

The Perfect Priest

Hebrews 5:5-10

⁵ So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you";

⁶ as he says also in another place, "You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek."

⁷ 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. ⁸ Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; ⁹ and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, ¹⁰ having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

What, really, is a priest? A priest is someone entirely human, just like the rest of us, struggling along like the rest of us, who is also called upon to receive, to bear, and to lift before God the needs that are common to us all. To conceive of Jesus this way locates him squarely in our nature and our world, and sees his work as intimate, connectional, and costly.

To call him not only priest but high priest suggests that in him the role intensifies, condensing to an ultimate embodiment. Especially in mind, of course, is the chief task of Israel's high priest: that in the most terribly sacred space, all alone, he bears to God the most crucial human need. Our scripture envisions Christ as being forever in this mode.

The words of the Greeks in the Gospel reading for this day—"We wish to see Jesus"—stretches a kind of sacred canopy over those of us who gather for worship, whether we are moved by a conscious need or by an unformed longing.

For some of us who hear this text, the image of the "high priest" is a great comfort. For any whose lives seem to unfold on one side of a chasm between the profane world of ache and ambiguity and the divine realm of glory and peace, the reassurance that there *is* someone who can cross the divide in both directions is

good and heartening news. We are grateful when worship helps us to see Jesus as our perfect high priest: the messenger who brings the news of redemption from God to our longing, the mediator who bears the fruits of our living to God as our offering.

But the breadth of the sacred canopy of worship always offers its spiritual shelter to a microcosm of human experience—so there are surely others present who long to see Jesus, but for whom the image of the great high priest is a more thick lens. The affirmation that Jesus has "been made perfect ... through what he suffered" (vv. 9, 8) for some of us may seem to widen the gulf of meaning between his suffering and our own. Particularly for those whose spiritual lives consist largely of unmediated prayer in the solitude of our own yearning, the sudden appearance of Jesus as a priest of "the order of Melchizedek" is unexpected or disorienting a way of seeing him as the transfiguration was for Peter, James, and John.

Those of us who seek Jesus within the august office of the high priesthood may recognize him in the comforting rhythms of our spiritual family at praise and at prayer – in song, the sermon, or at the Lord's table.

The words by which Jesus was commissioned as high priest (v. 5) echo the words of God at Jesus' baptism (Mark 1:11 and par.). Jesus' baptism is linked to our own by this liturgical season: the early church's Lenten practice of discipling culminated at baptism during the Easter vigil, now less than two weeks away. So the high priesthood of Jesus began where all our journeys begin: in the experience of the unconditional love of God poured out in water and in Spirit, sealing the new covenant in each heart (cf. Jer. 31).

Jesus, our high priest, in the order of Melchizedek, was the bearer of bread and wine who blessed Abraham and bore his tithe to the altar (Gen. 14:18).

Melchizedek, the "king of righteousness," is also the "king of peace" (Heb. 7:2), "a minister in the sanctuary and the true tent that the Lord ... has set up" (Heb. 8:2).

Those who would see Jesus will recognize him, even in the weariness and worry of their journey, as he comes to us with broken bread and brimming cup, and as we receive these gifts in remembrance of him.

Our perfect high priest can be seen for who he is, too, in the pouring out of his anguish "with loud cries and tears" during "the days of his flesh" (v. 7). Prayer—particularly prayer of deepest longing—is a place in which we recognize Jesus as we saw him at the tomb of Lazarus, in Gethsemane, and at Golgotha. What Jesus bears to God, what he offers up as sacrifice, are "prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears." Jesus was a priest not lifting a lamb or dove, or bread and wine, or even an atonement for sin. Into the presence of God, this priest offers weeping and screaming in the lifting up of prayers. Understood as a high-priestly act, Jesus is bearing in his person all the loud cries, all the tears and supplications of the people. His passion, in other words, embodies and suffers not only the guilt of the world, but also the grief of the world, human anguish, isolation, longing, misery, and rage, cried out to the heavens. All of this accrues to him, is borne by him and poured painfully out of him. Certainly the prayers, tears, and loud cries are for himself, for his own deliverance. But more deeply, he is a priest, staggering beneath the weeping, groaning supplications of the world.

More hauntingly, since the text calls him "priest forever," we are perhaps to imagine his cries forever echoing through the heavens.

Prayer is a place, too, where we meet each other as children of God. In worship we pool our compassion for one another's struggles and allow prayer to transform them into the deep solidarity of the church. Whether our offerings to God are loud, unrequited cries or only "sighs too deep for words" (Rom. 8:26), worship is the place where, as we entrust our prayers to this high priest, we recognize him as one

whom we have heard pray with all those same deeply human voices. Worship is the place where indeed we see and hear him in each other as we pray.

Our perfect high priest is also one who "learned obedience" (v. 8). Even though "he was a Son," his grasp of the grace and mercy of God deepened as he listened to his life and struggled, with us, to read the meaning of his days. He was given "the tongue of those who are taught"—and, as high priest, he knows "how to sustain the weary with a word" (Isa. 50:4). With him morning by morning, Sunday by Sunday, week by week, we listen as those who are taught, as sons and daughters who are learning obedience in the reverent reconforming of our lives to the shape of grace and mercy.

Biblical theologian Walter Wink writes that "history belongs to the intercessors, who believe the future into being." The high priest of the order of Mechizedek is none other than the one who intercedes for us and with us—the one who believes the future out ahead of us, and who lights the way into it. His approachability, as Tom Long notes, makes it possible for us to "forget the sheer audaciousness ... of daring to approach the holy." As we come to see and to know God in worship, that most elemental experience of Christian community, God helps us to become intercessors ourselves, who believe the future into being. **Richard E. Spalding**

The scripture's vision suggests both consolation and calling. All who have reason for tears and loud cries are addressed—mourners, the war-ravaged, the poor, the terrified, the oppressed, those who are too much alone. Our tears, cries, and clenched silences are gathered into a groaning divine cry, ceaselessly rising, painfully lifting the suffering world toward hope of transformation. The vocation of the church, in large measure, is to hear and to join in that cry. **Paul Simpson Duke**

Those who would see Jesus are invited to meet him in the peace of the sanctuary: at the font, at the Table, and sometimes in the sighs too deep for words

of the body, his body, at worship. There the intercessions of the pioneer and perfecter of our faith will teach us the audacity of prayer. And we will go from the true tent of the Lord, in the strength of the gifts we receive there from God at the hand of our high priest, to join him in the work of together believing the future into being. **Richard E. Spalding**

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B,
Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide.