

Faith Reformed Church  
Stevensville, Ontario  
May 4, 2008  
Morning Service

Text: Hebrews 5:1-10  
Sermon: Our Great High Priest, Part II

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; AMEN.

I remember hearing R. C. Sproul saying some years ago that if he were stranded on a desert island and could have only one epistle of the Bible with him he would choose the Letter to the Hebrews. Now that might seem a strange choice, but Sproul went on to make the point that Hebrews is utterly single-minded in its devotion to lifting up the person and the work of Jesus Christ. Paul, in Romans, opens his letter by focusing upon man's sinful condition. In other letters he addresses particular congregational problems. Peter starts his letters with praises to God the Father. John opens his first letter with a statement about his own apostolic mission and message. But Hebrews, from chapter one verse one, focuses upon the Lord Jesus Christ. Hebrews 1 is a grand statement about who Jesus is and what he has done. The rest of the letter is taken up with the superiority and sufficiency of Jesus: He is greater than angels, greater than Moses, greater than Joshua and greater than Aaron the High Priest. The author is saying, "Look—if you know who Jesus is and what he had done, you will persevere in the faith. If you get it right here—if you are right in your understanding of Jesus—then everything else will fall into place. If you don't get it right here, the rest will not matter.

Now to get Jesus right it helps to go to the Old Testament, to the role of the High Priest, for Jesus is the High Priest *par excellence* of his people. So let's start there and let me start by asking you a question. If you were standing in the Tabernacle or the Temple and you saw the high priest, what would you see? Let me describe him. The high priest wore a fine white linen tunic as an undergarment. Over the tunic he wore a blue robe. Attached to the hem of the robe were pomegranates woven from blue, purple and scarlet yarn. Placed intermittently between the pomegranates were golden bells that would ring as the priest went about his rounds. Over the blue robe was a garment called an ephod. The ephod was a sort of apron woven of golden threads, finely twisted linen and blue, purple and scarlet yarn. (By the way, the blue was for the sky, the scarlet was for blood and purple is what you get when you mix blue and red. It is a picture of the divine and human nature of the Lord perfectly joined together in one person.) The ephod was worn over the robe and held in place with a sash. At the shoulders of the ephod were two large stones of onyx; each of the stones had engraved upon it the names of six of the tribes of Israel. A breastplate was fastened to the ephod by gold chains. The breastplate held twelve precious stones in four rows of three each and one each stone was engraved with one of the names of the twelve tribes. The priestly clothing was

topped off with a white turban of fine linen bearing a plate of pure gold. On the plate was the inscription, “Holy to the Lord.”

The high priest’s clothing symbolically stated that this man bore the weight of Israel on his shoulders and over his heart. That is to say, he had a deep love and concern for his people. He wasn’t just some sort of worship specialist; here was a man concerned with the radical problem of human sinfulness and the need for his people to be reconciled to God if they were to be saved. The bells rang to indicate he was ministering perpetually before the Lord. That is to say, he was not a hireling but a servant. The inscription, “Holy to the Lord” was a summary of his priestly tasks. He was to be holy and to lead his people into holiness; he was to consecrate them and set them apart for the things of God.

Well, that’s what the clothes said, but because a person could don these robes and look the part of a faithful high priest on the outside did not mean that he was necessarily a faithful high priest on the inside. There were many unfaithful high priests in the history of Israel. And so in the first part of our lesson today, in verses one through four, our author outlines three inner qualifications of a high priest and in the second part, from verse five

through ten, demonstrates how Jesus satisfies these three qualifications better than anyone else.

Let's turn to our lesson.

Every high priest is selected from among men and is appointed to represent them in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.

Every high priest is selected from among men. Now this might seem to go without saying. Who else would be the high priest? Our author is making a couple of points. First, no angel or other celestial being qualifies to be our high priest, for it is the work of the high priest to be man's representative before God. The high priest must be linked to the people through a common humanity. Second, our author is saying that the true priest of God cannot be a man who retires to the study of his manse and stays there with his books. As a representative of the people he must be involved with their lives. He must know them and he must know that he is one of them. There is no room for elitism in the priesthood. R. Kent Hughes, in speaking of pastors, makes the same point:

It is good for the minister to be involved in life because life is not smooth sailing... Raising children—busy schedules—sticky telephones—bills—these better qualify him to represent his people in “matters related to God... The universal requirement is as it has always been, a real man with a real like to God and a real bond to man.

