

Jeremiah 31: 31-34

Psalm 119: 9-16 (or 51: 1-13)

Hebrews 5: 5-10

St. John 12: 20-33

Lent V 2024.

“So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest...”

Hebrews 5: 5a

A curious event happened to our spiritual ancestor Abram (also known as Abraham), many, many years before the birth of Jesus... Abram’s nephew Lot has been kidnapped. So, Abram gathers together all his extended male family members and male servants. Abram and the rest of the band pursue the kidnappers north of Damascus, and recapture the stolen household items, his nephew Lot, and other family members who had been kidnapped!...

On their way back home again, the Genesis writer mentions briefly that they meet the local king of the district of Salem... (Many years later, King David would establish the city of Jerusalem at or nearby this site.) The local king of Salem has the name “Melchizedek.” Melchizedek worships the local Canaanite deities, but when Abram and the rest of the fighting men show up, somewhat surprisingly, Melchizedek praises *Abram’s* God, the maker of heaven and earth... King Melchizedek offers the company “bread and wine.” “Bread and wine” – we’ll come back to that... That seems to be the end of Melchizedek! That historical figure is never mentioned again, in the whole Book of Genesis...

Have you ever gone on a road trip, and happened to come across someone who was a bit interesting?... Maybe you were chatting in the line-up at a roadside Tim Hortons, or you noticed the gas station attendant who seemed like an interesting fellow. You might remember the person and what they said or did for a day or two, but it is easy for that detail to be swallowed up by the larger story, of the whole road trip... This casual mention of encountering the local King Melchizedek – who would be more like the community leader of a small, local village – could be easily forgotten...

Many years later, though, the Jewish people remembered this curious little story of King Melchizedek blessing their ancestor Abraham. They had the sense that Melchizedek was not just a local king from ancient history... Rather, Melchizedek represented something *greater* – he was a priest-king figure who represented the priests who offered sacrifices to the Living God, the Lord God of Israel. Written many years after Melchizedek met Abram, King David wrote Psalm 110 with this verse:

The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind,
You are a priest for ever
After the order of Melchizedek.

So, if Abraham lived about 1800 years before the birth of Jesus (we can't date Abraham to the exact year in our calendars), and if King David lived about a thousand years before Jesus, by about 800 years after the Priest-King Melchizidek met Abraham, there was the sense in the Jewish nation that Melchizidek was one person, yet he was a mysterious figure in a priestly lineage who would last "for ever..." Melchizidek represented something more – a practice through time, of offering gifts of bread and wine to the living God...

Now, let's skip ahead another 1000 or so years, to the time when today's second lesson was being written -- in the Letter to the Hebrews... The first-century Christians were coming to terms with the amazing facts about Jesus the Christ. They knew Jesus had died on the cross. They knew that the Lord Jesus was God's perfect self-offering, for the forgiveness of all our sins... When the early Christians thought about this mysterious priest Melchizidek, a single figure who represented a priestly lineage of offerings to the Lord God Almighty – well, the link was beyond obvious to them! *Jesus Christ* is this perfect Priest. *Jesus Christ* is the High Priest chosen by God the Father himself, "after the order of Melchizidek (v. 10)..."

There are many titles for Jesus of Nazareth: He is the Chosen One; the Messiah; Emmanuel (God with Us). He is the Christ, the incarnate God the Son. Another title for Jesus is that he is our great High Priest...

What does that mean, though, exactly, to call Jesus our great High Priest, in the order of Melchizidek? Maybe a bit confusingly, some clergy are called "priests." Now that we think about it, what the heck *is* a Priest, anyway?...

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a Priest like this: "Someone who is authorized to perform the sacred rites of a religion, especially as a mediatory agent between humans and God..." An "mediatory agent" – a priest is an agent who is a go-between – a go-between between humans and God.

Obviously, Jesus Christ himself is our great Mediator – the great Go-between between God and people (I Timothy 2: 5). Many of us will recognize this prayer during Holy Communion, from the Anglican common prayer book: "Grant this our prayer, O Father, for Jesus Christ's sake, our only Mediator and Advocate..." Jesus Christ is our Mediator, restoring us into a restored relationship with Almighty God himself... He is our great High Priest, providing access to the inner heart of God...

Okay, Jesus Christ is our High Priest... But some might say, "Wait! Don't we all have access to God through what Jesus has done? We don't have to go to a building or perform a rite so we can pray. Can't we just... talk with God any time?... Indeed!... We can talk with God any time. Jesus is our High Priest. But as we belong to him, we are all a kingdom, a great family, of priests – every one of us. First Peter 2 explains it this way:

Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ... But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

Once you were not a people,
but now you are God's people;
once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy. (vv. 5, 9-10)...

So, Jesus Christ is our great High Priest, in the order of Melchizidek. As we belong to the Lord Jesus, we all have access to God the Father. We, the Church, are a kingdom of priests...

This is a lot to take in! Here's 1 more thought... In the leadership in many churches, including the Anglican Church, there are bishops (in the spiritual tradition of the apostles). There are deacons (ordained servants)... And, there are those whom we call priests... The original word was "presbyter;" "elder." But over very many years, that became shortened from "presbyter" to "priest..." It is Jesus Christ who offered the perfect self-sacrifice... But we serve God and the community, and we lead the parish community in offerings of praise and thanksgiving, *in response* to what the Lord Jesus has done...

All this is from the a few phrases in the Letter to the Hebrews... The Letter to the Hebrews is one long, beautiful presentation about how special it is to be follower of Jesus Christ. Let's review 2 highlights from today's second reading:

1. Jesus Christ is our great High Priest (v. 5)
2. Jesus Christ is in the line of Melchizidek, offering gifts to the Living God (v. 6)

We are a kingdom of priests, with Jesus' Spirit living in us... We can pray to God and listen for God, anywhere; any time...

Along with others, Anglican Christians have leaders in the congregation, also called priests, who (like Melchizidek) bring bread and wine before the Lord... As we approach Easter weekend, may we be drawn even deeper to what God has done for us in Jesus Christ; now and for ever.

Amen.