

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

THE GREAT HIGH PRIEST

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Sunday 2nd May 2010

Hebrews 4:14-5:10

Psalm 110

Some people spend a lot of their childhood wondering what they will do and be when they grow up. But Graham wasn't one of them. Graham always knew what he would do: he would inherit the family furniture business. Already there was an office waiting for him, right beside his father's with just as good a view, with the same luxurious, imposing, comfortable furniture. He watched his father's comfortable life, with fine lunches and late starts and he was glad to think that this was what lay ahead for him. All he had to do was to grow old enough.

Or so he thought. He barely noticed that his father was spending a fortune on his education, putting him to the best schools, making sure he got a good education at university. The day came when Graham finally graduated, and the very next week he turned up at the business for work. He was met at the door of his office by his father. "Where are you going, Graham?" "To work." "That's good. But you won't be working here. I need you to start in the lumber yard." And so Graham spent his time sweeping up after others, lifting, carrying, learning to work the big power saws. He got a bit bashed and bruised at times, his well-kept hands became rough and at times were full of splinters, and he even bore the marks of some small scars, where the saw slipped when he wasn't expecting it.

Later he was to find himself spending time in the joinery department - with thumbs that ached from being caught in the machinery and a back that ached from bending over his lathe. He was moved to the leatherworking department - sore hands from driving large needles through the stiff leather, the sales department - headaches from adding up the figures and trying to balance the books, the haulage department - weariness from long hours on the road, and even the canteen - scalds and burns. And always he started at the bottom of the heap, doing the most menial jobs.

It was only after he had worked in all the various work-stations of the firm that his father told him to put on his good suit and come to work in his own office, the office which had been waiting for him since the day he was born. "Now," said his father, "You are ready to do my work. Now you know what really goes on in our business and what it is like to work for us. Now the workers know and trust you. You are perfectly trained to represent their needs to me and to represent my wishes to them."

Graham had become a kind of work-place priest.

We are not used to the idea of a priest in this denomination, someone who is designated to help us come to God. We tend to want to do that ourselves without intermediary. In one sense we are right, we can do that. In another sense we are very wrong if we think we can do it ourselves! The idea of priesthood was very familiar to the people for whom Hebrews was written. They knew of the Hebrew priesthood, and they would also be surrounded by the Greco-Roman priestly cults of the various deities. The writer of this letter explains the role of a priest very well. "Every High Priest, chosen from among mortals, is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins," (Chapter 5:1) He tells us. A priest is supposed to be a bridge between God and humanity. The priest, and especially the High Priest, is supposed to be the route through which people travel to come close to God, and the route through which God has chosen to travel to come close to people. In the Hebrew tradition he maintains his bridge-like function by officiating as sacrifices and offerings are made which show penitence for sins.

The penitence is important. In the Old Testament sacrificial rules there is no sacrifice which can be offered

for sin that is not repented of. People can't, or aren't supposed to make a sacrifice and then deliberately go on doing the same wrong again and again. The sacrificial system is only for accidental sin, or sin that arises from not fully understanding what you are doing and its consequences, or sin that you are genuinely sorry for. Later on in this letter we will see that our writer will remind us that even under Christ's new covenant that hasn't changed. Deliberate sin that we understand and are not sorry for is not forgiven us.

We are told in chapter 5 that the human high priest is supposed to carry out his job with gentleness and compassion - so not rebuking or setting himself above those who come with their sacrifice and repentance - because he knows that he too is not perfect. In fact he has to offer sacrifice for his own sins first, before he can act on behalf of anyone else: in the Jewish rites this was done on the Day of Atonement.

Our writer is going to spend most of his letter talking about Jesus as our great High Priest. What we have read today are just his opening remarks on the subject. But if you have ever learned the art of speech-craft, you may well have heard the advice "Say what you are going to say, say it and then reiterate." So what he says in his opening remarks is important.

