

*Sermon delivered by Pastor John V. Carlson on August 29, 2010*

The Same—Yesterday, Today, and Forever

Yr. C, Ord. Time 22

Hebrews 13:1-8, 1-16

It isn't news to anyone that we live in a world filled with change. From constantly evolving technology where the latest gadget will be out of date even before it hits the market, to the ever-shifting social mores and customs that sometimes seem as if they're going to sweep away everything we know and trust, change in today's world is sudden, swift, and never-ending. Now more than ever before we know the truth of the old adage that the only thing constant is change itself.

And perhaps that's why Christians love this verse from the Letter to the Hebrews: "Jesus Christ is the same—yesterday, today, and forever." We love the reassurance it gives us, that in this world of shifting values and changing culture here is something that isn't open to question.

But by the same token, we should take time to reflect on these words and ask what exactly they mean to tell us. Because sometimes I suspect we retreat to this verse and cling to it, as if it might somehow shelter us from troubling changes in the world or in our lives, so that we ourselves don't have to deal with them. Sometimes I think people look to this verse as a last resort, as a trump card, to use when we've run out of answers, or when we feel overwhelmed by unfriendly forces. So maybe we could start by asking, just why does the author choose this very point to say that Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and forever? Well, did you notice that the lesson from Hebrews this morning is similar to one we looked at last week, in that it is a series of admonitions, words of advice, instructions for the faithful? Some of the key phrases are: "Let mutual love continue...show hospitality to strangers... Remember those who are in prison...Let marriage be held in honor...be content with what you have..."

Now we'll come back to this, but the next advice the author has for us is, "Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith." It is only *then* he states: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever," going on to add one more word of advice: "Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings..."

In others words, the statement that Christ is "the same yesterday, today, and forever," is not offered as a way to end all arguments and discussion or as a panacea for all our spiritual ills; he doesn't think that using these words as a mantra or motto will keep us from having to engage with the troubling changing world in which we live. And he most certainly doesn't want to suggest that this knowledge will somehow keep Christian believers from having to change themselves. Quite the contrary: Instead, the author of Hebrews offers this testimony as a basic article of faith to help us change, grow, develop. His advice here is for his readers to think about and remember their leaders, meaning persons who taught them the faith, people from whom they learned about Jesus Christ, and to emulate them, because the Christ they seek now is the same Christ who guided the lives of their teachers. This knowledge will help them be transformed into the persons God intends them to be.

We know from our own experience this is true. When we think about those from whom we learned the faith—parents and grandparents, pastors and mentors, teachers and leaders in the church—we know from looking at their lives that their faith in Christ was trustworthy and true. And yet we know they were not spared the trials of life, they could not live above the changes that took place in the world and in the church. Instead, they relied on faith in God through Jesus Christ to lead them through those changes, to help them chart their course through life. So also for us.

And so, yes: Jesus Christ is “the same yesterday, today and forever,” because he is the same Lord and Savior who was known and loved by those who taught us the faith. We sometimes think we’re the only generation that has had to face changes, or has had troubles. But Jesus Christ has a track record of being there for and guiding generations for over twenty centuries now. The faith that has been handed over to us is faith in One whose constancy and trustworthiness are unquestioned. Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever, will be there for us, will guide us, as he always has.

And yet, although the facts of Jesus’ life have not changed, although his power and his love are certain, the thinking of the church and individuals about Jesus Christ have had to change, to evolve, to grow. Jesus’ own disciples themselves were slow to grasp Jesus’ identity. Soon after Pentecost and the founding of the church conflicts began to arise concerning who Jesus really was, and what he wanted the church to do. Several of our New Testament books, including this Letter to the Hebrews, address some of the differences of opinion about Jesus that were current *within* the early church. So Jesus, though he is the same yesterday, today, forever, must be understood anew in each age, by every individual believer.

How has your thinking about Jesus had to grow or change over the years since you first learned of him? None of us would want to go to a doctor who hadn’t learned anything new since he graduated from med school; none of us would trust a car mechanic who based his knowledge of cars on the 57 Chevy he worked on as a teenager. As Christian people, as the church, we have to learn who Jesus is for us today. Many of us came to know Jesus Christ as a young person, learning stories of Jesus in Bible school or Sunday school. But as the Apostle Paul put it so well, when I was a child, I spoke as a child, but when I became an adult, I put away childish things. Jesus Christ is the same today and forever, but we are not. And knowing Jesus Christ is not merely understanding a set of principles or rules that never change, but rather, it’s a relationship: one that is indeed faithful and reliable—the same yesterday, today, forever—because that’s what we need in a world where so many other things are up for grabs. And yet it is a relationship which is as new and fresh as each new day, as new situations arise, as new challenges put themselves forth. It must be dynamic; it must be able to change and adapt. Our relationship with Jesus Christ must be able to change us.

And so here are a couple of points to ponder concerning the truth that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever:” Jesus Christ himself—the facts about his life, the truth of the God he reveals to us, and his faithfulness to us throughout our lives—those things don’t change. And so it behooves us to know the Christ of the Scriptures, to understand what he says to us about who God is and who we are to be. It behooves us to be familiar with his life and his relationships with those who followed him. We ought to be working hard to learn what Paul and John and

Peter and Luke said about him the New Testament. Those things don't change, and they will be the foundation of any relationship with Jesus Christ.

But we must also remember that knowing Jesus Christ is more than facts which we memorize or rules we observe rigidly. To know Jesus Christ is to have a relationship with him: one that is developed as we read the Scriptures, as we pray, as we go through the motions of our daily lives, and especially as we live out life in the community of faith we call the church. And our relationship with Jesus Christ should change, must change, because in that relationship Jesus Christ intends to change us.

That brings us back at last to this passage from Hebrews, to these exhortations the author gives us, for every one of them applies to the new situations which arise each day for Christian believers. Let's think of each of them as being undergirded by the truth that Christ is always the same, but remember that we must always discover anew what this means for us. For example when he says, "Let mutual love continue," he is referring to how church members should act toward one another. He means it is a relationship with Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever, which must be the basis for how we relate to one another in his body, the church. He says, "Show hospitality to strangers," and only the faithful unchanging love of Christ will help the church to know what it means to show hospitality to Hispanics in Arizona and Muslims in Manhattan. He advises us to remember those who are in prison, and we know immediately that without a relationship with Jesus Christ, we would not be able to respond to this advice at all.

Then the author turns to domestic issues, and says, "Honor marriage," and we wonder if somehow he is speaking directly to our own times, because of the stresses marriages and families are under. It is the reliable love of Christ for the church which is needed to show us how to make marriages and families stronger in our day. And when he says "Don't be carried away with your love of money...be content with what you have," he reminds us that the love of material things can undermine faith in any age, and that only by accepting Christ's invitation to seek first the kingdom of heaven will we be able to withstand the lure of the things of this world, and thus save our eternal souls.

Jesus Christ is indeed the same, yesterday, today, and forever. It is this truth which underlies all of the best advice in the New Testament, and is the foundation of all of Christian faith. But let us also pray that our relationship with him will grow so that we may be transformed into the image that our ever faithful God intends for us.