

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

ALWAYS BETTER

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Genesis 14:17-20

Hebrews 7:1-3, 8:1-13

There is one word which appears more often in Hebrews than in all the other books of the New Testament put together, and it is this: better. When we read the letter to the Hebrews we are finding out things that are better. Our writer is in the business of making comparisons. He is comparing Jesus with things that are not bad, indeed are good. He is comparing Jesus with the Law, with Moses, with the sacrificial and priestly system of the Hebrews and each time he says "That was a good idea, that was a good thing, but Jesus is just so much better."

Have you ever played table football? Either the kind where the plastic footballers are on metal rods to be twisted and pulled or the kind where you have to flick the players with your fingers to get them to kick the ball? Both are good games. But neither are as fast or exciting or unpredictable as a real game of football - either to watch or to take part in. If you had never come across real football then table football might seem a very good way of playing. But once you have encountered real football you know that the other is just a pale imitation of it. It's a small-scale and inferior copy of the real thing. That is what our writer wants to tell us about the Jewish priesthood compared to the priesthood of Jesus. Jesus' priesthood is the real thing, the best, and the Jewish system, while good while having a purpose, is just a small, inferior imitation. And he is going to make this point by talking about Melchizedek.

One thing we know for sure about the writer to the Hebrews is that he is steeped in the Old Testament, and is particularly fond of the Psalms. He has been pondering this phrase in Psalm 110 where God says to his chosen one "You are a Priest forever after the order of Melchizedek." Where is he to discover what these strange words mean? Well, by checking his cross-references. When we are reading and come across a word or concept we don't understand, we look it up to find out what it means. We turn to a dictionary or an encyclopaedia, or these days to the internet. When our writer wanted to cross-reference Melchizedek, he turned to the only other place where he is mentioned: to the fourteenth chapter of Genesis.

Now the fourteenth chapter is not one of the big and often-retold stories in Genesis. Basically 4 kings with jaw-cracking names make war with 5 other kings. The 4 kings do better than the 5 and the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah are sacked. Among the captives taken away is Lot, Abraham's nephew, who has settled there. When Abraham hears of this he takes his own trained men and does battle and retakes all the captives and the spoil that was taken with them. And on his return, along with the King of Sodom, he is met by Melchizedek, King of Salem (who has not been mentioned before in this story, he is not one of those who went out to battle) and who is named as a priest of God as well as a King. He blesses Abraham, and Abraham gives him a tenth of all the goods that he has just recaptured.

That's the story. So what does it mean to say that Jesus is a priest after the order of Melchizedek? Our writer puts his thinking cap on.

First of all his name. In Hebrew Melech is King and zedek is righteousness, and so his name means that he is King of Righteousness. Then he is named as the King of Salem - that is Jerusalem - and salem is very closely related to the word Shalom, which means peace, so he is King of Peace. That's good, and that fits with Jesus who is of course king of righteousness and king of peace as well. Only better.

But the crucial point is not what the writer of Genesis tells us about Melchizedek, but what he does not tell us. When I was learning Hebrew one of the frustrations of the language was that as a word is used in different

ways it can change its form and add or lose parts of itself. It was particularly bad when it lost things, because then you weren't always sure what the root word had been. And often our Hebrew teacher would berate us with the words, "Come on, look at what is not there. You are theologians, surely you can see what is not there!"

What is not there in the account of Melchizedek is any reference to his background. What was his parentage? Who made him a priest of God (long before the Levitical priesthood was initiated)? How long was he priest for, when did he die? The Bible doesn't tell us. Now, our writer doesn't think that literally that meant that he came from nowhere and is still around. But he says it is a bit like that. He wasn't made a priest because of who his parents were - like the Levitical priests. He wasn't forbidden from acting as a priest because of his royal status - which was the case in the later Hebrew monarchy: the kings were tribe of Judah and the priests tribe of Levi and each had different functions. It is as if he was simply sent by God, appointed, ordained by God, and his priesthood goes on forever. Just like Jesus.

And of course, Abraham gave a tithe, that's a tenth, that's the offering you give to God. Abraham wouldn't have given it to anyone who he didn't think was God's representative and so his superior. And Jesus is a priest after the order of Melchizedek, so Jesus is better. He is better than Abraham, he is better than the whole system of priesthood which was to spring from Abraham.

Of course, we are probably not tempted to go back to worshipping in the old way, with sacrifice and priests and all the rest. But there are other things which we can give rank and importance which they don't merit. We can value one day above others for being with God - but all days are days when God is to be worshipped. We can value one place, one building (even one seat in that building) as the place where we can be with God. We can value one person, one minister as the person to bring us closest to God. But if we do that we are just like the people this letter was written for, and we need to be reminded - Jesus is better and Jesus is for every moment of every day forever.

Jesus is a priest like Melchizedek, not through birth, not only for a time, but appointed through what our writer calls "The power of an indestructible life" (7:16). In other words he is appointed because of who and what he is, and he will not die and pass on the role to another, like earthly priests. He is a priest for ever, like Melchizedek, but better - he is in fact what Melchizedek was in symbol. He is the real football game compared to the table football. He is the genuine thing, now and forever. The only bridge between us and God, and he will never be superseded.

Some of the letters in the New Testament cover several themes, jumping from one thing to another, particularly if they are written to answer questions that others have asked. But this letter is not like that. It is like the river Spey, flowing with unexpected twists and turns to the sea. There are various burns and streams, even minor rivers, which feed it; but it has a destination and everything leads there. The tributaries all have the same idea, the same direction, the same theme: in various ways and coming from various sources, they tell us that Jesus is better.

We can look back and see how the source of the flow is the greatness of the Messiah: that Jesus is better than the law, even than the angels who gave the law, because he is God's Son. And he is better than any other human creature, because he is fully human, perfectly human and has attained the perfection that God has planned for the whole human race. Then there was a tributary flowing in which talked about the Sabbath rest for God's people, for which entry into the promised land was just an advance picture - like the pictures in the travel brochures, which are not the holiday itself! And that tributary reminded us that Jesus is better: by his Spirit he gives us that rest itself, if we hold onto our faith and hope.

The next little burn talked of Jesus as the true High Priest, and his priesthood is better, fuller, and eternal. He always is the one who brings us to God and God to us. But the letter is still not at its destination. And there is still another tributary to add its waters to the theme. If all this is so, if Jesus is the Messiah, God's Son, superior to angels and hence to the law; if he is the truly human being, and he offers true rest; if in fact as Messiah he is the true High Priest who accomplishes what the old priesthood was never able to, then Jeremiah's words have been fulfilled and the new covenant has begun.

The new covenant - what we celebrate at communion. The new covenant, sealed in Jesus' blood, which offers real forgiveness for sin; permanent, not temporary; and so real rest in God, real fellowship as his children, real hope which is more than wishful thinking. And everything else, anything else which can't offer this reality is obsolete and will fade away. Better, yes, Jesus is better, and what he does, what he has accomplished and brought in is better than anything which ever has been or ever will be.

We live in the time of the new covenant. As we travel down the river of God's provision, we are in new territory. If you go to Inverness swimming pool there is a so-called "river" - a loop of water through which a current is forced so that it sweeps you along. But it just takes you round and round the same area. We are in new territory, and as we travel with God we will always be travelling through new territory. The old can inform how we understand it, but in our lives, in the church, in the world, we cannot go back. Scary? Not when we remember that we go with Jesus, who intercedes for us, who loves us, who is our brother and bridge-builder forever. With him we can dig deep in our faith, we can eat the good food of teaching which God provides and we can enjoy the newness of the journey.

Amen.