He says that Jesus is our great High Priest. That's not a metaphor. He isn't saying that he is a bit like a priest and if you like the idea of priests you can think of Jesus that way. He is saying that this is what Jesus is - one of his many roles (such as Saviour, brother, Lord). If we are to truly know Jesus, then we need to know him as High Priest - *our* High Priest.

So Jesus is our High Priest, and, just as a human priest should not put himself forward for the office, he didn't ask for the role either. There is great irony in these words because in the first century the office of High Priest in Jerusalem was regularly touted for. The Romans had the office in their gift and rival candidates would offer bribes either in cash or in promises that they wouldn't rock the political boat. But everyone knew that this was wrong: the High Priest shouldn't put himself forward for office, but be chosen by God - and Jesus was.

But being also God's Son, Jesus would not necessarily have been compassionate with us, because of course he himself did not sin, so how could he understand? So God sent him to be one of us, to live among us and learn what it is to be human, what it is to live with constant temptation, what it is to live in a fallen world, with hunger and pain and loneliness and suffering of all kinds. God sent him to know even what it is to pray fervently but not get the answer you want. Think of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane: he prayed and prayed that the cup of suffering would pass from him, but in the end the prayer was not granted him: instead he found, as so often we find, that the prayer had changed him, so that in the end he was able to pray, "Not my will, but yours be done."

And so, although he was God's Son, because he was made human, completely human, for all time, he had the experience of learning. Suffering teaches us many things. Some it may teach to be bitter or despairing, but others it may teach patience or endurance. What Jesus, the great High Priest learned was obedience. All that Jesus went through in his life on earth makes him the perfect High Priest, the perfect bridge between the boss and the workers, between God and humanity, between the father and the children.

Because we have a High Priest who has entered God's presence right at the heart of heaven we don't need to fear God, but can boldly follow our brother and priest into his presence. When we were on holiday just after Easter, we went to view the old jail at Inverary. One of the places which you can visit there is the old courtroom, where there are life-size figures in the dock, on the bench - that's the circuit judge - and in the seats for prosecuting and defending lawyers. You can hear real charges and judgements being rehearsed in front of you, cases which affected real people in the past. It's interesting, but you can see how being in the dock must be really scary: your fate is so completely out of your own hands. Now as visitors we might enter the court blithely, but in the past surely that was far from the case.

Very often God's presence is imagined as a great court-room. Jesus doesn't deny it, either. Indeed he uses that image in his parable of the sheep and the goats. If the idea of a High Priest is not one with which we Presbyterians are immediately at home, the idea of God as a judge certainly is. And so we know we need to show him respect when we enter his presence. And that is good. But all the same, we can come to God with complete confidence: Why? Because, and only because, we have a great High Priest, who is Jesus, God's Son.

We enter God's presence in Jesus' shadow. Jesus represents us to God. And he represents us, not just with eloquent words - as a human lawyer would try to do. No, Jesus represents us in the same way that a proxy voter represents the person they are appointed to vote for. So Jesus represents us, he stands for us. If we accept him as priest (as well as brother) he literally stands for us before God; and God, who is delighted with him, is delighted to forgive and to give us all the help and strength we need.

And so we come to the 'so what' about all this. This time our writer has put his so what right at the beginning of what he has to say. Because Jesus is our great High Priest, who stands for us before God, who acts as bridge between God and us, who is able to sympathise and empathise with us in all things: because of all that we can hold fast to our confession. In other words we can live out our faith with confidence, not always looking over our shoulders to make sure we aren't offending God in some un-thought-of way; not afraid of what those who do not share our faith might think or say. We can live out our faith with calm confidence, allowing it to affect our lives, delighting in the mercy and help of our God.

The so what is all about our persistence and our attitude. We can stick at our faith, and we can enjoy our faith. Indeed we should stick at it and we should enjoy it. Anything less is to put aside the work which Jesus, our great High Priest has done for us and to try to go it alone. The good news is that we never have to go it alone, that Jesus is always right there beside us and right there bringing us into God's loving presence. So this week let us stick at living our faith and let us do it with pleasure.

Amen.