

What does a high priest do? (Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33)

A worshiper can go a long time without any idea of who Melchizedek is and what it means to be a priest according to his order.

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March 16, 2018

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In my Lutheran tradition we have a lot of churches named for a role or metaphor that scripture attributes to Christ: Good Shepherd, Christ the King, Messiah, Savior. We don't have many named for "Christ the High Priest," even though the Letter to the Hebrews serves it up for us. I can only guess at why we, but it's an image we struggle to find a place for. And while I can't say very confidently, I would guess that this bashfulness is present in other Protestant traditions as well. Hebrews makes relatively few appearances in the lectionary cycle, and the Torah texts describing the priesthood and its rituals are even less visible. A faithful worshiper can go a long time without forming any idea of who Melchizedek is and what it means to be a priest according to his order.

It's true that the big names associated with Jesus in the Gospels are from not the priestly but the prophetic tradition (Elijah, Moses). And many of our churches are more steeped in the prophetic literature of the Old Testament than in its ritual and cultic material. Still, we have an important image here in Hebrews. Christ as a high priest prompts us to remember what the priestly function does in relating God to the people. In the scriptures, the traffic between humans and God is not merely faith and ethical behavior in response to instruction and grace. There is also a whole sacrificial and intercessory system which Christians have variously claimed is

abolished, superseded, or recapitulated and transformed by Christ.

Without trying to resolve that whole thicket of questions, it's worth looking at the sacrificial language of this Hebrews passage, especially in connection with the fulsome intercessory prayer in John's Gospel. "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears," says Hebrews. His priestly service was not the one practiced in the Temple (hence, perhaps, the reference to the mysterious Genesis figure Melchizedek rather than to Aaron), and it was not merely serving as a sacrificial victim. But it is a role of mediation between God and humans—not just revealing God nor establishing a new standard of conduct or a different worldview, but interceding with God on our behalf.

Even if this priestly image and its theological implications can be hard to discern in preaching and teaching, it lives on in the simple fact of prayers and collects that conclude with "through Christ our Lord." The suggestion is that our own petitions pass through him. This brings the priestly function home in an intimate way for people who may be clearer on the idea that priesthood is something done by "all believers" than on the idea of priesthood itself. Jesus isn't the only one who can offer prayers and supplications, after all. Anyone can offer that kind of sacrifice, and so be joined to him in this most challenging and reverent image.