

## The Twenty-ninth Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 53:10-11
<i>Response</i>	Let thy steadfast love, O Lord, be upon us, even as we hope in thee.
<i>Psalms</i>	Psalms 33:4-5, 18-19, 20, 22
<i>Second Reading</i>	Hebrews 4:14-16
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 10:35-45 or 10:42-45

The twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time for year B continues our journey not just through the letter to the Hebrews but through the 4th chapter of that letter, moving straight into the next two verses — another short text but a very rich one... from Hebrews 4:14-16, which says this:

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.<sup>1</sup>

Okay, so this is a very famous passage. It's one of the classical texts, *locus classicus*, in the New Testament, that points out that Jesus is fully human insofar as He's tempted in every way. All the temptations we experience, He experiences them. But the difference between Jesus and every other human being (with the exception of Our Lady — you can read my book on Mary if you want to go into those details) is that He doesn't sin ... "yet without sin".

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

I think most people are familiar with the idea that Jesus was like us in all things except sin, but what we can forget sometimes is that the context of that doctrinal assertion of that belief is a description of Jesus in Hebrews as our high priest. So what's the relationship between Him being our high priest and His being tempted like us in all things except without sinning?

So let's just walk through that for just a moment. And we're going to continue to explore this throughout our journey through the letter to the Hebrews, because a case — a very strong case — could be made that the central theme, the central teaching of the epistle to the Hebrews is the high priesthood of Jesus Christ. So here in chapter four, that theme is coming to the foreground, and the author of Hebrews is beginning to expound implications of Jesus' identity as the true, the great high priest.

Okay, so let's just walk through that for just a minute. First point. When Hebrews describes Jesus as the high priest — *archiereus* in Greek. Arch meaning “first” or “highest” — it actually means “beginning”. And then *hiereus* is the Greek word for priest, so He's the first priest, the highest of all the priests. That terminology goes back to the Old Testament. It was used in the book of Leviticus, as well as the book of Exodus, to describe Aaron, who was the chief priest. He was the first priest out of all the priests consecrated by God to serve in the Levitical priesthood.

So if you'll recall, in the Old Testament, originally in Exodus 19, God calls all of Israel to be a kingdom of priests. But in Exodus 32, eleven of the twelve tribes commit idolatry, and they are in effect defrocked. They are divested of their priestly prerogatives and priestly identity, and the priesthood is restricted to just one tribe. It's the tribe of Levi, which is Aaron's tribe. So Aaron, who is Moses' brother, is appointed — not because he merited it, but because Moses interceded for him — Aaron is appointed to be the high priest over the Old Testament priesthood. And he's given certain prerogatives, certain special tasks — the most significant of which for understanding the letter to the Hebrews, is his annual role of offering the supreme sacrifice on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement or the Day of Covering for sin that's in Leviticus 16 that's described.

Every year as high priest, he would enter into the Holy of Holies, and he would offer a sacrifice not only to atone not only for his own sin but also for the sins of the priesthood and for the sins of the people of Israel. So here, what Hebrews is doing is saying that the true high priest is actually Jesus Christ Himself.

However, one problem with identifying Him as the high priest — and any first century Jewish reader, or should we say, any Hebrew reader (remember this is the letter to the Hebrews) would have recognized that there was a problem, a difficulty in referring to Jesus of Nazareth as a high priest ... or actually two problems.

First, He's not from the tribe of Levi. So He's not a Levite, and this will come up later in the letter to the Hebrews — it'll address this difficulty. Second, as far as we know, Jesus of Nazareth never entered the holy place of the earthly temple in Jerusalem, much less did He ever enter into the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement to offer the sacrifice that would take away sins for that year, as the high priest was commissioned to do by God in the book of Leviticus.

So it would have been a puzzling move for the author of Hebrews to identify Jesus as the *archiereus*, as the great high priest, if he was referring to the earthly temple in Jerusalem. The only thing we know Jesus ever did in the temple of Jerusalem was give teachings. He would teach, and He would preach. And then He also turned over the tables of the moneychangers and made a big prophetic sign within the temple precincts within the outer court. But He never acted as a priest in the earthly temple.

So how could Hebrews do this? Well, if you look back at the text, what does it say?

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens,  
Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. (Hebrews 4:14)

So we're going to see as we move through the letter to the Hebrews, Jesus is going to be identified not just as any kind of high priest but as the heavenly high priest, who's going to offer sacrifice not in the earthly temple in Jerusalem but in the heavenly sanctuary. We'll come back to that in another video where we're walking through the letter to the Hebrews.

