

Homily for January 18, 2017

Throughout the month of January we are reading our way through the Letter to the Hebrews. This letter was written to deal with a serious issue facing the early Church. Because of the increasing persecution and the challenges these Christians encountered, living year in year out as Christians, some of those who had come to believe in Jesus were turning away from Him. These would have been people who were ancestrally Jewish – hence the designation of the letter, “to the Hebrews”.

Because of the Jewish nature of the audience the letter is steeped in the Hebrew Bible to help them understand that God does know what he is doing and Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s covenant promises.

This is one of the most theological letters in the New Testament and therefore requires real effort in understanding its’ content. For this writer to be a devout Christian requires theological formation so as to understand how Jesus is the fulfillment of all the Hebrew Bible says.

In the section of Hebrews we read today, Jesus, we are told, is anticipated all the way back in the Book of Genesis with the mysterious figure of Melchizedek.

Let me walk through these verses with you.

This “King Melchizedek of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham as he was returning from defeating the kings and blessed him”;

Here reference is made to Genesis 14. Abraham has just defeated a group of opposing kings. Upon his return, in the Valley of Shaveh, he meets Melchizedek who blesses him in a very particular way. We are told in Genesis:

***And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High.
19 And he blessed him and said,***

***“Blessed be Abram by God Most High,
maker of heaven and earth;
20 and blessed be God Most High,
who has delivered your enemies into your hand!”***

The blessing is one that bestows favour on Abram, while at the same time honouring God. This is the same thing that happens in the Mass where we are blessed and God is blessed through the consecration of bread and wine. All the way back in Genesis, 2000 years before Jesus celebrated the Last Supper in the upper Room, the Mass is anticipated in Genesis 14.

Hebrews the goes on to say that is response:

and to him Abraham apportioned “one-tenth of everything.”

This was the percentage that was subsequently given by each family to the Levitical priesthood for their vocational ministry as stated in the Book of Numbers.

Next we are told what the name Melchizedek means:

His name, in the first place, means “king of righteousness”; next he is also king of Salem, that is, “king of peace.”

There are titles which again find their fulfillment with Jesus. This association with Jesus is made even more explicit by what is said next:

3 Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever.

The thing about Melchizedek is that he just shows up in Genesis 14 unannounced. We know nothing of his parentage nor genealogy and so our writer wants to underscore his eternal character. When reference is made to his being a priest forever, this is stated in contrast to the Aaronic priesthood. According to Numbers chapter 4, those in the priestly line of Aaron could only serve as priests from the age of 30-50. Not so with Melchizedek and Jesus. This point is brought home in the latter part of today’s reading where we hear:

15 It is even more obvious when another priest arises, resembling Melchizedek, 16 one who has become a priest, not through a legal requirement concerning physical descent, but through the power of an indestructible life. 17 For it is attested of him,

***“You are a priest forever,
according to the order of Melchizedek.”***

At the end of this reading is quoted Psalm 110. A psalm which is prayed every Sunday evening in the Breviary for Evening Prayer. That it is prayed on Sundays is significant because it underscores the eternal priesthood of Jesus the Day of the Resurrection. His was a priesthood not in line with the ancestry of Aaron but with the eternal quality of Melchizedek of old.

What are we to take from this tightly presented theological writing? That what we are doing here today, January 18th 2017 has roots deeper than the oldest Douglas Fir that you could find in a West Coast Rain Forest. This liturgy, this profession of faith that we articulate is the most well thought out and carefully executed plan in the history of the world. That is because this is a plan of no human origin but is divine.

Such a faith when appropriated and lived out with conviction will guard our hearts and wills from falling away from Jesus.