

Jesus the Great High Priest

Hebrew 4:14-5:10

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, this morning with the references to Palm Sunday in our songs and opening video we have acknowledged Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, which would set into motion the events which lead up to his betrayal and arrest and trial and execution less than a week later.

And as we remember and reflect on these events in this coming week, indeed as our Easter celebrations come and go each year, there are those who reflect and celebrate Holy Week and Easter with the belief and notion that Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem and his suffering and death are to be understood as ultimate examples of his love and commitment toward us...

So that, upon hearing about them and considering them - our hearts will soften and we will change into more loving and accepting tolerant people, following the example of Jesus.

Others would say that Jesus comes into Jerusalem to confront the status quo. Once he arrives He spends every minute of the next week fighting against the ruling powers.

He tosses tables in the temple. He mocks the hypocrisy of the priests and the authorities. He is starting a rebellion. Occupy Jerusalem! Jesus stands up to the powers that be and confronts them – and He exposes their true nature and reveals His when they finally put him to death on the cross.

(quoted from article on Progressive Patheos.com)

And somehow this is supposed to inspire us to take action for social justice and change and stand up against the ruling powers and expose their self-interest, like Jesus did.

And any suggestions that the violence and brutality, and bloodshed and prophetic fulfilment in the events of Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday are a necessary part of a real transaction that took place - wherein Jesus actually offered his life in place of our own, to pay for our sins - are dismissed as barbaric, politically incorrect and

out of touch with how people think today. That's not the kind of message about Jesus that would appeal to our post-modern sensibilities!

Now this is not a new twist on the Easter message – it's been around for a couple hundred years, but it is making a big comeback in lately appealing to those who are disillusioned by traditional churches, sick of the infighting and politics that goes on, wanting a faith that seems to be more accepting and tolerant and engaged in helping the needy and making a difference in society.

People very much like those to whom the writer of Hebrews was speaking last week – people who are tired and weary from following Jesus, or at least with His very imperfect Body – the Church.

And as you know - when we are tired and weary, we're not thinking straight, things get muddled and mixed up, and we make mistakes, or we just walk away...

And as much as the early Jewish Christians were in danger of turning away from Jesus because their fellow Jews were persecuting them for their confession that Jesus was the Messiah and insisting that he was simply another prophet or teacher or radical revolutionary...

Many Christians today are in danger of turning away from Jesus as "*the Lamb of God who was sent to take away the sins of the world*" (John 1:29) and settling for a poor substitute who is either some sort of moral example or courageous activist instead - because they are tired and weary of what they experience as an empty and impotent, self-righteous and arrogant version of Christianity.

So, if Christianity is about following Jesus, then if you change your Jesus, you can change your Christianity.

Furthermore they are confidently declaring their lack of confidence and certainty about being confident and certain, in what we can specifically know about God and the Christian faith.

It has become cool to search for God – but not cool at all to actually find Him.

So, it is into this confused and muddled milieu which the writer of Hebrews speaks the living and active Word of God that is sharper than any two-edged sword and it gets to the heart of the matter.

And that is to clarify who exactly was this Jesus who rode triumphantly into Jerusalem, to exhort us to be confident in what this Jesus does for us, and to give us reasons why we can be certain about it.

So the passage we read from Hebrews on this Palm Sunday reveals to us that Jesus is not only King – but He is the great High Priest, the Son of God, who has ascended into the very presence of God in heaven.

And the writer of Hebrews wants to make sure we get this and understand this because if we are considering turning away from the Jesus whom the scriptures reveal to us - to a Jesus

whom we find more acceptable or inspirational or less dogmatically confident... then we should at least understand what we end up losing in that process.

Friends, if we make Jesus into something other than who scripture reveals Him to be – we lose our great high priest, we lose our guaranteed access into the presence of God, and we lose our hope for humanity.

Now, is it actually possible to make Jesus into something other than what He really is?? Not in reality no... but in what we believe and confess about Him yes.

