

A higher priest?

A few weeks ago, I referred to an account in chapter 24 of the book of Exodus (24: 4b-8) which tells us of Moses making a sacrifice on behalf of the people – a sacrifice which involved slaughtering young bulls and culminated in Moses spreading half the blood of the sacrifice on the altar – and the other half on the people.

It would have been a confronting experience for all of those present. But it was an important thing to do: the sacrifice of the bulls was described as “fellowship offerings to the Lord”, and just the value of what was sacrificed shows how important the people’s relationship with God was to them.

Have you heard the story of the people of various denominations who are discussing how they determine how much they should give in offering to God? Well, the first one says “We draw a circle on the ground, and throw our money up in the air over it, and whatever money lands in the circle, we put it in the offering” and the second one says “We do a similar thing – we draw a circle on the ground, throw our money up in the air, and whatever lands outside the circle, we put in the offering”, and the third one says “We do better than that: we draw a circle on the ground, throw our money up in the air, and whatever God wants, God can keep.”

But if we were making a sacrifice, in the way the people of Moses time did, we would be throwing our money into a fire. Giving it up, entirely. Not putting it to a “better” use or a good cause, but actually sacrificing it.

People often equate the practice of sacrificing, that we read of in the Old Testament, with the practice of giving an offering that we have in churches.

Things have changed. And though sacrifices were needed in ancient times, they are no longer needed – and here in our reading today from the letter to the Hebrews, the change is explained.

The writer begins by telling us that “Every high priest is selected from among the people and is appointed to represent the people in matters related to God (5:1).

The main function of a high priest was not to preach in the temple or provide pastoral care to members of his congregation – the things we might expect of a religious leader. Instead, he was appointed to represent the people in matters related to God. Rather than bringing God’s word to the

people (which as be the role of a prophet in Old Testament times), he was there to act as a mediator between people and God.

And the thing that the high priest did for the people was to offer gifts and sacrifices on their behalf for their sins. The ancient people – as people still do – did the wrong thing, and they needed to be reconciled with God. There was nothing that they could do themselves, and they had to go to a priest. They couldn't make the sacrifice for themselves, but they could pay the cost of the sacrifice.

The writer explains that the high priest was able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself was subject to weakness. The high priest, though he had an exalted position, was still a human being, he still did the wrong thing, so the writer tells us that when he made sacrifices for the sins of the people, he had to make sacrifices for his own sins as well.

As I read this passage, I ponder verse four – “And no one takes this honour on himself, but he receives it when called by God.” No one take the honour of being high priest on themselves. To me it sounds a bit like the politician who says, “I don't aspire to the leadership, but if called upon by my party I'd step up.”

But the office of high priest was instituted by God – and however much backroom dealing there may have been to work one's way up the hierarchy of the temple, in the end, the high priest is called by God, just as Aaron was.

So that's how things were: From the time of Moses and Aaron, through all the Old Testament history – the wilderness, the promised land, the establishment of the kings, the temple, the exile, the rebuilding of the temple.

With the establishment of the temple, it became the high priest's responsibility to enter the Holy of Holies, each year on the day of atonement (Yom Kippur), to make a sacrifice. It was only the high priest, and only on that day, who could enter the holy of holies – where the ark of the covenant had been housed, and where they held that God would be present.

It tells us “In the same way, Christ did not take on himself the glory of becoming a high priest.” Just like all the high priests before him, since Aaron, Jesus was called by God:

But God said to him, “You are my Son; today I have become your Father.” (5:5b, from Psalm 2:7).

And he says in another place, “You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.” (5:6) – and that other place is Psalm 110:4.

At this point, you might be wondering who Melchizedek is. Melchizedek is Hebrew for ‘king of righteousness’, and the first reference we have is back in Genesis 14:18-20a, where he meets Abraham:

Then Melchizedek king of Salem [Jerusalem] brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, and he blessed Abram, saying, “Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And praise be to God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand.”

