

Hebrews 4:1-13

Jesus gives superior rest Tim Anderson 2/12/18

"How are you going, mate? Busy.

Yeah, I'm flat out like a lizard drinking, mate."

Have you ever heard a conversation like that?

I'm sure you've heard a conversation like that.

People have their sense of self worth defined by being run off their feet.

If I'm so needed that I'm constantly busy,

my life must be important.

I must be significant.

So in the context of our world,

today's reading has a very interesting description of heaven.

And it's a description of heaven that we don't use that much.

And that's despite it being an important picture of heaven in the Bible.

Heaven is God's rest.

Are you weary?

Does life have a way of wearing you down?

Do you wish that the weeds wouldn't grow back after you pull them out?

Do you wish that you could tell your kids things once

and you wouldn't have to ever tell them that thing again?

Heaven is God's rest.

It's the place where the things that weary us don't exist anymore.

In our reading today,

there are three pictures of rest.

There is the picture of God's creation of the world.

Here are the words of verses 3-4.

"And yet God's works have been finished since the creation of the world.

For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words:

"On the seventh day, God rested from all his works.""

Those words come from Genesis 2

in the account of the creation of the world.  
It says that God worked for six days creating.  
And then on the seventh day God rested.  
Why did God rest?  
Was he tired out?  
No. Of course God cannot be tired out.  
God has an unlimited supply of energy.  
He could have kept on going,  
but he was finished.  
When God rests,  
it means he has achieved all he set out to do.  
Genesis tells us that God saw all he had created  
and it was very good.  
He had done what he set out to do.  
He was finished.  
So he rested.  
And when God rested he established a pattern for us.  
We work for six days and observe a day of rest.  
It's a day to honour the God who established the pattern of our rest.  
We are not like ants or bees  
who work every day until they die.  
We are like God,  
made in the image of God.  
We work to achieve our goal.  
And we rest to honour our creator,  
and take pleasure in the things he has enabled us to create.  
So that's the first picture of rest in today's reading.

The second picture of rest is the Promised Land.  
This is the dominant picture in our passage.  
The reason is clear.  
The rest in the Promised Land could be forfeited.

God's people were slaves in Egypt for hundreds of years.

There was no rest there.

But God promised to give them a land of their own,  
and a land where they would have rest.

What does rest mean this time?

It's not about knocking off when you finish work.

It's not about stepping back from your creativity  
to enjoy what you've created.

It's about not having the constant vigilance of having to protect yourself.

I've had the privilege of meeting some people  
who have been deeply traumatised.

Children who have suffered shocking abuse.

Soldiers who have fought in combat zones.

Something that is common to both is an experience of hyper vigilance.

They are super alert.

Checking every sensation that comes upon their senses for danger.

It feels like they never relax.

A car backfires in the night

and they are wide awake and out of bed like a shot.

That is the kind of rest that Israel was promised in the land.

Rest from having enemies of every side.

Rest from constantly having to look over their shoulders  
to see who would invade them next.

It's wonderful to have that rest.

To know security.

Something we in Australia take for granted when we shouldn't.

But anyway, the point for the writer to the Hebrews is  
that not all the Israelites enjoyed the promised rest.

Joshua and Caleb went and spied out the land.

And in the words of Hebrews,

they came back and proclaimed the good news to their countrymen.

It sounds a lot like proclaiming the good news of the gospel of Jesus, and it's meant to.

Joshua and Caleb proclaimed the good news.

What was that good news?

"This is a good land that the Lord has promised us.

There is abundant produce.

Look at the size of this bunch of grapes.

It took two of us to carry it.

Yes there are strong looking people in the land.

But we need to trust the Lord's promise and go and take possession of the land he is giving us.

We need to enter into our promised rest."

But did Israel listen?

No. I whole generation died in the wilderness.

Why?

Because they did not have faith like Joshua and Caleb.

The message.

If you want to enter into God's rest,

you must act on your faith.

God has told you what to do.

So hop to and do it.

Otherwise you will be found to have ignored his promises and you won't obtain his promised rest.

Well is that a message that's just for the people of Israel going in to take the land?

The writer to the Hebrews says 'No'.

And his evidence is the book of Psalms.

In Psalm 95,

David retells the story of those who failed to enter the promised land.

Hebrews quoted the psalm in last week's reading.

"Today if you hear his voice,

do not harden your hearts ..."  
and it finishes,  
"So I declared in my anger,  
"They shall never enter my rest."  
The point is this:  
When David wrote the psalm,  
the people were already in the land.  
They had settled down.  
They had entered their rest.  
So why was David warning them about not entering into God's rest?  
They were already there!  
Well the key verses are verses 8-9,  
"For if Joshua had given them rest,  
God would not have spoken later about another day.  
There remains then a Sabbath rest for the people of God."  
Now Joshua did give them rest.  
He led God's people into the Promised Land.  
They marched around the walls of Jericho and the walls fell down.  
And the people went in and took possession of the land.  
So why is Hebrews saying that Joshua didn't give them rest?  
Because that rest was just a small foretaste  
of the true rest that God has for his people.  
When they took the land,  
they could settle down and build houses.  
They were their own masters.  
It was nothing like being slaves in Egypt.  
But the people were still slaves to sin.  
They had no rest from the temptations of the devil.  
They still rebelled against God after they were in the land.  
Their history is a litany of rebellion against the God who loved them.  
They had no rest from the ordinary brokenness of life.  
They got old,

they got sick,  
crops failed when there was no rain,  
wild animals still attacked their herds.  
Compared to Egypt they had rest.  
But the rest of the Promised Land was just a way  
of giving them a foretaste of the far superior rest that God has prepared.