But in this case, the author of the Hebrews simply asserts it; he doesn't defend it just yet. And he uses this reality of Jesus' identity as the heavenly high priest to actually make a pastoral point, we might call it, about Jesus' identity and ability to sympathize with our weakness. He says:

For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. (Hebrews 4:15)

So what's going on here? First, temptation. The Greek word for temptation, *peirazō*, is the same term that you see in the Our Father, for example: "Lead us not into temptation". It can mean being tempted to sin. It can also be used to describe being put to the test, which is what a temptation is, right? We're tested as to whether we're going to do the right thing and choose the good, or whether we're going to miss the mark and sin, to choose evil, to choose the bad in sinning.

So this is another way in which Jesus would have been different from every other Jewish high priest going all the way back to Aaron, who was certainly tempted but who did sin. Remember the whole incident of the golden calf. Not only did the first high priest, Aaron, commit an extremely grave sin — the sin of idolatry — but in the actual ritual of the Day of Atonement, if you go back to Leviticus (the book of Leviticus 16), you'll see that the high priest himself and also the people, every year were reminded annually of the fact that the high priest was a sinner. Because when the high priest went into the temple every year for the Day of Atonement, the first sacrifice he would offer was a sacrifice of a bull for his own sin.

So in the old covenant period, the high priests are fully human with sin, and they have to atone for their sin just like Aaron committed a sin at the very beginning. Every time they would go in to offer the sacrifice of the Day of Atonement. By contrast, Jesus is fully human. He's like us in all things, but He's different from the previous high priests because He is sinless. He's been tempted, as we are tempted, but without sinning.

And the upshot of that reality for the author of the Hebrews — the letter to the Hebrews — is that we should have confidence:

Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Hebrews 4:16)

So this is a very beautiful, very profound passage. One of the great challenges that often affects — that one that should affect every human being — is the fact that sin ... it not only darkens our intellect and weakens our will, it also creates in us (it *should* create in us) a sense of shame. And it can (and often does) make us feel unworthy to enter into God's presence. How can we bring our sin and our uncleanness, the kind of spiritual uncleanness that we all associate with having committed a sin — the guilty and the shame — how can we bring that into God's presence?

And what Hebrews is saying to us here is ... we have a high priest who understands what it's like to experience human weakness. Jesus gets hungry, He gets tired. He goes into the desert for 40 days and He is assaulted by the temptations of the devil. He knows what it's like to experience temptation and to feel human weakness. The difference, however, is that He doesn't sin. So He's able to sympathize with us because He's fully human, but He's able to redeem us and deliver us from it because He, unlike us, has the power to overcome sin.

So because of that dynamic of the fullness of His humanity and the fullness of His divinity — that's my terms, not the author of the Hebrews. Hebrews is saying because He's a high priest who doesn't have sin, we can draw near to the throne of grace confident that we're going to receive mercy and find the grace that we need to help us in our need and in our weakness.

And the imagery here of drawing near to the throne of grace ... this is a standard Jewish expression from Scripture. It's used throughout the Old Testament. Whenever a person would go to the temple, or whenever a priest would enter into the Holy of Holies or even just the holy place (the inner sanctuary), the language was often used of the priest drawing near, because he's entering into the presence

of God. He's moving from the secular world — the outside world, the profane sphere — into the sacred sphere of the temple.

And so would the lay people when they would bring their sacrifices for Passover or when they would pray and go to the temple for the Day of Atonement. They are drawing near to God. And on that Day of Atonement in particular, they're drawing near in order to experience mercy — the mercy of having their sins forgiven and having their sins atoned for by the high priest through the offering of sacrifice.

So Hebrews is beginning this exposition of Jesus' high priesthood by emphasizing and reminding its readers that there's no reason to be afraid and every reason to be confident. Because if God sent His Son to be like us in all things except sin, then the purpose of that was obviously so that we might find mercy, so that we might be forgiven of our sins, just like the priests in the Old Testament offered sacrifice for the sins of the people in order to atone, to reconcile them with God.

That language of atonement is one of the only theological terms that actually comes from the English language. It means to be at one, a-tone. You always hear me ... I either quote Greek or Hebrew or Aramiac, but in this case, English provides the foundation for this language of atonement, the terminology of atonement. Because by the sacrifice of sin, those who were divided — namely God and His people, those who are separated because of sin — are now at one. They have been reconciled with one another.

Alright, so you see how rich Hebrews is — so rich, so deep, and that's just two verses, and there are thirteen chapters. In closing, then, one question I always get when I look at this passage or I teach through this text is, "Dr. Pitre, I understand Jesus was like us in all things, but how could He have really been tempted like we are, if He is divine? How can He be tempted if He's fully divine, if He's really the Son of God? Are the temptations that Jesus experienced real or are they just kind of Him pretending? Is it kind of an appearance of temptation or is He really being tempted?"