And what we believe and confess about Jesus will determine how we act and live out our faith and most importantly who we will turn to for dealing with our sins and restoring our relationship with God.

When we profess that Jesus is our great High Priest, the Son of God who has ascended into heaven what we are saying is that we accept the testimony of scripture that there is a separation

between humanity and God which needs a mediator to step into the gap and represent humanity to God and God to humanity.

Furthermore, we are confessing the Jesus is fully divine and fully human and fully qualified to be that mediator.

And by implication we are recognizing that some sort of relationship structure was in place which had been disrupted – and that the fault and the guilt for that the disruption lies on humanity's side, our side of the relationship.

And specifically using the term High Priest, we are bringing forward the whole history of the nation of Israel and their calling and inability to be faithful covenant partners with God, and realizing that if Israel can't do it – with all the help and attention and being God's chosen people...

If Israel can't be a faithful covenant partner with God – no one can... and thus a new human being was needed, a new hope, a human who would be able to be faithful to God, a human

who could be faithful to God on behalf of those who could not be faithful...

So – John 3:16 "*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*"

And then Hebrews 4:14 "*Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.*"

Hold firmly friends – even when you feel tired and weary because of your faith, or because of the faults and failings of the church and your fellow Christians.

In fact it's especially during those times that you need to hold firmly... because you are holding on a high priest who can empathize and sympathize with what you are experiencing!

Are you fed up with God's people acting arrogant and self-righteous? Jesus certainly knows what that is like. Are you

dismayed by how easily people misunderstand who Jesus is and turn away from him? He's been there as well. Are you tired and weary of following God's truth and will? Friends Jesus experienced that as well...

But in all of these instances – Jesus did not give into the temptation to turn away, to disobey God's plans for him, to pursue his own agenda. He did not sin.

Now if we insist that Jesus is just an example for us to follow, His sinlessness becomes an impossible burden for us to achieve and drives us into despair.

So it is no wonder that those who portray the Easter events as the culmination of Jesus' expression of love towards others or his determination to challenge power and corruption must confess they are uncertain and vague about faith and knowing truth...

It is the only way they can keep the impossibility of imitating Jesus' sinlessness from pushing them into spiritual depression!

But, if we hold firmly to the faith we profess – His sinlessness qualifies Him to stand in our place in front of God in heaven and it becomes our salvation and Hope!

And this gives us confidence, and certainty that we can go directly to the uncreated creator of all, the one who has no beginning and no end, the Almighty, Omnipotent, All-knowing God, the one who exists in three persons as one God... the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ – and we can ask for mercy and grace to help us in our time of need. Just. Like. That.

Why? Because scripture reveals that Jesus is our Great High Priest, the Son of God who ascended into Heaven.

Amen!? Hold firmly to that – and do not be deceived by fine sounding arguments these people put forward about focusing on Jesus and following his example and just loving people.

Now, the truth about confessing and professing faith brothers and sisters is that there is always the possibility of

understanding what we are confessing and professing about in another way.

What do I mean?

Well consider all the people who had lined up to welcome Jesus as He was riding into Jerusalem on a donkey? Did they understand what was really going on?

Did they know who Jesus really was? Did they really know the significance of what they were saying and what they were participating in?

They were first hand eye-witnesses to all the events of Holy week – but did they automatically infer from everything that occurred that Jesus had taken their sin upon himself and paid the price for their covenant unfaithfulness and opened up a new way into the presence of Yahweh for all humanity in his very person?

No... not even those who had followed Jesus with hopes of him being the Messiah understood this.

Remember the account of the two disciples leaving Jerusalem to go back to Emmaus after Holy Week in Matthew 24.

They were dejected and despairing – tired and weary – because they had just witnessed their Messianic hopes put to death on the cross and buried in the ground, Jesus had been crucified so what was left for them?? So they were turning away and leaving it all behind.

