, as it says in chapter 1, “The radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.”

But Hebrews is not simply a work of systematic theology, some academic treatise proving from scripture that Jesus is God, no after explaining to us who Jesus is it then goes on to tell us how we are related to him and through him to the father. It uses some pretty mind blowing language. After telling us how Christ's death makes us holy it then goes on to say that –

“In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering. Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers.”

Those who are being made Holy, that is those of us who are Christians, are of the same family and Jesus calls us brothers. It is as though we were people who have grown up in extreme poverty and have been adopted into the family of a great king. The book then goes on to remind us that this fantastic brother of ours is also our high priest, one who allows us, through his death to draw close to God with a confidence based not on our own goodness or holiness but on that of Jesus who died in our place and took the death sentence that was ours by right.

We are encouraged then to behave like a good family. I stress the words good family because many of us, perhaps, I suspect, most of us have families who, in some respect, do not behave as a good family should. We should, as a family take care of one another, encourage each other. In love we should rebuke one another when we start to go astray so that no one is lost from the family.

Hebrews gives us some very stark warnings on this point about falling away from the faith. It is a book written to shake some people out of their complacency. It is one of those books in the bible that scares people and some of its words are meant to scare us just as many of its words are there to comfort us. Words such as those we read in verses 26 and following have often confused and worried well meaning Christians who have been concerned about their salvation.

If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Anyone who rejected the Law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," and again, "The Lord will judge his people." It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

That is a very strongly worded section designed to shake those who would be complacent about their faith or lack of it, but not designed to worry those who are sincere in their faith. We all sin, whether we are born again believers or not, the Book of Hebrews is very plain on that, as is the rest of the Bible. But to those of us who are Christians the writer states, "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."

That section warns those who feel that they can take God for granted that it is a dreadful thing to try to do so and think that you can get away with it. It does not tell people who are Christians that God operates a three strikes and your out policy but rather encourages us to see that salvation is not ours by right but only through the grace and the love of our holy, righteous and awesome God.

So Hebrews is a book of comfort and encouragement and for those who are complacent and insincere it is a book of warning. It appears to be a book written to Jewish Christians whose faith has been shaken and who it seems have been tempted by some form of persecution to give up their faith and return to the temple or to stop meeting openly together and go underground.

I've gone through that little overview of some of the themes of Hebrews just to try to place these few words that we are going to look at in chapter 10 verse 25 in some sort of context. Often they are quoted as though they stood on their own and were simply a statement about people who have become too lazy or disillusioned to come to church any more. On the contrary they are placed at the heart of a letter that seeks to lift up and encourage some Christians whose young faith has been sorely tried by pressure both from external forces and from some degree of internal tension.

So this is a text with a context. "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another--and all the more as you see the Day approaching." It is also a text that has a long history of being misused to bash well meaning Christians and make us feel as though we should be spending every waking hour God gives us in church.

Now that's not to say that coming to church is not a good thing, we have to meet together to build one another up and encourage one another. As verses 23 and following say, "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another--and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

Meeting together is not only good but also an essential part of the Christian faith. Charles Wesley once said that, "The Bible knows nothing of a solitary religion," but the Bible also knows nothing of a Christian community that is inward looking and spends all of its time and resources on itself as though it were some sort of spiritual social club. This verse is not a call to spend all of your week in church and ignore your family, friends and neighbours.

As a Christian community in this town we must practice our faith not only by coming here to this building to worship God but also through the way that we behave towards those outside of the Christian community. We meet together not to become more inward and more obsessed with our own little Christian group or clique but we meet together to encourage one another in our primary task of bringing Christ's message to the people we meet every day.

We meet together to pray for one another and to equip one another, to enable us to face the task ahead of us and to remind each other that we are not called to evangelise our area on our own, we are not called to transform our community on our own but to do that in the power of the Holy Spirit and to do that together.

We also meet together around God's word to be fed and encouraged. The writer to the Hebrews is at great pains to point out to his readers just how important it is to get a fully rounded view of who Christ is and who we are. We don't live in an intellectual vacuum. We live in a world that throws its ideas at us day by day and pushes its values down our throats whether we want them or not.

Coming to church is an opportunity not only to get a Christian perspective on the issues of the day but also to acquaint ourselves better with God's word as we not only read it but it is expounded to us. What strikes you going through the Letter to the Hebrews, is just how many direct quotations there are from scripture, and how many allusions there are to various parts of the Bible.

The writer does not base his conclusions about our relationship to God on speculation, or on what people have told him, instead he looks to scripture to give him a clearer view of who we are and what that implies for our life. That is important and that is one of the reasons why meeting together as a church round the bible is important, whether that is on a Sunday or midweek at the house groups.

We live in a world in which we are bombarded daily with adverts, you can't walk through the town centre or wait on a bus without some billboard or other trying to sell you something. Advertisers, to do their job properly, have to convince us of our need for their product. To get us to buy slimming products they have to convince us that we are fat, to get us to buy beauty products they have to convince us that we are ugly. To get us to drink Nescafe they have to convince us that it will make us more sexy.

It's constant and it is not only heavy on our pockets as we spend money on things that we do not need but it is also heavy on our hearts and minds as we get told over and over again, "You're ugly, buy this!" "You smell, spray this on you!" "You don't get enough sex, wear these clothes!" "You are not important, buy this car!" "You are not valued, take this pill!"

Even in Christian magazines or bookshops, there is the same sort of pressure, "Improve your prayer life! Buy this book!" "Worship better, buy this CD!" Even in Christian circles then we can be told over and over again that we are not worth as much if we do not own things, if we do not go to things, if we do not have things. The letter to the Hebrews lets us know how important we are in the eyes of God and how valuable we are to him.

That is a message that no advertiser wants us to hear, they don't want to let us know that our value is set by God and not the how we smell or the labels we wear or the car that we drive. If that kind of message were to get out then maybe people would be happier with what they have and who they are and not want to go out and buy things in a vain attempt to make them more happy and content in life.

When we meet together around God's word we help each other to get a better, clearer perspective on who we are and who Christ wants us to be through him. In the face of external pressure the writer to the Hebrews gave his readers a clearer perspective by turning them to the scriptures and he reminds both them and us that as forgetful human beings, with so many other ungodly ideas competing for our attention then we must never give up meeting together, never give up coming to God's word, never fall out of the habit of praying for one another and encouraging one another to press on in the faith.

But hang on a minute! All of this depends on the church actually being a place of encouragement, actually being a place where we meet round God's word, actually being a place where we come to be refreshed by the Holy Spirit to face the week ahead in his power. That has challenges for myself and Robert and anyone else who preaches or leads a bible study in this church community. It challenges us to bring people, not to our own opinions but to God's word to be changed and refreshed.

It brings a challenge to all of us who attend the meetings, a challenge to pray confidently as it says in verse 22 in the New Living Translation, "let us go right into the presence of God, with true hearts fully trusting him." Finally it brings a challenge to us all to get to know one another, to leave no one out on their own so that we can encourage and warn each other, not just in holy sounding words that don't mean anything to people because they are just somebody else in the pew near us but in ways that are relevant and meaningful because we have taken time to learn more than their name and where they sit in a Sunday.

We can only do that in God's strength and with his grace and power so not just this summer but always let us not be like that solitary lump of charcoal, trying to be a whole barbecue on our own. We will end up being quite simply burnt out and not having done anything. So, let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another - and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Amen.