And this is a question that St. Pope Gregory the Great — again, who I've mentioned before, one of my favorite early Christian writers, favorite patristic

authors — in his wonderful collection of *Forty Gospel Homilies*. These are magnificent, very influential homilies of his on the Gospels. He takes this up in his homily on the temptation of Jesus. And I found the distinctions that he makes here very helpful, so listen to what St. Gregory the Great says about how it is that Jesus could be the Son of God and yet actually still be tempted in the way that we are tempted. So this is what he says:

Surely it was right that he should vanquish our temptations by his temptations, just as he had come to overcome our death by his death. *We should be aware that temptation is carried out in three ways: by [1] suggestion, by [2] delight, and by [3] consent. When we are tempted, we frequently fall through delight, or even through consent.* Having been begotten by a sin of the body, we have within ourselves the source of the conflicts we endure [= Original Sin]. But God, who became human in the womb of the Virgin, and came into the world without sin to take to himself a body, endured no inconsistency within himself. *He could therefore be tempted by suggestion, but no delight in sin took hold of his heart. This whole diabolic temptation then took place from without, not from within.*<sup>2</sup>

That's from Gregory the Great, his *Homilies on the Gospels*, number 14. Okay, so with these words — these are very famous words, and they're going to be repeated throughout the history of the spiritual tradition. So if you read mystical writers from Gregory the Great on, they are going to draw on Gregory's three-fold distinction of the stages of temptation. He's making a distinction between three distinct kinds of temptation or three stages of temptation.

So the first stage of temptation is suggestion. So we can be tempted by suggestion from without. That's what the devil is doing to Jesus in the desert. He's assaulting Him with exterior temptations. And you'll see the different spiritual writers talk about how (very frequently) the demons can put thoughts into our minds. They can appear in external manifestations, but they can also insinuate things. And our response — for us, the decisive element is how we respond to those exterior temptations. That's what Jesus is experiencing in the desert.

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<sup>2</sup> Gregory the Great, *Homilies on the Gospels* 14; trans. David Hurst

The second stage of temptation, however, deals with how we respond. And here Gregory talks about delight. So when we experience an exterior temptation, some kind of impulse, do we enjoy it or are we repulsed by it? You'll sometimes see the spiritual writers talk about, do we experience delight or do we experience disgust? So that's stage two. And that takes place within the human heart. It has to do with the way we choose to respond to the exterior circumstances.

And then the third stage of temptation is consent. That's when we agree to give in to the temptation — for example, to perform or to commit some sin that has been suggested to us from without.

So what Gregory is saying is when we sin ... I'm sorry. When we're tempted, we frequently fall through delight (through enjoying the temptation) or through consent and actually giving in to act upon the temptation.

Jesus, however, although He experienced all the exterior temptations that we can face, He never delighted in them, and He certainly never consented to them. And that's what Hebrews means when it's describing the fact that He is fully human. He's like us in all things, He's been tempted like us in every way that we can be tempted. All the exterior kinds of temptations that the devil and the demons can afflict us with this or that the world — just the reality, the spiritual world can suggest to us — Jesus experiences them all, but He never delights in them and He never consents to them. That's the distinction.

And you'll see this ... if you want a great exposition of this — I didn't bring a copy or I don't have it in hand. St. Frances de Sales in the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, develops Gregory's distinctions here. Actually, he developed not just Gregory but St. Augustine deals with this too in the Sermon on the Mount, in his exposition on the Sermon on the Mount whenever he's looking at Jesus' teaching about anyone who looks at a woman in order to lust after her has already committed adultery in the heart. There Augustine is going to make the same three-fold distinction, which by the way, now that I'm thinking about it ... Augustine's first, Gregory second, and then Francis is third. So that's the order.



So this is an Augustinian teaching as well, although Gregory is very famous for it, because these homilies are very widely read in the Middle Ages. Frances de Sales, in his *Introduction to the Devout Life*, is going to expound this out, explain this is a bit more, this three-fold distinction.

So for me, personally, I find this a very helpful way of trying to wrap my brain around the mystery — and it is a mystery, you can't fully comprehend it at the end of the day — the mystery of how Jesus, the divine Son of God, can be tempted in a way we experience temptation, yet without sinning.

And that's ... in closing, the *Catechism* illuminates this in its section on the doctrine of the Incarnation. In paragraph 464, it says this:

The unique and altogether singular event of the Incarnation of the Son of God does not mean that Jesus Christ is part God and part man...

Not half God, half human.

...nor does it imply that he is the result of a confused mixture of the divine and the human.

He's not a demi-god, for example.

He became truly man while remaining truly God. Jesus Christ is true God and true man.<sup>3</sup>

... as we say in the Creed. So He's true man in the sense that He experienced exterior temptations — although He didn't have original sin, so it wasn't within Him. He didn't experience the same interior temptation, the inclination to sin that we possess, because of original sin. But as true God, He experienced all those things and rebuffed them and overcame them without sinning. And that's why we have confidence — we can have confidence — to approach the throne of grace and find help for mercy in time of need.

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<sup>3</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par 464