

The Thirtieth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Jeremiah 31:7-9
<i>Response</i>	The Lord has done great things for us; we are glad.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 126:1-2, 2-3, 4-5, 6
<i>Second Reading</i>	Hebrews 5:1-6
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	...our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 10:46-52

The thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time for year B continues the Church's journey through the marvelous letter to the Hebrews. We're moving slowly, but that's okay because there's just so much in this epistle. Here we're looking at chapter 5, verses 1-6, and we see here the introduction of this extremely crucial theme of Jesus not only as high priest but as a high priest according to the order of Melchiz'edek. So let's take a peek at that. The passage says this:

For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness. Because of this he is bound to offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. And one does not take the honor upon himself, but he is called by God, just as Aaron was. So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him, "Thou art my Son, today I have begotten thee"; as he says also in another place, "Thou art a priest for ever, after the order of Melchiz'edek."¹

Alright, a lot going on here. We'll try to unpack it. The first one, once again we see that Jesus is being identified as high priest. But here Hebrews says what His purpose is:

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God... (Hebrews 5:1a)

What Hebrews is saying here is — not just Jesus in this case but — every high priest going back to Aaron has the principle function of acting as a mediator, a sacrificial mediator, who represents the people of Israel to God. He acts on their behalf. He speaks on their behalf. He pleads on their behalf with God, and he offers sacrifices on their behalf — in particular, or principally, the sacrifice of the Day of Atonement, which is meant to reconcile the people of Israel to God for all of the sins that have been committed within the community, within the whole people, within the whole nation, over the course of the entire year... including the sins of the high priest himself.

So Hebrews here is emphasizing that in the Old Testament, the high priest would be chosen to act as a mediator, a sacrificial mediator. And in that role of mediation, the high priest was actually able to sympathize with the sinful people of Israel (with all the people from the tribes), because he himself was a sinner:

... since he himself is beset with weakness. (Hebrews 5:2b)

And as I pointed out in another video, this is why — verse 3 is saying here — because of the fact that he himself was a weak sinner, he was not just bound to offer sacrifice on the behalf of the people. It wasn't like for the Day of Atonement, he went in and just atoned for the people's sin and he was fine. No, he first had to offer a sacrifice of atonement for his own sin and then for the sins of the people.

So the mediator is in one sense above the people, but in another sense, he's a member of the people. He's both representing them to God and also coming before God as a member of that people.

And here, Hebrews says something very fascinating. This is one of the only times in the New Testament where we see the language of “vocation” or “a call” being used with specific reference to the call to the priesthood. This is a very significant text. When he says that the high priest in the Old Testament...

... does not take the honor upon himself, but he is called by God, just as Aaron was.

The Greek word there is *kaleō*. You can actually hear the fruits of the word “call” in that. In Latin, it’s *vocatur*. We get the word “vocation” from this. So in contemporary Catholic circles, we will talk about or we’ll raise the question, “Does this young man have a vocation?” What we tend to mean by that is, “Is God calling him to be a ministerial priest, to be ordained to the priesthood? Is he being called to receive Holy Orders, the Sacrament of Holy Orders?”

Now we always think about vocation in that way, in contemporary context. As I’ve pointed out in other videos, in the New Testament that’s not the most frequent use of the term vocation. The most frequent use of the verb *kaleō* — or to be called, *vocatur* here — is actually the vocation to Baptism. So if you read through the letters of Paul, ordinarily when he talks to his audience about “when you were called” or “as you were called”, he’s actually talking about when they were baptized — when they were called by God to the grace of faith and the salvation and justification and righteousness given through Baptism.

So there’s the baptismal vocation that every single Christian has, but there’s also... this is a scriptural foundation for the idea of a priestly vocation. And here, it’s interesting. What Hebrews is pointing out is, in the Old Testament, you couldn’t just take this honor upon yourself. So for example, if you were descended from the tribe of... let’s say, Dan. It’s my favorite tribe, the tribe of Dan. If you were a Danite — it’s not my favorite tribe, I’m just joking. There was actually a tradition that the antichrist would come from the tribe of Dan. And they’re left out of the list of tribes in the book of Revelation.