And when the resurrected Lord Jesus came up and walked alongside them, they didn't – couldn't - even recognize Him!

Jesus had to go back and help them understand all the events of the past week through the lens of Moses and the prophets from the scriptures – and then finally they understood what had taken place in the events of the past week.

It was revealed to them, they understood it and they recognized Jesus for who he truly had been all along – they could now confess and profess that Jesus was the great High Priest, the Son of God who stood in their place before God and stood in God's place before them.

So what sort of scriptural proof does the author of Hebrews offer to his first readers and to us -that Jesus actually meets the criteria of a high priest? That is not just something we're making up or reading into the events of Holy Week?

Well we are offered a comparative description between the office of the High Priest and Jesus, and in each case we see that Jesus not only has the qualifications – but he goes beyond those qualifications.

First, in 5:1 we are given a brief description of the function of the high priest. *"He is selected from among his people and appointed to represent the people in matters related to god, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins."*

Second, in 5:2 the necessary character and person of the high priest are outlined. Because he is a human representing other humans to God, he knows his own weaknesses and sins and *"thus he is able to deal gently with those who ignorant [of God's laws], or who are going astray"*

Third, in 5:4 we see how someone becomes a high priest – and that is only through divine appointment by God. It's not something you can decide to become on your own.

So let's take a look at Jesus and see if he meets these qualifications.

Was he appointed by God? Yes, there is a public recounting of God sending the Holy Spirit upon Jesus when he received the baptism of repentance from John.

In Luke 3:22 says *"the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."*

So the writer of Hebrews refers to Psalm 2:7 for us, which says
"You are my Son, today I have become your Father"

So, Jesus is appointed by God just as the high priest was - but he is above and beyond an ordinary high priest, we call Him the Great High Priest because He is the Son of God.

Secondly, did Jesus meet the criteria of character and person in order to be a high priest? Since He is fully God is He able to sympathize with sinful human beings in their plight and temptation?

Absolutely - because He was fully human he was tested and tempted as we are.

Hebrews 5:7-8 says "*During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered*"

Jesus temptation in the desert by Satan and His night in the Garden of Gethsemane come to mind here – but in both instances though Jesus experiences the same human temptation, He is able to redeem our humanity by resisting and not falling into sin.

So we have another reason why He is the GREAT High Priest.

And finally, in what way does Jesus then function as a high priest? Does He bring a sin offering for himself and for the people to God?

Well – this is really the best part of all.

Because Jesus did not sin, because the trials and temptations he experienced revealed that His humanity, when tested, was found to be perfect He did not need to bring a sacrifice for himself – but instead He could offer Himself as the sacrifice for ALL God's people – past, present, and future!

Hebrews 5:9 says "*he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him*" this is the greatest reason why we call Jesus our Great High Priest!

So brothers and sisters in Christ – be assured and confident, that the one you have put your faith and trust in to represent you before the Almighty God in Heaven – is not a sentimental moralist, a good teacher whose demonstrations of love are supposed to move us emotionally... He is not a radical revolutionary set on challenging the status quo...

(Though through the illuminating power and work of the Holy Spirit applying Jesus work to us – we are moved to respond in faith and this includes our emotions...

And through the empowering work of the Holy Spirit equipping us and calling us to continue Jesus' ministry we confront the sinful status quo with a call for re-formation according to God's Word...)

Friends, the Jesus whom the scripture reveals is our Great High Priest – who can sympathize with our tiredness and weariness – and yet because He did not sin, He has made the payment for ours with His own life.

So let us hold firmly to this faith we profess

Put our faith and trust in Jesus the King entering into Jerusalem, who became the Great High Priest - just like Melchizedek of old who was the King of Salem and a priest of God most High.

He stands before God in Heaven, before the throne of grace and He will give us mercy and grace to help us in whatever time of need we are in right now.

Brothers and sisters, be confident and pray boldly for whatever you need in your time of trial – through Christ our Great High Priest. Amen.