In heaven, we will not get old.  
In heaven we will not get sick.  
In heaven we will not face temptation from the devil.  
In heaven the crops won't fail and the lion will lay down with the lamb.  
The rest we have to come is a far superior rest.

You can imagine the Israelites breathing a sigh of relief  
when they finally settled down in the Promised Land.  
No more slave masters.  
Our enemies are subdued.  
But imagine the sigh of relief we will breathe when we get to heaven.  
The face that looks back at me from the mirror  
won't get progressively more wrinkly each year.  
I won't have to head across to the chemist each month,  
to buy the pills that stop me getting heart burn.  
I won't have to manage the stress of competing priorities in the church.  
If I write a sermon, then I'm not reaching out to the lost.  
If I reach out to the lost,  
I'm not training the church for the ministry that God has for them.  
If I train believers for ministry, I'm not caring for the elderly.  
If I care for the elderly, then who will run the youth group?  
Please Lord, let me enter your rest!  
And there, I will never have to run another funeral.  
Don't get me wrong.  
I am greatly privileged to be able to take funerals.

But it will be so much nicer when people don't die anymore!  
We long to enter God's rest.  
for as it says in verse 10,  
"For anyone who enters God's rest also rests from their own works,  
just as God did from his."  
It's why people are hanging out for retirement.  
So that they can finally rest from their own work.  
The problem is that retirement never lives up to the hype.  
By the time you get there,  
your body isn't up to doing half the things you dreamed about.  
Your budget isn't up to doing plenty of the other stuff you dreamed about.  
The grand children you had romantic notions of spending lots of time with  
quickly grow up and decide that you are boring.  
And you spend way too much time  
keeping the medical profession off the unemployment queues.  
God has a far better rest prepared for you than retirement!

And that's why we need to heed the warning of verse 11.  
"Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest,  
so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience."  
How do we make every effort to enter God's rest?  
It was clear what the people in Joshua's day needed to do.  
God told them if they trusted him,  
and went in to the land,  
he would give it to them.  
But what about us?  
It's the same story really.  
We need to hear God's promises and act on them.  
Hearing them is not enough by itself.  
Good news is not enough by itself,  
we need to trust in the good news and act on it.

So here's a question for you.

Do you really believe in God's promised rest?

Lots of people say they believe in God's promised rest.

But when it comes down to it,

they are more diligent in urging their children to get a good job, than they are in urging them to enter into God's rest.

If you spend more effort urging your children to get a good job than you do urging them to enter God's rest,

do you really believe in God's rest?

You can't do.

Not really.

If you really believed in it,

then you would know that it is immeasurably more important than what job you do.

You see, we can tell whether you really trust in God's promise by what actions you take.

It's the same as the Israelite's walking in the wilderness.

They can say,

"Yeah we believe God is taking us to the promised land", all they like.

If they get to the border of the promised land

and won't go in because they are scared,

they didn't really have faith.

We don't want to follow their example of disobedience.

If you say,

"I just want my grandkids to be happy",

do you really believe in God's rest?

If you believed in God's rest,

you would want your grandkids to be saved.

Being happy won't last anyway.

They think, if I have this house,

or if I get married to that person,

then I will be happy.

It won't work.

Have you heard what Saint Augustine said?

"Our hearts are restless, until they find rest in you."

"Our hearts are restless, until they find rest in you."

Other things won't make them happy.

The only true rest

the only true happiness is to be found in God.

Do you believe that is true?

Because if you collaborate with them on chasing all the other stuff,  
you actually don't believe in God's rest.

Whatever you say,

you actually don't believe in it.

"Today if you hear his voice,

do not harden your hearts."

People often think that the Bible is a story book from long ago.

Wrong!

When you hear the Bible,

you are hearing God's voice speaking to you today.

That's happened to you today.

You can't escape that.

The Bible has spoken to your heart.

It's caused you to ask the question,

"Do I really believe in God's rest?"

It's shone a light on the thoughts and attitudes of your heart.

I might say I believe in God's rest.

Do my actions back that up?

What values do I promote to my kids and grandkids?

Our reading finishes with these words.

"For the word of God is alive and active.

Sharper than any double edged sword,  
it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow;  
it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.  
Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight.  
Everything is uncovered and laid bare  
before the eyes of him to whom we must give account."

Often when we hear those words  
about God's Word being sharper than a double edged sword,  
we think it's out there somewhere.  
It's talking to those people over there.  
Well yes it is.  
But it's talking to you and me too.  
It's asking you,  
"Are you making every effort to enter God's rest?"

Don't take it for granted.  
Don't have a casual, she'll be right mate attitude.  
I've met too many people  
who have been utterly convinced that they will enter God's rest,  
who I can categorically say will not be entering it,  
unless God does something remarkable to change their hearts.  
How can I say that with confidence?  
Because the word of God spells out very clearly,  
that only those who believe and act on God's promises will enter his rest.  
The word of God tells us about people who disobeyed  
and didn't enter God's rest.  
Their example is not to be casually disregarded.

"Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest."