Readings: Hebrews 7:23-28; Mark 10:46-52; Jeremiah 31:7-9; Psalm 126

The wall that separates

I used to think that it was impossible to touch your nose with the tip of your tongue, but my father-in-law can – it's quite a sight! So I won't ask you to attempt that this morning. It's not impossible. But they tell me that it's impossible to lick your elbows with the tip of your tongue – my father-in-law can't do that, but is there someone here who can? Some things are just impossible. One of those things is to break the barrier that exists between us and God. Today's reading from a letter to Hebrew Christians explains how Jesus does that for us.

We 'build a wall' between ourselves and God by losing the way in our thoughts, words and deeds or by failing to seize an opportunity to think, say or do what it good and right. Today's reading from a letter to Hebrew Christians calls these things 'sin'. It's things like caring more for self than for others, wanting what we don't have, strutting about with a swollen head, forcing ourselves on others, being always "me first", losing patience and flying off the handle, keeping score of the sins of others, revelling when others grovel, never looking for the best, always giving up. This wall is a barrier to experiencing God's love and blessing. His blessings are currently out of sight!

The wall that gets rebuilt

Today's reading from a letter to Hebrew Christians tells us that the job of the high priest was to offer sacrifices for his and other people's sins. This was a way of saying sorry and it helped knock down the wall. But because these people were not perfect and because people continued to sin, they had to keep on offering sacrifices day after day, and year after year. Nothing they could do kept the wall down permanently.

Nowadays we might try to break down the wall by 'doing good', giving away money, spending time supporting the church community, making a sacrifice for someone. But just like the high priest, we can't break down the wall – we're not perfect and the wall will be built up again. We cannot earn God's acceptance.

The wall that is permanently destroyed

Only Jesus is able to destroy the wall forever. Only Jesus was able to break down the wall completely and permanently because of who he was and what he did. Here' how today's reading from a letter to Hebrew Christians puts it:

“Earlier there were a lot of priests, for they died and had to be replaced. But Jesus’ priesthood is permanent. He’s there from now to eternity to save everyone who comes to God through him, always on the job to speak up for them. So now we have a high priest who perfectly fits our needs: completely holy, uncompromised by sin, with authority extending as high as God’s presence in heaven itself. Unlike the other high priests, he doesn’t have to offer sacrifices for his own sins every day before he can get around to us and our sins. He’s done it, once and for all: offered up himself as the sacrifice. The law appoints as high priests men who are never able to get the job done right. But this intervening command of God, which came later, appoints the Son, who is absolutely, eternally perfect.”

So here’s what this reading is telling us:

only Jesus lives forever, only Jesus is the way to God, only Jesus speaks on our behalf, only Jesus is holy, perfect and set apart, only Jesus offered himself as a sacrifice, and only Jesus was appointed to do the job. This means that although we cannot save ourselves, Jesus is able to do that. Only Jesus could offer himself as the perfect sacrifice, only Jesus could deal with sin and so only Jesus could bring that wall tumbling down! Wow! Wow!! Wow!!! It’s three cheers for Jesus!

So instead of trying to break down the wall and earn God’s acceptance we need to do what Bartimaeus did in today’s Gospel reading. Bartimaeus knew he didn’t deserve Jesus’ help, but he really needed it and so he asked for it – he cried out, ‘Have pity on me!’ Rather than trying to force God to help us, it is better simply to tell him what we need and trust that Jesus is making sure the message gets through. This is faith.

Passing through the wall

Thanks to Jesus alone, we can now pass through the wall and discover what’s on the other side. Thanks to Jesus alone, we can now pass through the wall and discover peace with God and experience God’s love and blessings – maybe for the first time, maybe in a way we’ve never experienced them before. Thanks to Jesus alone, we can now pass through the wall and discover the amazing gifts that he has waiting for us.

In a nutshell, neither the high priest nor our own selves can save us and bring us to God – only Jesus can do that – only Jesus! And today we celebrate his victory, his gift of love, his offering of himself.