

OD Talk Jesus Great High Priest 14 Feb 26

This morning, we are continuing our series on the letter to the Hebrews and today we are looking at the theme of Jesus our Great High Priest.

This is one of the big themes in this letter and takes up quite a lot of the letter – more than just the short section we have read this morning. The preacher or writer of this sermon or letter that we thought about a few weeks ago, begins his exposition on the theme of Christ our High Priest in chapter 4 and then expands on the idea in chapter 7 and then into chapter 8. You might want to read all of those passages later this week.

I might be wrong but I don't think that many of us think about Jesus as being our great high priest very often, but this idea found in the Letter to the Hebrews has influenced Christian thought and is also present in our liturgy- the words we say during our services in church. In one of the Eucharistic prayers, the one I used this morning at our previous service it says 'accept through him, our Great High Priest, this our sacrifice of thanks and praise'.

So what or whom is a High Priest?

It is helpful if we go back to the Hebrew Bible, or the Old Testament that the preacher, the writer of this letter or sermon, was drawing on very heavily

In Exodus chapter 28, Moses was given instructions by God about the vestments the priest and the high Priest were to wear – breastplate which has twelve precious stones representing the 12 tribes of Israel, ephods both blue and the more colourful one on top, a robe, a tunic, a turban and a sash. A little further on in Exodus 32 we find that Moses was told by God to consecrate as priests his brother Aaron and his clan, who had shown great zeal for the Lord.

There are a number of tasks the priests had to do – they were to teach the Israelites about God, they were to care for the shrines and the sanctuaries, and they also had responsibility for something called the Urim and Thummim, which were carried in their priestly ephod. These were an official way to cast lots to ascertain God's will in any particular situation, either at the request of the King or an individual. The High Priest was the only one who was allowed to go into the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle on the Day of Atonement to offer a sacrifice on behalf of the people for forgiveness of sins and impurity. These priests were intermediaries between God and the people and vice versa.

But before these Levitical priests of the family of Aaron, were instituted there appears in Genesis 14 the rather mysterious character of Melchizedek which the writer of Hebrews refers to at the beginning of chapter 7 ahead of the portion we have just heard. In Genesis, Abraham or Abram as he was at that time, was returning from a military victory when this strange king-priest of Salem suddenly appears. Melchizedek is described as a 'priest of God most high'. He brings out bread and wine and gives Abram a blessing. In response Abraham offers him a tenth of his plunder recovered from the invading kings. And then as suddenly and mysteriously as he arrived on the scene, he disappears without any explanation.

There is also a reference to him in Psalm 110:4 'You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek'. But despite these very brief references, Melchizedek appears in first century Jewish and Christian writings, and the writer of Hebrews may well have drawn on some of this material – indeed some of the ideas the writer of Hebrews discusses might have been very familiar to his first listeners, but equally they may have been completely new, like so many things, we really don't know.

But we do know that the name Melchizedek means 'king of peace' and 'king of righteousness'. Also, Melchizedek was not recorded to have any parents. In other words, the writer to the Hebrews argues, he had no beginning nor ending. Consequently, he is considered a kind of prototype of Jesus – a forerunner if you like. He is eternal, he is righteous and he brings peace – qualities that Jesus, the one true eternal high priest possess.

The writer to the Hebrews goes on to argue how Melchizedek is superior to the Levitical priests. The Levites themselves were responsible for collecting the tithes, the 10% of people's produce and income that they were instructed to give to God. This gave the priests authority. But Abraham gave his tithe, the tenth of his booty to Melchizedek. Where did he get the authority to do that from? It was because he is 'a priest forever'. And Melchizedek also grants the great Abraham, the father of the Israelite people a blessing; the suggestion here being that the more important person gives a blessing to the less important. Melchizedek then, is greater than Abraham and greater than the Levitical priests argues the writer to the Hebrews.

Therefore Jesus, whose priesthood is described as being "after the order of Melchizedek," in that psalm, is greater than Abraham and greater than the Levitical priests who were mortal and who inherited the position because of their family.

Instead, Jesus' priesthood is similar to the mysterious Melchizedek and based on an "indestructible life" rather than a family line. Christ's priesthood is nothing to do with his earthly family, he was from the line of Judah not the priestly family of the Levites.

So, the old system of priests and high priests offering animal sacrifices wasn't good enough and a new system is now in place. This new priesthood is permanent, and it is eternal bought through Jesus' death and resurrection. He is the one perfect high priest.

Jesus is always able to save those who 'approach God through him' (7:25). I know Ian talked last week about how we are able to boldly approach the throne with confidence.

We are able to approach God the Father directly through Jesus Christ, God the Son. It is something we can take it for granted today, but we shouldn't! Through first century Jewish eyes this would have been amazing! Direct access to God was impossible under the old system, but a "new and living way" (Hebrews 10:19-20) was opened through Christ.

Jesus is a better way that we are able approach God 7:19. Jesus gave himself once and for all upon the cross in stark contrast to the Levitical priests who had to go on and on offering sacrifices in order to obtain forgiveness.

In Jesus we have a new way. He is 'holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners and is exalted in heaven' where is intercedes for us – wow! He lives to intercede for us – another image that we might not think about very often.

So as we approach the beginning of Lent this week, Lent being a season of reflection and repentance reflection and penitence as we prepare ourselves to meet with the risen Christ at Easter, we are assured that we can come before God through Christ and that through Jesus our great High Priest we can find forgiveness for our sins because he has made

the only sacrifice that is required through his death. All we need is a contrite heart.