

**OUR GREAT HIGH PRIEST**

**(Job 42; Psalm 34:1-8; Hebrews 7:21-28; Mark 10:46-52)**

Over the past weeks our lectionary has been bringing us readings from one of the more neglected books of the New Testament: the Letter to the Hebrews. It is one of the longest works of the New Testament to be called an "Epistle" or "Letter": 13 Chapters, around 7000 words. It would take close to an hour to read out loud.

Why is it a neglected book? If you have been listening to the readings, you might be able to tell me! It's full of Old Testament quotations, and seems to be involved with complicated explanations comparing the Old Testament with the Christian Gospel. And actually that's one of the things which makes it such a significant book! It reminds us that the Gospel didn't come out of nowhere: it grows out of the Old Testament, and out of God's covenant with Abraham and the people of Israel.

We call it a letter, but it seems to be more of a written sermon or even a Bible study than a letter. In fact it describes itself as a "word of exhortation". We don't know who wrote it. The writer certainly had taken in Paul's message, but he handles the truths of the Gospel from a different angle.

We don't know who were the original recipients either. From reading the letter, we can gather that they were mainly Jewish Christians who were in danger of giving up their faith in Jesus, or of drifting away. It seems that they were being pressured by their fellow-Jews, or even facing persecution. Perhaps they were missing their former traditions and practices. It might be easier to go back to their own people and their own ways, and to forget about Christianity. No doubt many of their Jewish friends were questioning the value of their Christian beliefs, and even suggesting that they had been led into some sort of heresy.

Our writer therefore is seeking to help his readers to understand the vital difference between the teaching of the Old Testament and the Christian faith. He wants them to see what they would lose if they let go of their faith in Jesus. And in particular he wants them to see that the Old

Testament finds its true fulfilment in the message of Jesus. And much of the book works out the implications of a number of passages from the Old Testament in the light of Jesus. This is a book that seeks to make clear:

- who Jesus really is;
- what he has done for us; and
- how to respond to the message of Jesus.

To get the point that our writer is making in today's short passage, which comes from around the middle of the letter, it may be helpful to see the main things he has said so far.

The Letter starts by reminding us that God has spoken to us. He has not left us in the dark about himself. God has spoken through Moses and the prophets, but now he has spoken in a new way through his divine Son, who himself was involved in the creation of the world. Our writer wants us to listen carefully to Jesus, and the message of Jesus.

The writer then turns to Psalm 8, that beautiful Psalm which reflects on the wonder of the universe, and then asks "What are we humans, that you care about us? You have even put us in charge of your wondrous world." Our writer picks up this idea and asks: are we humans really in charge of the world? It doesn't always look like it, as we are reminded time and again even these days. But he then says that there is one human who has demonstrated that power: Jesus fulfils the picture of this Psalm in a very special way. Jesus showed this unique power as he healed people, and in his creative miracles. Jesus has even destroyed death itself, that great enemy of us all. Again our writer moves from the Old Testament to the unique claims of Jesus.

Our writer then moves to another Psalm, very familiar to us who used to go to the Old Morning Prayer service. It is Psalm 95, which begins with an enthusiastic "O come, let us sing unto the Lord". But the mood suddenly changes at verse 7 of the 11 verses. The Psalm calls us to listen to God's voice and not to harden our hearts, as the people of Israel did in the wilderness. And our writer uses the Psalm to challenge his readers not to harden their hearts to the message of Jesus. That earlier generation of Israel missed out on God's rest in the sense that they failed to enter the Promised Land. Our writer points to a far greater rest, the blessings of God's kingdom. Don't miss out on it, he says: listen to God's voice today!

Our writer then introduces a new description of Jesus: he is the **Great High Priest**, and this becomes a key theme of the next few chapters, including chapter 7, from where today's passage comes. Now when we think of a priest, we think of a leader of worship, a preacher of the word, a pastor of the congregation. Indeed our word "priest" comes from the Greek word "*presbuteros*", which means an elder or senior person.

But the Jewish idea of a priest was rather more specific. The Hebrew word is "*Cohen*", a familiar Jewish name. In the Old Testament, a priest was one who not simply presided in worship, but in particular one who offered sacrifices on behalf of the people. A priest really acted as a go-between between sinful humanity and the holy God.

And then our writer finds yet another Psalm to expound. This is Psalm 110, understood by many Jewish people to refer to the Messiah, the promised King and Saviour. In the Psalm we read that the Lord has sworn: "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek." We heard Melchizedek's name mentioned in last week's reading. He is the king of Salem who greets Abraham on his way home from battle with a number of kings and their armies who had kidnapped Lot. (Lot seems to have been pretty good at getting himself into trouble!) Melchizedek is also described in Genesis as priest of the Most High God: he gives a blessing to Abraham, and Abraham gives him a tenth of the booty; in other words Abraham gives him a tithe. After this strange encounter in the book of Genesis, we don't hear any more of Melchizedek until Psalm 110. The Psalm seems to suggest that the Messiah will be some kind of priest, not an obvious role for this conquering figure.

But now our writer puts it all together and shows how Jesus brings together all these realities. Yes, Jesus is a great high priest, a go-between linking humanity and God, one who offers sacrifice to bring forgiveness of sin. But Jesus brings a whole new meaning to that idea of priesthood. His priesthood is not the traditional priesthood associated with Aaron: it is something quite new. Hence this idea of a new order of priesthood, the order of Melchizedek.

Whereas ordinary priests need to offer sacrifices for their own sins, we are told that Jesus is free from sin, even though he has experienced the extremes of temptation so that he truly understands the pressures we face

from temptation. Ordinary priests were chosen as part of the system: This priest was appointed by God himself, confirmed by an oath. Whereas ordinary priests keep needing to offer sacrifices because we humans keep sinning, Jesus' sacrifice of himself for us deals with all sin for all time, so that no further sacrifice is needed. Whereas priests come and go because they are mortal, Jesus is eternal. He opens the way into a new covenant: a new relationship between humans and God.

Jesus is free from sin. Jesus is eternal. His sacrifice deals with **all** sin. He is the one who brings us today truly into the welcoming presence of God. My role as a priest is simply as a leader and preacher. There is no sacrifice that I need to offer on behalf of anyone: Jesus has offered himself once and for all, for all people for all time.

Well, the Letter to the Hebrews continues on, using the Old Testament to explain who Jesus is, what he has done for us, and how to respond to him. In a wonderful chapter, the Letter will describe the reality of faith: faith that is put into practice, and is lived out, as demonstrated by faithful people in the Old Testament. And **faith** is what the writer looks for as the response from his readers, and ultimately from us. "Keep going", he says. "Hang onto your faith. Don't go back to the way things were."

The Old Covenant was good, but there is now something so much better, to which that covenant pointed. He calls his readers not to drift back to old ways; not to take the Gospel for granted; not to let go of that faith in Jesus, who has done all that needs to be done to bring us into fellowship with God. We mightn't face the same temptations as those Jewish Christians of old faced, but there is always the temptation for us to sit lightly on our faith, or to take it for granted. Let's resist that temptation.

And let us heed the calls of our writer in the latter chapters of the book. Let's keep believing. Let's keep seeking to grow in our understanding of the message of the gospel. Let's keep following Jesus, even when it seems hard. And let's keep loving one another, encouraging and supporting each other as we follow Christ.

As Christians, we don't place our deepest trust in our selves or our own efforts, nor in some system, nor even in our church. We place our trust in Jesus, our Great High Priest, our Saviour, our Messiah and King! Amen.