Beyond that, we only have a reference to him in Psalm 110, and then mention in the letter to the Hebrews. He was the King of Jerusalem long before that city has any other importance, and he’s a priest of God Most High, but long before Aaron and the establishment of the priesthood. We do know that Abraham accepted his authority over him by receiving a blessing through him and then Melchizedek blessed God for delivering Abraham’s enemies into his hand.

He is a mysterious figure, but we learn here in the letter to the Hebrews that Jesus is told “You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.” What I think we should take from that is that Jesus’ role as high priest has an origin that is much older than even Aaron. Melchizedek is, after all, the first priest mentioned in the bible.

Of course, Jesus has a role that is far greater than being high priest. One Christmas carol that we isn’t very popular in some churches is ‘We Three Kings’, because, after all, we don’t know that there were three of them, and we can be pretty sure that they weren’t in fact kings, but I think it’s a still a good carol and it does tell us that the three gifts that the wise men from the east bring to Jesus in Bethlehem, gold, frankincense and myrrh are symbolic of what Jesus is to do: Gold for a king, frankincense for a priest,

myrrh for a sacrifice. We're used to thinking of Jesus as a king (and we'll be celebrating Christ the King Sunday at the end of next month), and we're used to thinking Jesus as a sacrifice, but we don't so often think of him as a priest. Someone who mediates between God and us.

But having established Jesus as a high priest, it's Jesus as sacrifice that we heard of next from the letter to the Hebrews:

During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. (5:7)

Remember, after the last supper, Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, in anguish, where he prayed "Father...everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will." (Mark 14:36)

Jesus cried out to his Father, "Save me!", but it wasn't to be. He was a high priest, but as Paul writes to the Philippians (2:8), he humbled himself, by becoming obedient to death - even death on a cross!

And the writer to the Hebrews tells us, that Son though he was, [Jesus] learned obedience from what he suffered (5:8).

When we think of the suffering of Jesus, we often think of the pain of the beatings during the trials, the crown of thorns and the scourging and the crucifixion itself.

But there was more to his suffering than the physical pain - we heard in our Old Testament reading from Isaiah (53:7-8a),

He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away. Yet who of his generation protested?

Remember the taunting while Jesus hung on the cross? *Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, "So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, come down from the cross and save yourself!" In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself! Let this Messiah, this king of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe." Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him. (Mark 15:29-32)*

As Isaiah prophesied all those years before “Yet who of his generation protested?”

That’s the suffering that Jesus experienced, suffering that made him cry out “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.” (Mark 15:34)

Sometimes in the modern church we characterise Jesus as a revolutionary and a radical, someone who defied the religious authorities, and while that’s true to some extent, we need to also see Jesus as obedient – obedient to God the Father, throughout his life and ministry, and his words and actions were consistent with the scriptures.

Jesus was obedient through it all. Through the pain. And also through the abandonment. He didn’t learn obedience because he was disobedient beforehand - he was without sin, therefore in perfect relationship with God the Father. But the writer tells us that, in Jesus’ obedience and suffering, he was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

He was the high priest. But he was also the sacrifice. The perfect sacrifice. The Passover lamb.

Hebrews tells us and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek. (5:9-10)

Jesus was a perfect high priest. I don’t mean that he was just a very, very good high priest, or that he was just better than all those who had gone before him, but that he perfected the role of high priest – in his perfect character, his perfect life and his perfect work - work that was perfected in his atoning death on the cross for us. The work of Jesus was perfect and complete. It accomplished exactly what it was designed to accomplish.

Gone are the days of high priest after high priest. Gone are the days of costly, brutal sacrifices, and the splashing of blood.

Jesus as our high priest after the order of Melchizedek not only listened and obeyed God the Father; he also answered him by his perfect suffering and death on the cross. His once and for all time - and for all people - sacrifice makes him a perfect high priest - a higher priest. And we can follow his perfect example by worshipping him with lives of love and obedient service.

Jesus is king, and priest and sacrifice. Let's all accept him as our king, our priest and our sacrifice.

Amen.