

Hebrews 5: 5-10

Here at St Mary's we are, like the author of the book of Hebrews, much exercised in the contemplation of priests, but in our case, in a literally small, parochial, way. There were effectively two forms of priesthood in Judaea at the time of Jesus. The Sadducees, who were the inheritors and descendants of the High Priest, Zadok, and favoured over all the other priests by Solomon because of his support during the accession struggle after the death of his father, King David, these were the powerful, aristocratic priests of the temple in Jerusalem; and others were the Levites who fulfilled a priestly sacrificial role throughout the land. Aaron, Moses's brother, who were both descended from the tribe of Levi, became the first of the Levitical priests. They expanded in number within the tribe of Levi but then became scattered when the Israelites entered the Promised Land. The secular tribe of Levi disappeared and its surviving members seemed to have specialised in cultic functions, carrying out sacrificial duties in the towns and villages. They lost much of their power and function when the rural sanctuaries were abandoned in favour of the major central shrines and were reduced to being assistants to the priests by the time of Jesus, yet still performed priestly functions.

The book of Hebrews was often introduced as The Epistle of St Paul to the Hebrews. It is neither an epistle, nor was it by Paul. Rather it is an anonymous treatise containing a theological argument for the finality of salvation achieved by Christ, directed to those whose faith and practice was weakening, imploring them not to abandon that salvation. It is an early Christian thinker's theology in which Christology, namely the person, nature and role of Christ, plays a vital part and uses the only scriptures Christianity possessed at the time, namely the Old Testament. His readers were almost certainly Jewish Christians on the brink of lapsing back into their original Jewish beliefs. Whilst some scholars think it was written in Hebrew initially, the presence of one or two puns and the occasional play on words in the Greek text make it unlikely to have been written in Hebrew and later translated into Greek.

In the verse right after our reading, the author admits that what he has just written is "hard to explain." He's not wrong! It is particularly hard to explain today's lectionary reading to a 21st century church that isn't one bit interested in closely reasoned arguments about a "high priest in the order of Melchizedek." The author of Hebrews thought it was very important to go into this much detail about the high priesthood of Jesus, because, as I've said, he was writing to second generation Jewish Christians who were being tempted to return to Judaism by, among other things, the attractiveness of the Aaronic, Levitical, priesthood with all its highly choreographed rituals. Hebrews very carefully explains how Jesus is better than anything Judaism had to offer. Unencumbered by the postmodern toleration that is embarrassed by claims of religious superiority, our author says again and again (up to 15 times) that Jesus is better. Here he argues in chapter 4 verse 14, that our "great high priest, who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God" is superior to the high priests who serve in the earthly sanctuary.

Our reading starts with an assertion that Christ did not grab honour for himself, it was bestowed upon him by God and we are given two texts from the Psalms to support this. Psalm 2⁷, a royal, Davidic, psalm; "You are my son, today I have begotten you", which is a formula of adoption whereby the king (David) becomes God's son, more familiar to us from the voice from heaven at Jesus's baptism in Luke's Gospel, in some versions at least. The second quotation is from Psalm 110 (verse 4); "You are the priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek."

So, who is this Melchizedek? His story is told in Genesis 14¹⁷⁻²⁰, and the author of Hebrews gives us more detail and insight into his theology in the first three verses of Chapter 7, namely

"This 'King Melchizedek of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham as he was returning from defeating the kings and blessed him'; and to him Abraham apportioned 'one-tenth of everything.' His name, in the first place, means 'king of righteousness'; next he is also king of Salem, that is, 'king of peace.' Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever."

