***“The Imprint of God”*** by S. Finlan, at The First Church, October 3, 2021

**Hebrews 1:1–4**

1 Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, 2but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. 3He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, 4having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

**Hebrews 2:5–12**

5 Now God did not subject the coming world, about which we are speaking, to angels. 6But someone has testified somewhere, “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, or mortals, that you care for them? 7 You have made them for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned them with glory and honor, 8 subjecting all things under their feet.”
Now in subjecting all things to them, God left nothing outside their control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to them, 9but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor . . .

10 It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. 11For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, 12saying, “I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.”

This week, we are taking a look at the Epistle to the Hebrews. It is classified among the epistles, that is, letters, and some church traditions assign it work to the hand of the Apostle Paul, but most scholars consider it to be an anonymous sermon, and they refer to the unknown author as “Hebrews.” Scholars do not consider this to be an actual letter because there are no named individuals or community receiving the letter; no greetings to church leaders, none of the standard salutations. Except for the last three verses, there are no well wishes from compatriots of the author, and those verses look like they were written in imitation of the Pauline style.

Very few scholars consider this work to be written by Paul. The work has classy and educated-sounding vocabulary that Paul himself never uses. It has a sacrificial theology, as Paul does, but Paul always mixes his sacrificial metaphors with redemption, scapegoat, and justification metaphors. Hebrews does not do that, but zeroes in on the sacrificial metaphor, speaking of Jesus making purification (1:3), saying a lot about the details of the sacrificial system, the curtain, the incense altar, the bread, and the tablets of the covenant (9:3–4), which Paul does not do.

As in Paul’s letters, Hebrews exhorts the readers to have strong faith and to believe certain things, but it does not address the ethics of relationships in a congregation, as Paul’s letters do.

Hebrews considers Jesus to be the new high priest, an image never used by Paul or any other New Testament author. The work is unique in what it says about the priesthood, actually different orders of priesthood, and in the way it sees Christ purifying the heavenly temple (9:24–26). Still, Hebrews may understand himself as following in Paul’s footsteps, and supporting Paul’s interpretation, and there’s no reason it cannot be as valid as anything Paul wrote.

Let’s look at what the author says about Christ. Right from the start, the author fills us in on Christ’s divinity. He is the reflection of God’s glory, and is the imprint of God’s very being (1:3). He was God’s co-worker in creation itself, Jesus being the one “through whom he also created the worlds” (1:2). The word for “worlds” here is “aeons,” so it could actually be translated “through whom he also created the ages,” but I think “worlds” is a better choice here. There may be other worlds out there, with other human races that Jesus created.

Fortunately he is not just a creator, but a loving and caring father-figure for us. But instead of emphasizing his fatherly role, Hebrews wants to stress his brotherly role. Jesus calls us brothers and sisters, he says. Notice that Hebrews, when quoting the psalm, says that Jesus spoke the psalm (2:11–12). He assumes that Jesus is the author of the Psalms. He does this again later in the sermon (10:5). He believes Jesus is literally speaking through the Psalms. He takes Ps 22:22 to mean that Jesus will proclaim God before his brothers and sisters in the congregation. Can you feel the emotional power of the statement “I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you” (2:12)? Jesus, our creator, is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters. He is the one who sanctifies (makes holy), and we are the ones who are sanctified, but we share the same Father (2:11), so we can think of him as our big brother. It is very humble of him to put himself in the position of being our brother. It reminds me of when he said “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone” (Luke 18:19). That was a remarkably humble saying.

Now, Hebrews has a lot to say about humans and angels. We are just a little below the angels in the hierarchy of life, yet humans have some special prerogatives. For instance, it is to humans, not to angels, that God was “subjecting all things under their feet” (2:8). But angels are special creatures. Later in the first chapter it says “Are not all angels spirits in the divine service?” (1:14). Christ, of course, is superior to the angels, but when he became like us, “for a little while was made lower than the angels,” and is “now crowned with glory and honor” (2:9). He is “the pioneer of their salvation” (2:10). Hebrews envisions Christ being made “perfect through sufferings” (2:10). In chapter 5, he says “having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him” (5:9). Whether or not it’s entirely accurate to say he was made perfect through sufferings, I think it was crucial that he lived through a whole human life. He truly knows what human beings have to go through. And he did have to suffer, not just at the end, but when he was faced with the ignorant resistance of his family and of the Pharisees, it pained him.

Jesus had compassion on people, but he also understood them, and he seems to have accepted that most people are very down-to-earth and often selfish. Some of the characters in his parables are basically selfish, but they can still be rewarded if they are seeking to turn to God. The Prodigal Son was mainly just trying to get a decent place to live, but he was sincere in wanting to return to his father. The merchant who was willing to sell all he had in order to obtain the pearl of great price (Matt 13:45–46) is just pursuing his own passion, but that’s okay. Jesus is ready to save all kinds of people. And he’s ready to lead many children to glory.

But look at that interesting remark near the beginning: he is the imprint of God. The Greek word for “imprint” is *charaktēr*. Obviously that word’s meaning changed as it moved over into English. But it provides an interesting commentary on the text to read back in our English meaning, and to say “Jesus is the character of God.” Certainly, he is the human face of God. The original intent is to say that Jesus is the reflection or copy of God the Father, but we get another truth out of it if we think of Jesus as the human-facing character of God. We can’t see the Father, but we can see—that is, *imagine*—the Son, and we can hear what he did when he lived his earth life. And he was quite the character, too.

Hebrews has some of the most interesting things to say about Christ. He is the *charaktēr* of God, and through him God created the *aeons*. But he is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters, while leading us to salvation.