But I digress. Let’s say you’re a Danite, and you say, “Well, I feel like God is calling me to be high priest.” Sorry, you’re not. It’s not an honor that you can take upon yourself. It has to be a vocation. It’s a mission, an office, that God calls someone, and upon which, God has to bestow. He has to bestow this upon a person.

So in this case, the letter to the Hebrews is drawing an analogy here, making a comparison between the fact that just as in the Old Testament, the Aaronic high priest, the levitical high priest, didn't take the honor upon himself but was called by God.

So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him... (Hebrews 5:5a)

This is very, very, important. One of the difficulties that the first readers of the letter to the Hebrews is going to encounter — or would have encountered — is the problem of how Jesus of Nazareth, who's a Judahite (he's not a member of the tribe of Levi) can offer an atoning sacrifice for sin. How can He be designated high priest? How can He offer a sacrifice? How can He perform the Last Supper, where it says "this is my body", "this is my blood that's going to be poured out"... when only priests could pour out the blood of sacrifice, sacrificial blood in the temple in order to atone for sins?

So they would have been — we're not puzzled by that. We just think, "Oh yeah, of course, Jesus is the true high priest. Jesus is the high priest. He's the one who offers the true sacrifice that atones for sins." But for the original audience of Hebrews — which remember, are Hebrews — they would have recognized this is a difficulty. Because it might appear like Jesus the Judahite, Jesus the layman — because He's a layman, He's not a priest, at least according to the earthly priesthood of Levi. How can He presume to offer sacrifice if He's not a Levite, if He's not an Aaronite? And Hebrews tells us... Christ did not exalt Himself. He doesn't ordain Himself high priest. He's made high priest by God. He's called by God just like Aaron was called by God. And what's the proof for that? Here the author of Hebrews gives two texts from the Old Testament — Psalm 2 and Psalm 110. So the first psalm, Psalm 2 says this:

He said to me, "You are my son, today I have begotten you." (Psalm 2:7b)

And then the second psalm, Psalm 110 says:

"You are a priest for ever after the order of Melchiz'edek." (Psalm 110:4b)

So what the author of Hebrews is doing is interpreting these two psalms (that are originally about David) messianically. He's applying them to Jesus as the Davidic Messiah. And he's pointing out that already in the Old Testament, there is a figure, there is a person who is not a member of the tribe of Levi... and yet who is identified as a son of God and as a priest according to the order of Melchiz'edek.

Who is this figure? It's the Davidic king. It's King David. So as Messiah — this is important — Jesus is the new David. And just like David was appointed Son of God (He was made king) and also designated a priest — not according to the order of Levi but according to the order of Melchiz'edek — so too Jesus is a priest after the order of Melchiz'edek, insofar as He is the long awaited Davidic Messiah. So He's not just a royal Messiah. He is a priestly Messiah.

Alright. Now, in order to understand or to feel the force of that argument, we have to go back to Jewish CCD and remember — do a little basic here — that if we go back to the Old Testament, the figure of Melchiz'edek in Genesis 14 isn't just the first person to be called a priest in the Old Testament. There's also something else that's said about him. So let's go back there for just a moment, Genesis 14. Many of you will be familiar with this already, but some of you might not be, so we need to make a point.

In Genesis 14:18-20, the first time Melchiz'edek appears in Jewish Scripture is when he encounters Abraham after the battle with Chedorlaomer and the kings of Sodom. Melchiz'edek comes out and offers a sacrifice. Listen, it says this:

And Melchiz'edek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High. And he blessed him and said,

“Blessed be Abram by God Most High,
maker of heaven and earth;
and blessed be God Most High,
who has delivered your enemies into your hand!”

