

Jesus the priest: Hebrews 5:5-10

by [Fred Craddock](#) in the [March 22, 2003](#) issue

The Epistle to the Hebrews joins the Revelation to John as the literature most intimidating to readers of the New Testament. With the Revelation the reader must endure its terrible splendor; with Hebrews the reader must listen intently to the tightly woven arguments in what the writer calls a sermon. No question about it, the listening is demanding, not only because of the writer's rhetorical style but also because of the assumption that the reader knows the Old Testament and the wilderness life of Israel, a life centered in the tabernacle and the daily ministrations of the priest. The difficulty for the reader is softened, however, by the realization that the writer is fully aware of the burden. For example, after introducing the "M" word, Melchizedek, the writer relaxes the reader with "about this we have much to say that is hard to explain," and then does not return to the theme until Hebrews 7:1. The recess is welcome.

In fact, the style of the writer is patient and pastoral; the path is cleared for primary themes. For instance, the author focuses the sermon on the affirmation that Christ's saving work is that of a priest. Obviously such a view will draw not amens but questions. Jesus was no priest! He was of the tribe of Judah, not Levi. When did he serve at the altar or perform the sacred rites? He cleansed the temple with a whip and clashed with the priests. How can one claim he was a priest? Into such an unusual thought the reader must be led patiently. And so, Jesus as priest is only implied in 1:3b, briefly stated in 2:17, presented more strongly in 3:1, elaborated upon with great pastoral warmth in 4:14-16 and finally developed at length with both reason and scripture beginning at 5:1. The writer pauses at 5:11 to say, "I know this is difficult." How considerate of the reader Hebrews is!

Before arguing that Jesus belongs to an order of priests prior to and different from the Levitical priesthood, the author addresses the fundamental questions: Who is a priest? What does a priest do? These questions are answered briefly but clearly. A priest represents God to the people in words and actions. The distance implied when we speak of the transcendence of God is negotiated through the ministries of the priest, and the people before the altar experience the word and the presence of God.

Obviously, no one would presume to take this role upon himself or herself. Being a priest is not simply one's "chosen profession," as though taking the training and putting on the robes made one a priest. A priest is of God, God chosen, God appointed. The writer assumes there is no need to argue the point.

But does Jesus qualify? Beyond question, says our text. He was appointed by the God who had said, "You are my Son," words from coronation Psalm 2 declaring that the Son is also King. That same God now says of the Son-King, "You are a priest forever" (Ps. 110:4). Nothing further is said. For the community of faith, Jesus Christ is appointed priest forever, like Melchizedek, without beginning or end (Hebrews 7:1-10).

However, the picture is not yet complete, for a priest must not only be of God but also of the people. He must become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, tested through suffering in order to help those being tested (2: 17-18). Only then can the priest deal gently with the ignorant and wayward (5:2). The ministries of a true priest are performed in full sympathy with the people.

Again, does Jesus qualify? The answer is Yes, but it is not an easy Yes. That Jesus was of God was a swift affirmation, needing the support of only two brief quotations from the psalms; that Jesus was of the people seems to call for repetition and elaboration. Jesus was made for a little while lower than the angels (2:9); not ashamed to call us brother and sister (2:11); shared with us flesh and blood (2:14); is able to sympathize with our weaknesses, having been tested as we are, yet without sin, and therefore able to offer mercy and grace in time of need (4:14-16). One would think these statements are enough to complete satisfactorily the ancient Christian formula: he was not as we are and therefore *can* help; he was as we are and therefore *will* help.

Yet it seems that the writer feels he cannot say often enough that Christ was and is one with the people. It is as though there were in the writer himself or in the reader a caution, a hesitation about this article of our faith, that Christ was "truly human." Therefore this quality, essential for any priest, is declared once more, not with quotations from scripture, not with bold pronouncements, but with a scene from the earthly life of the historical Jesus, or as the writer puts it, "in the days of his flesh." "Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission."

This passage raises the tantalizing question of whether the writer was familiar with the gospel tradition about Jesus, and with Gethsemane. But of greater importance is the author's inclusion of the life of Jesus in the message we call "the gospel." The death, burial and resurrection of Jesus are not all we need to know. And the point in his life which most vividly touches our own, qualifying him to be our priest, is his time of fervent prayer. His kneeling beside us as we offer up loud cries and tears is already an answer to prayer.