The Genesis story is a strange one. Abraham is blessed by Melchizedek, who is described as 'King of Salem', and 'priest of God most High'. For some unexplained reason, Abraham pays tithes. In Psalm 110, a psalm in honour of the king David, (or even perhaps Simon Maccabeus), the writer wishes to confer a

title to these offices by suggesting that he, the king, stood in the lineage of a kingship greater any other and a priesthood greater than Aaron's. The writer of Hebrews applies this not to an Old Testament king, but to Christ. Melchizedek is for him a type of Christ. Christ's is a royal priesthood as Aaron's was not and Psalm 110 is cited as a prophecy concerning Christ, whose eternal priesthood holds a blessing which even Abraham must accept. The writer translates Melchizedek as 'King of Righteousness' and 'King of Peace' and hence Melchizedek is the type, or foreshadowing, of Christ as the true 'King of Righteousness' and 'King of Peace'. From the fact that nothing is said about the ancestry or fate of Melchizedek, the writer concludes that he fittingly symbolises the eternal priesthood of Christ. As our writer shows in some detail in Hebrews 7, Melchizedek had no apparent birth or death; thus, he was a priest forever. Indeed, he was both priest and king. And when Abraham, the father of all Israel, bowed down to Melchizedek and even gave him tithes, it was as though all Israel, including the Aaronic priesthood, had acknowledged the superiority of Melchizedek. The conclusion of this complex argument is that Jesus is not only a high priest appointed by God, but that he is a far better high priest than any Aaronic high priest. "So why would you think of going back to an inferior priest?!" Hence, whilst we might think that this reference to an obscure Old Testament passage seems very odd, the writer was trying to commend the Gospel to those who had been conditioned to devout Jewish ways of thinking.

But Verse 2 of Chapter 5 has said "A good high priest 'is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness.'" But how on earth could that be true of Jesus, if he is, indeed, the Son of God? Here the high Christology of the Book of Hebrews seems to be an obstacle in this complex teaching about the high priesthood of Jesus. If he isn't fully human, one of us in every way, then he cannot represent us in matters related to God. If he is so high and lifted up, he is of no use to us.

Hebrews speaks to that very real problem, using language so daring that it challenges our understanding of the Incarnation. If Jesus was indeed fully God, how could he 'learn obedience' and be 'made perfect?' Presumably God's will was his own will since he was God's Son. So how could he obey it? Verse 7 solves this theological problem by pointing not to his eternal divinity, but to his historical incarnation. "In the days of his flesh ..." means "During the days of Jesus's life on earth" Echoing that striking passage in Philippians 2, "but (God) emptied Himself, taking on the form of a slave, being born in human likeness." – God *emptied* himself. – Hebrews claims that something radical happened when "the Word was made flesh." God in the flesh did not cease to be God, but became fully human. As such, Jesus suffered all that we humans suffer.

Note again the superiority of Jesus's priesthood. The Old Testament Aaronic priests could offer only temporary salvation; all the sacrifices and rituals had to be repeated again and again. As our writer will say over and over, Jesus did his work once and for all, thus providing a completed salvation that lasts forever. Hebrews speaks also of eternal redemption (9¹²), eternal inheritance (9¹⁵), and eternal covenant (13²⁰). As F.F. Bruce put it, the salvation won by this High Priest is eternal "because it is based upon the once for all, accomplished, never to be repeated, and permanently valid sacrifice of Christ," the great High Priest after the order of Melchizedek. In a world filled with solutions that work only for a while, with answers that go out of date when the questions change, with a confusing parade of the latest and best way to confront the problems of the human race, this difficult passage points to something far better than all that.

After all the indicatives of this complicated text, there is one implied imperative. Writing to people who were thinking of leaving the Christian faith, our writer says that Jesus is the source of eternal salvation "for all who obey him..." That doesn't mean that we are saved by our good works. "Jesus paid it all; all to him we owe." What we owe him is a steady faith, a faith that remains steadfast when we are tempted to fall away, a faith that works itself out in a life of obedience. Saving faith is not just a head full of complicated doctrine; it is feet faithfully following the One who "in the days of his flesh" prayed, and cried, and feared, and submitted, and suffered, and obeyed unto death, even death on the cross.

The Levitical priesthood was never intended to be permanent (Heb 7¹¹). The death of Christ put an end to the Old Covenant and the Levitical priesthood as evidenced by the rending of the Temple veil in two (Matt 27⁵¹), the way becomes open to the Holy of Holies. Now Jesus himself serves as the believer's Great High Priest. Through his death and resurrection we have access to God's presence where we can freely enjoy him for ever.