

One of the realities that we face as human beings  
Is that sometimes those who are most willing to lend us a sympathetic ear  
When we are in distress or in need  
Are least able to give us practical help.  
Maybe they are a family member, a spouse, or a trusted friend or colleague.  
They understand us, they understand what we are going through,  
Maybe they've been in our exact position in life.  
But they can't do much if anything to effect the kind of change we need.

On the other hand there are people who have great competence,  
And who are able to effect real change for us, for the better,  
But who seem unable to listen attentively to us,  
To put themselves in our shoes,  
And to act for us with real understanding.  
Perhaps you've experienced this sort of thing with a teacher  
Or with a doctor, or (could it be possible?), with a pastor.

As human beings, in our real and sometimes desperate need.  
We need to deal with people who get what we are going through:  
Who have stood, or what can stand *in our shoes*.  
And we also need people who can *act*  
Decisively, authoritatively, and powerfully for us  
When we are not able to help ourselves.

The Good News from today's reading is that *Jesus is our true high priest*.  
He understands what it is to be a human being:  
He suffered the distresses and cries and tears that are part of life.  
So he doesn't stand aloof from us, above us and apart from all the difficulties,  
Apart from the distresses that we face in this bodily life.  
He understands what it is to be a human being:  
So he can deal gently with us in our ignorance and waywardness.

But he himself is not weighed down by sin or shame.  
Rather he is himself the source of our salvation  
And he is the one who can, as we obey him  
Bring us to the heavenly city, the heavenly Jerusalem  
And to innumerable angels in festal gathering.

Now today's reading from Hebrews is not necessarily straightforward  
It presupposes that we know well the first five books of the Old Testament,  
As well as, especially, the Psalms.  
In a bible study we could go back and forward reading up  
On the allusions and the references to the Old Testament.

But today I'm going to give a little context as we get into the text.  
Let's start four verses back from the reading that we heard from the lectern.  
Here's what it says: **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. He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness; and because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people.**  
Now it seems that the writer of Hebrews is writing to people  
Who do indeed know that Old Testament well:  
They know about angels; about Moses and the Torah;  
About the temple and sacrifices; *and about the priesthood*.  
One of the things the writer of the book wants to make clear up front  
Is that Jesus shows us exactly who God is:  
At the beginning of the letter, for example,  
The writer gets us to picture a wax impression made by a seal. (Heb 1:3)  
And he says that the relationship of the Father to the Son is at least that close.  
The writer also wants to make clear that Jesus is therefore  
Greater than the angels, that he's greater than Moses,  
That his sacrifice is greater than any sacrifice.

*And that he is greater than any priest.*

Greater indeed; but, as we just heard, there are nevertheless similarities  
With the Levitical priesthood, and the priesthood of Jesus.

For a start, Jesus, like the Levitical priests, offers gifts and sacrifices to God.  
This is a theme which is developed as the letter progresses.

Jesus, like the Levitical priests, is also able to deal gently with people  
Who are so naturally ignorant and wayward.

But, as the letter makes clear, his gentleness with us  
Does not mean he is made incompetent to serve perfectly  
And to bring us true and lasting salvation:

Jesus' greatness is seen

In that he does not have to make sacrifices for his own sin.  
Rather he is himself, as the letter later makes clear, the true sacrifice,  
And that through his death and resurrection and ascension  
He was free to offer for all time a single sacrifice for sins (Heb. 10:12)

The writer then goes back to another similarity that Jesus has  
With the Levitical priests, he writes:

**And one does not presume to take this honour, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was.**

This is an important teaching of the Old Testament  
That also resonates in the New Testament, and in the life of the church.  
When it comes to the holy things of God, it is useless to push oneself forward.  
To insist one's personal sense of calling, or to stand on one's rights.  
One must be called to serve *by God*, and be appointed *by him*.

This is how Hebrews goes on:

**So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him,  
'You are my Son,  
today I have begotten you';  
as he says also in another place,  
'You are a priest for ever,  
according to the order of Melchizedek.'**

These quotes are from Psalm 2 and Psalm 110  
They are quoted as the Father's declaration to the Son  
And can be understood as the Father establishing his Son as the High Priest  
Who represents human beings to the Father, and the Father to human beings.  
The reference to Melchizedek in the text is not easy to get  
And so I'll quote one section from Genesis 14

This is early in the Biblical narrative,  
Well before Moses or Aaron; well before, therefore, the Levitical priesthood  
That served at the tabernacle and later at the temple.  
Abram, as he is then still known, returns victorious from a battle  
And we read these words: **And King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High. He  
blessed [Abram] and said,  
'Blessed be Abram by God Most High,  
maker of heaven and earth;  
and blessed be God Most High,  
who has delivered your enemies into your hand!'**

**And Abram gave him one-tenth of everything.**  
In Melchizedek we have a priest king  
One to whom even Abram, our father in the faith, offers tithes.  
Jesus, the writer of the Hebrews, is a priest in *this* order.  
One, in other words, who does not offer sacrifices for his own sins.  
And one who, as the writer goes on to say,  
Prepared for his priestly role by  
What we could call his active and passive obedience;  
By his suffering, and by his life of prayer.

Listen to how the text goes on: **In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.**

One phrase that stands out here is **'Having been made perfect'**.

Surely, we could rightly ask, Jesus was already God's own Son

He was sinless, and therefore, already perfect. What's going on?

Perhaps we could think about it this way:

There are different ways in which things can be perfect.

Consider an acorn, for example: what is a perfect acorn?

One answer could be that a perfect acorn is one that is regularly shaped,

That is without blemish and is glossy and pleasing to look at and hold.

But another way to think about a perfect acorn

Is one that is planted in the ground, that dies in the earth

But that in this process springs into new life:

Sprouting, growing into a sapling, and then into a fully grown oak tree.

The acorn finds its perfection in reaching its goal.

*This* is how it is with our Lord Jesus.

He was indeed always God's Son; always sinless

Always able to stand for us as our champion against sin and evil and death.

As God's Son he fell like a seed into death

But grew into new life in the resurrection.

(And this is the imagery he uses of himself in today's reading from John)

Jesus reached his goal as inauguration as our true high priest

Through his suffering and death;

Through the prayers and tears that he experienced

As he shared his life with us as human being.

And even now, as a human being, he reigns at the right hand of the Father

Interceding for us in our need.

Dear people of God,

You have a great high priest who knows what it is to be a human being,

Who himself experienced the groans and tears and cries of life.

He is able to understand you, and to deal gently with you.

You also have a great high priest who is strong to reconcile you to the Father,

And to bring you into God's presence through the blood that he sacrificed.

You can approach God with a true heart,

And in confessing your sins,

Know that you have mercy and forgiveness from God.

The one who stands to intercede for you, the human being Jesus Christ,

Is the Son of God, who frees you also to live out your priestly status,

As you intercede for others,

As we together offer petitions for all people,

May God keep us in this life of faith,

So that his name may be glorified among us and in this world,

As we call on his name to bless all people.

In Jesus' name. Amen.