

Jesus the Great Priest, Melchizedek

Homily for January 18th 2023

Hebrews speaks about a figure who was shrouded in mystery until the coming of Jesus. Melchizedek, the King of Righteousness and King of Peace. I say he is shrouded in mystery because he only appears in one story in the Old Testament, Genesis 14, and in one Psalm, 110. And yet, in the New Testament book of Hebrews he is a main player. From chapters 5-7 he is mentioned 13 times. This is because Melchizedek could only be fully recognized in Jesus Christ. The writer to the Hebrews clearly sees Jesus as the fulfillment of this ancient figure, whose priesthood is not in line with that of Aaron, the brother of Moses. In order to be an Aaronic priest you had to be of the family line of Aaron. But when it comes to Jesus the writer states:

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.”¹

Here the writer of Hebrews states clearly that Jesus is Melchizedek, for by his Resurrection from the dead Jesus witnesses to his indestructible life. This is a life that Jesus continues to share with us today, especially through the ministerial priesthood. As a man is vested in the office of his priesthood with stole and chasuble these words are said or sung:

Christ the Lord, a priest for ever, according to the order of Melchizedek, offered bread and wine [alleluia].

This is to make the association between Jesus the true priest – Melchizedek – and the priesthood now shared with Jesus by those who have been ordained to serve the people of God as his vicars. The word vicar means “in place of”.

And as we turn to today’s Gospel we see at play what it means for the Church through her priests to continue to extend the ministry of Jesus as we see Jesus embody what it means to be the king of righteousness and peace.

The word righteousness means, among other things, the right ordering of life. Jesus wants to do this for the man with the withered hand. Knowing the Pharisees are watching him, with fearless courage, Jesus calls the man with the withered hand forward, so that no one can mistake what he is about to do. Then he puts his antagonists in a dilemma with two clear questions. First: “Is it lawful to do good on the sabbath rather than to do evil?” “They are bound to admit that it is lawful to do good, and it is a good thing he proposed to do. They are bound to deny that it is lawful to do evil; and, yet, surely it is an evil thing to leave a man in wretchedness when it is possible to help him.” (William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, pp. 68-69) Then Jesus asks the second question: “Is it lawful to save life rather than to destroy it?” “Here he is driving the thing home. He is taking steps to save this man’s life; they are thinking out methods of killing Christ.

¹ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#) (Heb 7:15–17). (1993). National Council of Churches of Christ.

On any reckoning, it is surely a better thing to be thinking about helping a man than it is to be thinking of killing a man. No wonder they had nothing to say!" (Ibid.)

Seldom does the Gospel show Christ angry. Here his anger is provoked by the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and their hardness of heart. They close themselves off from his message of salvation, his message of peace. What happens when someone definitively closes his heart to Christ? The Pharisees, the defenders of the law and Jewish customs, were bitter enemies of the Herodians, who collaborated with King Herod and the Romans. Yet this Gospel relates the chilling fact that these two joined forces to plot to kill Jesus. They are united not by the intrinsic force of goodness, but by the malignant power of evil. And rather than cooperating with Jesus' desire to bring peace and harmony they are instigators of evil and discord.

St Peter's by our vocation is called to be a community where under the direction of me as your Pastor we want to extend that ministry of righteousness and peace characteristic of Melchizedek. Here is a place where people are warmly received so as to know that the loving and merciful priest, Jesus continues to touch and heal, restore and offer his peace to all who call St. Peter's home.