And Abram gave him a tenth of everything. (Genesis: 14:18-20)

Okay, now most people are familiar with the fact that Melchiz'edek is the first man to be called a priest in the Bible. The Hebrew word there is *kōhen*. You'll still meet today Jewish people who might have the last name Kohen, and that is a vestige of the fact that going back all the way through their genealogy they belonged originally to one of the priestly families of Israel.

Okay, so that's what the word *kōhen* means... and Melchiz'edek's the first person to be called a *kōhen* in the Bible. So he's the first person to be called a priest. This is important, because Melchiz'edek is at the time of Abraham, which is normally dated around 2000 BC. Aaron, the high priest, is at the time of Moses, which is normally dated (traditionally dated) around the 15th century BC.

So which of the two priesthoods is earlier? Which of them is first? Well, it's the Melchiz'edekian priesthood. Aaron's priesthood isn't going to be given to him until 500 years later. So the Melchiz'edekian identity of the priesthood — or should I say the Melchiz'edekian order of the priesthood, the one associated with his name — is the primordial priesthood. He's the first priest, the first man to be called priest in the Bible. It exists long before the Aaronic priesthood.

Now the reason that's significant is that Melchiz'edek is not just the first person to be called priest in the Old Testament. Look at that line. It says:

... And Mel-chiz'edek king of Salem...

So Mechiz'edek isn't just a priest like Aaron was just a priest; he's also a king. And he's king of a particular city — Salem, Massachusetts. Nah, I'm just kidding... just messing around. We need a laugh track to add there. Well, actually maybe not — it was a bad joke. Anyway. So he's king of Salem, but Salem is the archaic name, the ancient name, for a city you know. If you don't know where Salem is in the Holy Land off the top of your head, all you have to do is change its name slightly. Salem is the ancient name for Jerusalem. Hear it? Jeru-salem. Jerusalem is the later name for the place where Melchiz'edek was king.

So you can see this actually in Psalm 76:1-2. Listen to what Psalm 76 says:

In Judah God is known,
his name is great in Israel.
His abode has been established in Salem,
his dwelling place in Zion.

So this is a great example of Hebrew synonymous parallelism. Synonymous parallelism is one of the terms you learn in grad school and pay student loans for. It's just a technical term for the custom of poetic parallelism, where you'll use two different words to say the same thing, to speak about the same reality.

So frequently in the psalms, one line will use one word for a particular reality, and then the next line will use a different word but to describe the same reality. So in this case, the synonymous parallelism is between Salem and Zion. Salem and Zion are two ways of referring to the same city. There are two names for the same city — like New Orleans or the Crescent City. Those are both different terms to refer to the city of New Orleans. Or the United States or America — both different ways to refer to the same reality.

So... what Genesis 14 would have revealed to a first century Jew reading the text (who would have known the Psalter well) is that he's not just the first priest; he's the first king of Jerusalem. So he's a king and a priest in Jerusalem who offers what kind of sacrifice? Not a bull for the Day of Atonement, not even a goat for the daily sacrifice. He offers an unbloody sacrifice of bread and wine in Jerusalem in what? In thanksgiving for the victory that Abraham has just had over the kings of Sodom.

So what the author of Hebrews is doing here is... it's subtle, but it's powerful. He's revealing that when God spoke publicly to Jesus of Nazareth at His Baptism and said, "You are my Son in whom I am well pleased," He revealed that the psalms about David as king and priest are actually being fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth, so that when Jesus of Nazareth offers an unbloody sacrifice of bread and wine in Jerusalem at the Last Supper, He reveals that although He's not a priest according to the order of Levi, He is the true priest according to the order of Melchiz'edek.

He's the new David and the new Melchiz'edek who's going to offer a new sacrifice of thanksgiving that will atone for sin.

Okay, so that's what's being revealed here. This is an explosive passage in the letter to the Hebrews. Hebrews 5 for its first readers would have been revelatory, because it's showing how Jesus of Nazareth isn't just the royal Messiah, He's also a priestly Messiah.

