

JESUS OUR HIGH PRIEST

Isaiah 53. 4-12

Hebrews 5. 1-10

Mark 10. 35-45

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

‘Is she truly called? Is she qualified? Can she do the job?’ These are the types of questions I was asking myself as I travelled to Jersey this week in order to interview a woman who is looking to train for ordination in the Church of England.

In our appointed epistle reading, the author of Hebrews asks a similar question: is our Lord qualified for the office of high priest? The author’s answer is ‘yes’, but demonstrating the reasons for his position is difficult, because Jesus is not from the tribe of Levi, which from the time of Aaron provided high priests to serve God in the Temple.¹ Christ’s lineage appears to disqualify him; yet the writer of Hebrews begins to respond to this problem and shows that our Lord is qualified to function as our high priest.

The writer examines two qualifications for high priesthood in particular: humility and compassion. In the first four verses of the passage, the writer speaks about compassion and humility in general; and then he reverses the order, speaking about Jesus’s humility in verses 5 and 6 and about his compassion in verses 7 to 10.

With respect to humility, the author first notes that high priests do not grasp at this position of honour. Those who arrogantly seize the office disqualify themselves. Aaron and his descendants who followed him as high priest came to their position because God called and appointed them.

¹ Cf. Ex 28. 1; Heb 7. 11-14.

Christ fulfils this qualification as well. He did not presume that he should take the office of high priest. Rather, God appointed him. The author quotes two passages of scripture to support this claim. The first passage, ‘You are my Son, today I have begotten you’, is actually a reference to Psalm 2 (verse 7). And the second passage, ‘You are a priest for ever, according to the order of Melchizedek’, is a quotation from Psalm 110 (verse 4). This quotation proves to be central in the argument.

The author knows that our Lord does not fulfil the requirement of physical descent from Levi. How can the writer then continue to argue that God has appointed Jesus to be high priest? Since any straightforward logic is blocked, the author uses a chess knight’s move to jump over the objection. Christ, he points out, is not a priest like Levi at all. He is a priest like Melchizedek, who belongs to an older (and therefore better) order of priests.²

In a forthcoming chapter of the epistle to the Hebrews,³ the author will examine the relationship of our Lord and Melchizedek in more detail. Here, he quickly turns to explore a second qualification, that of compassion or mercy. The high priest must be able to deal mercifully with the ignorant and the wayward, since he too is beset by human frailty (5. 2). Most high priests must also offer sacrifice for their own sins as well as those of others (5. 3).

Despite his exalted status as Son of God, Jesus too is able to sympathise with human frailty and limitation, because of what he experienced in ‘the days of his flesh’ (5. 7). The analogy between Christ and the other high priests does not hold in every respect, however, because our Lord is without sin. Nonetheless, his experience of testing

² Melchizedek is an obscure figure who appears in the story of Abraham in Genesis 14. 17-20. He is said to be both a king and a ‘priest of God Most High’. He appears nowhere else in scripture until his name shows up in Psalm 110, where the addressee of the psalm -- understood by Jews of this period to be the Messiah -- is said to be a priest in his order. Hence we have the basis for the Messiah to be identified as a high priest, despite the non-Levite ancestry. Particularly important for Hebrews is that he is said in the verse to be a priest ‘for ever’, which connects nicely to Christ’s immortal post-resurrection status, and which provides a contrast with the mortality of the Levitical priests.

³ Cf. Heb 7. 1-28.

encompasses the full range of human experience, so that he is able to sympathise with us.⁴

In particular, it is the prayers of Jesus that illustrate the depth of his identification with us. Just as the high priest offers ‘gifts and sacrifices for sins’ (5. 1), so Christ sacrificially offers ‘prayers and supplications’ (5. 7). But our Lord did not offer these prayers in a serene sanctuary, isolated from human need and pain. Instead, Jesus prayed to God in the midst of crisis, fervently and passionately, ‘with loud cries and tears’ (5. 7).

These prayers referred to in verse 7 may allude to Christ’s experience of prayer in Gethsemane,⁵ to his prayer from the cross,⁶ or to the role of prayer throughout the entirety of his passion. What matters most is that our Lord stands in solidarity with us in our vulnerability and finiteness; and, like us, he cries out to God for help.

Jesus’s identification with humanity extends beyond prayer to obedience. His experiences in ‘the days of his flesh’ were not a mere gloss on his heavenly status. Rather, his obedient suffering (and here the writer has in mind his paschal suffering and death)⁷ becomes formative for his vocation as priest. In his own experience, Christ learns how to respond to and obey God’s call. He does not cling to his prerogatives as Son of God, but becomes obedient.

That obedience qualifies him for his service as priest, for it demonstrates his capacity to sympathise with us in our struggles. Learning obedience, our Lord became ‘the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him’ (5. 9).

⁴ Cf. Heb 4. 15.

⁵ Cf. Mt 26. 36-46; Mk 14. 32-42; Lk 22. 40-46.

⁶ Cf. Mt 27. 46; Mk 15. 34.

⁷ Cf. Heb 2. 9,10; 9. 26; 13. 12.

But why should the obedience of Jesus as a human being matter? Why does salvation depend on a high priest who is subject to weakness, who prays in crisis, who learns what the human lot is like? Why does Christ's service as high priest require his identification with us?

Writer Louis Cassel provided the answer in a newspaper column, which he wrote in 1959 and entitled the *Parable of the Birds*. The column recounted the story of a man who refused to attend a Christmas Eve service with his family because he did not believe in the incarnation.

The man remained at home, where it began to snow. Minutes later, he heard what he thought was someone throwing snowballs against his window. Going outside to investigate, he found a flock of birds trying to fly through his window as they sought refuge from the storm. He thought that they might find shelter in his barn, and he made his way there. He opened the doors and turned on the light, but the birds stayed outside. He created a trail of bread crumbs for them to follow into the barn, but that did not work. He tried to shoo them into the barn, but that effort also proved unsuccessful.

'If only I could be a bird myself for a few minutes, perhaps I could lead them to safety.' At that moment, the church bells began to ring, and the man sank to his knees in the snow. 'Now I do understand, Lord', he whispered. 'Now I see why you had to do it.'

Amen.