The high priest must be a man. Second, the high priest must be a person with a compassionate disposition. Look at verse three. It reads, “He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness. This is why he has to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of the people.” Let me get at it this way. The high priest was, first of all, very aware that he was a sinner just like the people he ministered to. As you know, on the Day of Atonement the high priest went into the Holy of Holies and sprinkled the blood of a sacrificial lamb upon the mercy seat to atone for the sins of his people. Before he could do that, however, he had to make a sacrifice for his sins and the sins of his own household. He would lay his hands upon the head of a bull. He would say a prayer of confession. This is a typical one for such an occasion:

O God, I have committed iniquity and transgressed and sinned before thee, I and my house and the children of Aaron, thy holy people. O God, forgive, I pray, the iniquities and transgressions and sins which I have committed and transgressed and sinned before thee, I and my house.

He would then slaughter the bull and, in a cloud of incense enter the holy of holies and sprinkle the blood on the Ark of the Covenant. Only after doing this was he in a condition fit to sprinkle the blood on behalf of the people.

So he knew he was a sinner. Second, the high priest knew he was subject to weakness. Now this principally has to do with moral weakness—

with stumbling into sin—but it also has to do with the other sorts of weaknesses that we as human beings have to deal with. At times the high priest was weak in body. He got sick. He suffered from injuries or accidents. He got old. He could be weak in intellect. Being a high priest did not mean he could not do stupid things or make mistakes or get careless. He could be weak emotionally, suffering from depression, worry or fright. The high priest had to be aware that he was not superman.

Now put those two things together. He was aware of his sin and aware of his weakness. Because of that, he was able to minister gently with the people who, in the same sort of ignorance and weakness, were going astray. The expression “to deal gently” means to steer a middle course between anger and apathy, between being furious at sin and saying, “Go ahead; do whatever you want; I’m past caring.” Here “gentle” means to be wise, patient and restrained when dealing with a person fallen into sin.

We have a wonderful example of this in the New Testament. Think of Matthew 5 and the first three beatitudes. Jesus says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” The poor in spirit are those who know their spiritual weakness. They know they have no spiritual strength; they know they have no good

works; they know they have no merit that places God under an obligation to receive them. They are the people who sing with Augustus Toplady,

“Nothing in my hands I bring,  
simply to thy cross I cling;  
naked, come to thee for dress,  
helpless look to thee for grace;  
foul I to the fountain fly;  
wash me Saviour, or I die.

Next Jesus says, “Blessed are those who mourn.” The mourning here doesn’t have to do with the loss of a loved one. The people spoken of here are those who mourn because of their sins. And they don’t mourn because of the consequences of their sins so much as they mourn because their sinning has offended a thrice holy God who has given them blessing after blessing after blessing. Their sinful actions, directed against a loving God, cut them to the heart and they stand convicted before the Lord of vile ingratitude.

And third, Jesus says, “Blessed are the meek.” It can be properly translated “blessed are the gentle.” Beloved, a harsh, judgmental and unsympathetic spirit is a tell tale sign that a person has lost his sense of weakness and his awareness of his own sin. Such a person will lose his



effectiveness as God's servant, so we are always to remember who we are and where we have come from. We are only sinners saved by grace.

We find the third qualification for high priest in verse four. It reads, "No one takes this honour upon himself; he must be called by God, just as Aaron was." God chooses his high priests. It was only by divine appointment that such service was possible. And attempts to circumvent this requirement always met with disaster. Let me give you a few examples. Korah was a Levite. His story is told in Numbers 16. Now all priests were Levites, but not all Levites were priests. Only the sons of Aaron were priests; the other Levites worked to set the Tabernacle up and to tear it down when it was time to move. One clan of Levites was responsible for moving the furniture. Another clan was in charge of moving the curtains and the coverings. The third clan took down and set up the tent poles, the posts and the beams. Korah was a worker involved in moving the temple furniture. He didn't like the work. It wasn't prestigious enough for him. He wanted to be a priest although God had not called him to that position. He tried to take matters into his own hands. He led a liturgical rebellion with 250 colleagues who felt the same way. It didn't end well for him; the ground opened up and swallowed him and his 250 co-conspirators. King Saul, (I Samuel 13) before going into battle against the Philistines at Micmash, was waiting for

Samuel to come and offer up sacrifices before the Lord. Samuel was delayed so Saul went ahead and made the sacrifices himself. As a result, Saul lost his kingdom. King Uzziah of Judah (II Chronicles 26) was, for the most part, a good king, but he let things get to his head. He decided he wanted to burn incense to the Lord in the Temple, something only priests were allowed to do. The priests serving in the temple that day confronted him. They tried to stop him. When he would not be dissuaded God stopped him in his tracks. He struck him down with leprosy which he carried with him until the day he died. Beloved, all genuine priests were divinely chosen so they would minister in an attitude of humility and dependence, not trusting in themselves but in the Lord.