What about the living tradition? In this case, I just want to highlight something interesting to you. It's really fascinating. It has to do with the liturgy. I don't know if you've ever noticed this — I'm sure you have — but when the priest in the Mass prays Eucharistic Prayer number one, he makes mention of Melchiz'edek and of the sacrifice of Melchiz'edek. So listen to these words. This is from Eucharistic Prayer number one — which, by the way, is just another name (a new name) for what was traditionally known as the Roman Canon. This is the prayer, it's the Eucharistic Prayer or the Anaphora, that is the central piece, the centerpiece, of the Roman liturgy of the Roman rite (of the Eucharistic liturgy of the Roman rite) that has been used for centuries.

And although you have two different forms of the Roman liturgy — you have the Missal of 1962, sometimes called the Extraordinary Form or the Traditional Latin Mass, or you have the Missal of 1970 (or 1969, I can't remember which one it is) of Pope Paul VI, sometimes called the Novus Ordo or the New Mass — they both as a constituent element, have the Roman Canon, the Eucharistic Prayer number one. And in that prayer, the priest will say these words:

Be pleased to look upon these offerings with a serene and kindly countenance, and to accept them, as once you were pleased to accept the gifts of your servant Abel the just, the sacrifice of Abraham, our father in faith, and *the offering of your high priest Melchizedek* (Latin *summus sacerdos tuus Melchisedech*), a holy sacrifice, a spotless victim.²

² Roman Canon, identical in 1962 Missal of John XXIII (Extraordinary Form) and 1970 Missal of Paul VI (Ordinary Form)

Now, those of you who attend the Mass in English, those should ring a bell — sorry, no pun intended there. They should ring a bell from Eucharist Prayer number one. But they're also part of the Traditional Latin Mass; they're part of the Roman Canon. And so what you see is... the very liturgy that we practice to this day in the Roman rite, teaches us that the Eucharistic sacrifice of the Mass isn't just any kind of sacrifice, and the priesthood isn't just any kind of priesthood. But the priesthood of today (of new covenant) is a participation in the Melchiz'edekian priesthood of Jesus Christ.

And what's fascinating about this Eucharist Prayer number one is that when you hear those words, when you hear those words pronounced in the Roman Canon, those words have been uttered over the bread and wine in the Eucharist in the Roman rite for centuries, going all the way back (as far as we can tell), all the way back to the 4th century AD.

There's a treatise by St. Ambrose of Milan in his wonderful book called the *Mysteries, the Holy Spirit, the Incarnation, and the Sacraments*. The treatise here *On the Sacraments* is the earliest witness that we possess to the words of the Roman Canon. So Ambrose, St. Ambrose — remember he's the one who brings St. Augustine in the Church. He plays a key role in the conversion of St. Augustine, and he's bishop of Milan. So he's celebrating the Latin liturgy of Rome, but he's doing it in Milan. And as he's explaining the sacraments to the audience he's writing this book for, he actually uses the words in Latin that we still use to this day in Eucharistic Prayer I. So listen to this, in Ambrose of Milan, *On the Sacraments*, chapter 5, verse 21, we read this. Ambrose says:

And we beg and pray that you might take this oblation by the hands of your angels to your altar on high, just as you accepted the offerings of your righteous child, Abel, the sacrifice of our patriarch, Abraham, and *that which the high priest, Melchizedek, offered.*³

So notice those same three examples — Abel, Abraham, and Melchizedek. If you look at the Latin text here, as the liturgical scholar John Baldovin shows in his

³ Ambrose of Milan, *On the Sacraments*, 5:21; trans. John Baldovin

commentary on this, the words are almost identical between the prayer that Ambrose is reciting and explaining to the audience of this text and the words that we use to this day in Eucharist Prayer I in the Roman Canon.

So this is a very ancient tradition in the Roman rite, and it's a powerful revelation of the Melchiz'edekian character of the priesthood of Jesus and the Melchiz'edekian nature of the sacrifice of the Mass, the sacrifice of the Holy Eucharist. And that concept of the Mass as a sacrifice is ultimately rooted not only in Scripture as a whole, but in the letter to the Hebrews in particular.