

Prov 8:22-36

Heb 1:1-4; 2:5-12

John 1:1-14

*Hebrews 1:1-3a "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but 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. He 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."*

The question of what we believe about the person of Jesus has occupied the minds of theologians ever since NT times, and perhaps there are as many answers as there are Christian believers. Over the years the church has produced creeds and doctrinal statements in an attempt to set out precisely what it believes about the person of Christ.

When we turn to the opening of the Epistle to the Hebrews, we find an account of the person of Christ written perhaps only 20–30 years after his crucifixion. This description of Jesus is by no means easy for us nowadays to understand, because it was written for people with a Jewish background and living in the Greek world of the 1st century. Nevertheless, even if some of the images used by the author are no longer intelligible, I believe that he is saying some worthwhile things about Jesus to the people of every age.

He opens the Epistle by saying that in times past God spoke in many and various ways by means of the prophets, but that in the last days he has spoken by means of a Son. Perhaps all of us would describe Jesus as the "Son of God", and it would be all too easy to use this title without giving much thought to what it means or implies, and it might be used in all sorts of senses. However, the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews leaves no ambiguity about his use of the term "son" in relation to Jesus, but goes on to explain exactly what he means.

1. The Son of God is the appointed heir of all things, through whom God also created the world. The fact that Jesus is described as a "heir" does not mean that he has been given something that he previously lacked, or that the ownership of anything has been transferred from father to son. Rather, this description of Jesus is an allusion to his exaltation. According to the understanding of the writer of Hebrews, Jesus during his lifetime was made inferior to the angels. But when he was later exalted to the highest honours of heaven, this did not involve a change of status for him.

On the contrary, he re-entered into what had always been rightfully his. For the writer of Hebrews tells us that it was through the Son that God created the world. We find a very similar understanding of Jesus in John chapter 1. John speaks about the Word, which in the beginning was with God, and was somehow identified with God. He says: "All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being." Later John says: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."

What the writer of Hebrews says in the first three verses of his Epistle is more concise and less developed than what we find in John 1, but the idea is exactly the same. Both writers have been influenced by the thought of the 1st century Greek-Jewish world about the *logos* or Word (*logos* being the Greek word for "word"). The Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria, who lived at about the same time as Jesus, thought of the *logos* as an impersonal principle of mediation between the transcendent God and his universe, though he used personal terms to describe this impersonal principle. Philo's thought was to some extent based on Proverbs 8, where Wisdom is spoken of in personal terms, is given an independent existence of its own, and is said to have been created by God at the beginning of his works.

Now, 1st century Jewish-Greek ideas about the *logos* are very difficult for the 21st century mind to understand. But under the influence of this thought, the writer of Hebrews does convey to us an important truth about Jesus. He says that it was through the Son that God created the world. This suggests that in everything God has been working towards the fulfilment of a purpose from the very beginning. Already when God created the universe, he planned the redemption of all things through his Son. God's work of creation and his work of redemption are all part of the same activity by which he is working for the salvation of mankind, and towards the fulfilment of a wonderful purpose.

**2.** The writer of Hebrews says that the Son "is the reflection of God's glory". The Greek word can mean either "reflection" or "radiance". But the two meanings are not mutually exclusive. For the son radiates the glory which is reflected from the father. Here we find the image of light used not only of God, but also of his Son. Again, the idea is very similar to what we find in John chapter 1. John says in verse 9: "The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world." And he adds in verse 14: "We have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."

What both of these passages are saying to us is that we see something of God's glory and his divine nature in Jesus Christ. As St Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 4:6: "For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

**3.** According to the writer of Hebrews, the Son is the "the exact imprint of God's very being". The word used here suggests an engraving or a stamp used on a coin. In fact the Greek word is that from which the English word "character" is derived. Used metaphorically, the Greek word means a mark impressed upon a person or thing, a distinctive mark, a characteristic. In other words, the Son represents everything that the Father represents. As Jesus said in John 14:9: "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." We come to know God and what he stands for, by knowing his son.

What the writer of Hebrews says about the son's being present at the creation and being the imprint of God is very similar to what is said in Colossians 1:15-16: "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things

visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him.”

4. The Son sustains all things by his powerful word. That is to say, God's providential care of the universe is carried out through his Son. The world at the very beginning was created by the word of God. And the world continues to be sustained by the word of his Son. Again, there is a parallel in 1st century Greek-Jewish thought.

In (the apocryphal book) The Wisdom of Solomon 8:1 it is said of Wisdom, “She reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other, and she orders all things well.” Here Wisdom, which is spoken of as a person, is considered to be the governor and sustainer of the universe, a function assigned in Hebrews 1:3 to the Son of God. Thus the writer of Hebrews gives us a great note of hope. For we live in times in which there is a great deal of anxiety about the future of the world.

In the modern age, humans have the capability of destroying life as never before, whether through the use of highly destructive weapons, as we saw in the wars of last century ..... or through the harmful effects of so many aspects of human activity on the environment, of which we have become increasingly aware in the early years of the present century.

In the opening verses of Hebrews we are introduced to a God who has had a purpose for his creation from the very beginning. The sending of his Son into the world was an essential part of that purpose. Through the powerful word of his Son, God continues to uphold and sustain his universe. He continues to work towards the fulfilment of a purpose which he has had since the very beginning of creation.

And no human can possibly thwart that purpose.