

Homily for January 19th 2017

The passage we just heard from Hebrews could be entitled:

See How Great Jesus Is!

The greatness of Jesus can be seen, first of all, because of who he is. He slogged it through the muck and mire of human life. He experienced every test, underwent every trial, endured every temptation known to humanity. He bore our griefs and carried our sorrows, and he emerged from it all not beaten and defeated, but steadfast, resolute, “made perfect forever” through suffering. Because he remained faithful as no other human being has done, he is “holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens” (7:26).

Jesus is great because of what kind of priest he is. Ironically, in terms of the old, earthly priesthood, Jesus would not have qualified for the job. The law required that priests be Levites, and Jesus was of another tribe as we are told in 7:14:

For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests.

So in legal terms Jesus was an “outlaw” priest. But Hebrew’s point is that Jesus’ priesthood does not rest on the old law but on the eternal will of God. God ordained Jesus; God spoke “the word of the oath” (7:28) that established his ministry. He is therefore a priest unlike any other.

Jesus is great also because of where he is. Ordinary priests perform their ministries in sanctuaries that are but a “sketch and shadow” of the real thing (8:5). Moses was given the blueprints for the earthly sanctuary on Sinai (8:5; see Ex. 25:40), but it was but a copy of the heavenly tabernacle (8:5). Jesus, however, offers his priestly service in the real thing; he is “exalted above the heavens” (7:26) and serves as a minister “in the sanctuary and the true tent that the Lord, and not any mortal, has set up” (8:2).

Jesus’ greatness can be seen in why he is a priest. Every priest must bring an offering to the altar of God. The priests of old brought lambs and bulls, grains and oil. Jesus brought himself. He placed on heaven’s altar the deepest possible sacrifice: his own life made perfect through suffering. In other words, he brought as an offering to God nothing less than the fullness of the human condition perfected by his own obedience. This is why he came and as Hebrews says in chapter 8:1 explains the central message of his letter:

Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven,

In this passage we see who, what, where and why Jesus is so great! Which brings us to the last of the five w’s, the “when” of our story.

When we see the greatness of Jesus it changes how we see ourselves.

There is not a day in which we do not fall, not a deed untouched by our weakness, not a moment in which our flawed nature does not shine through. Does it not stand to reason that our priest would need to go to the altar for us every day? No, says Hebrews. When Jesus placed himself on the altar of heaven, he was placing not only his own life but also ours, too, offering to God the human condition made perfect through his obedience.

We want our lives to count for something, to make, in other words, an acceptable offering. But we are plagued by the fear that our offering is finally unacceptable. Not only do we frequently make a mess of our lives, but even when we are at our best, even when we press ourselves to the limit to give and serve and do the right thing, it still seems insufficient. We can never do enough, achieve enough, love enough, give enough, have enough, be noticed enough. Someone is always standing in judgment over us—parents, teachers, employers, strangers, our inner selves—putting us on trial, deeming our efforts to be unacceptable. So day after day we are condemned to trudge to life's altar with a new offering, but it is never satisfactory.

The good news of Jesus' high priestly ministry is that he placed on the heavenly altar, once and for all, not only his life but—astonishingly—ours, too. He gathered up our hunger for approval, and he lived a life truly pleasing to God. He took our restlessness, and brought us to the place of Sabbath rest. He carried the human condition and placed it as an offering to God—not the ravaged, broken, humanity that we have made of ourselves, but humanity healed by his own faithfulness, humanity as God intended at the creation, free and joyful, at one with itself, others, and God.

When we know who, why, where and how Jesus is the great high priest we can more fully see ourselves aright. This is what Hebrews wants us to understand. When we see how great Jesus is we see our true worth and dignity in relation to him.