We can sum it up this way: A true high priest bore Israel on his shoulders and over his heart. He was one of the people. He was aware of his sins and weaknesses and able to deal compassionately and gently with those who were going astray. Chosen by God and so meant to be free from pride and a haughty spirit, he was selected to serve.

That being said, let's look at the qualifications of Jesus and how as great high priest he supersedes the qualifications of the high priests. Let's pick up things at verses five and six:

So Christ also did not take upon himself the glory of becoming a high priest, but God said to him, “You are my Son; today I have become your Father.” And he says in another place, “You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.”

First of all, Jesus was chosen by God the Father. Our author mentions two offices here. The first quotation, from Psalm 2, which we dealt with earlier in chapter one, speaks of Jesus being enthroned as Lord and Christ. It is a statement that Jesus is the eternal king. The second quotation, from Psalm 110:4, points to Melchizedek. Now we are going to get into Melchizedek in more detail later on, but for the moment let me keep it brief. Melchizedek is a mysterious character we meet in Genesis 14. He just appears one day, and then he is gone. He was the king of Salem—of Jerusalem—and a priest of God Most High. When he met Abraham, he came with bread and wine and the patriarch offered him a tithe of all he had gained in battle against a coalition of kings from the north. That’s the bare bones, but the point is this: In calling Jesus a priest after the order of Melchizedek our author is saying that Jesus is an eternal priest, greater than any priest of Aaron’s family. Priests of the order of Levi come and go; priests of the order of Melchizedek are eternal. Jesus was chosen by God to be eternal king and eternal priest both.

And note this: The Father bestowed this honour upon his Son. Jesus did not seek it. Just as in eternity Jesus did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking on the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness,” neither did he clutch at the office of priest or king. His only goal was to glorify the Father. That is why he came—to make manifest the Father’s justice and his grace, his holiness and his mercy, his wisdom and his goodness.

So Jesus was chosen by God the Father to a greater priesthood. Second, Jesus was able to show sympathy and compassion like no other priest. Look at verse seven: “During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death and he was heard because of his reverent submission.” Jesus offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears. There was a depth of sympathy and compassion to Jesus found nowhere else. He wept over Jerusalem. He wept at the graveside of his friend Lazarus. He restored a woman caught in adultery. He forgave those who nailed him to the cross. He was not a sinner but he knew the power of temptation like no other because he resisted it successfully to the end. And he knew the weaknesses we as human beings are heir to. He got tired, thirsty and hungry. He felt the sting of betrayal and mocking. He felt the

pressure of his ministry bearing down upon him. Think of him in the Garden of Gethsemane. He was filled with a sorrow so deep it brought him to the brink of death (Mark 14:34). The thought of what he had to do exerted such force upon him that he sweated great drops of blood. He asked for the cup and the hour—both metaphors for his judgement and death—to be taken from him because he really was one of us. But think of this: Christ’s desire to do his Father’s will was greater than his desire to escape the dreadful punishment he was facing; his desire to minister forgiveness and life to sinners dead in trespasses and sins was greater than his desire to flee from the penalty of sin. As such a sympathizing priest Jesus is able to minister and bless his people far beyond anything the priests of the Old Testament could do.

Let’s read the rest of the lesson, starting at verse eight.

Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek.

Two things need to be said here. First of all, Jesus was a “son.” Although he had a divine nature, he had a human nature as well. He was fully God and fully man. He was as human as you and I are human. As such he met the qualification of manhood necessary to be a priest. But second, he was more than a mere man—he was a perfect man. He learned obedience. That

does not mean he moved from disobedience to obedience, it means he moved from obedience to obedience, at each step of his earthly ministry facing the challenges of this life with integrity, in ways entirely pleasing to the Father. He was “made perfect.” This does not mean that at one point he was imperfect—it means that he was made complete in his human experience. And now, in his completeness and perfection and obedience, his work being done, he is the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him. That is to say, Jesus is the perfect priest of God and representative of man, for he was able to offer a sacrifice that actually took away sin and brought man back into a loving relationship with God.

Let me say one more word before I close. Our lesson says that Jesus became the source of eternal salvation “for all who obey him.” What does it mean to obey Christ? In John 6 some followers of Jesus ask him, “What must we do to do the works God requires?” Jesus answered, “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.” In John 3:36 it says, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him.” Jesus is the source of eternal salvation for all who believe in him. For all who have faith in him. For all who trust that the work he did as our Great High Priest at Calvary is a work done for them. Jesus is the source of eternal salvation for all who cast

themselves upon his finished work at take his righteousness as their own. Is that you? If so, rejoice. If not, then why not? What is keeping you from the joy of reconciliation with God through the Son? Whatever it is, get rid of it. Get rid of it right now. Turn your eyes upon Jesus. In Christ's name.

AMEN.