

The Final Word on Confidence Hebrews 4:14-5:10

Preached at 8.15 and C@10 on 14th December 2014

Intro

Why do we need a priest? What do you think of when you hear that title?

Up until a few years ago people like me in the Anglican Church were known formally as priests.

In recent times we've changed that to 'presbyter', which means 'elder'. The idea is of someone who is a leader among equals.

Using the word 'priest' in English came from a Latin word that meant something like 'elder'.

But the word 'priest' reminds us of the Old Testament role of priest – the men who offered sacrifices to God on behalf of the people.

One of the key differences between what protestant Christians and Roman Catholics believe is the role of the priest.

Roman Catholic teaching is that the priest offers a sacrifice to God on behalf of the congregation when they celebrate the eucharist, or Lord's Supper.

But I don't offer any sacrifice up here. We don't have an altar – this is a communion table. So I'm not a priest in that Old Testament sense.

I'm thankful that my job isn't slaughtering animals day in and day out!

The priesthood belongs to that old order of Old Testament religion that the Hebrew Christians were being attracted back to.

But here in this section we see that Jesus is our great High Priest.

Why do we need a priest at all if the Old Testament is now complete?

Why is it important for us to fix our thoughts on Jesus as our great High Priest?

Qualification of High Priest

Well let's look at the passage in reverse order here. Let's firstly look at the verses from chapter 5 that explain the qualifications for the High Priest.

Once we have that background we'll go back and see how Jesus being our High Priest helps us understand the gospel.

The office of high priest was part of the Old Testament sacrificial system.

God prescribed who, how, why and when sacrifices were to be offered – this wasn't a system invented by people to make offerings to God to somehow please him.

Other people groups and nations had sacrifices and priests that were meant to try and keep their gods happy.

But the true God *gave* his people the sacrificial system, including the priesthood, to provide the means to teach people what's needed for sinful people to be forgiven and to be assured of his forgiveness.

The High Priest was the one who had the job of representing the people before God, especially on the biggest day of the year – the Day of Atonement.

On this one day, the High Priest made sacrifices for the sins of the whole nation of Israel.

And he had to be qualified to do that. So, in 5:1 it gives those qualifications:

“Every high priest is selected from among men and is appointed to represent them in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.”

The first qualification for a high priest is that he is human – selected from among men, to represent them before God.

Secondly, to be able to represent the people, in verse 2 it says that the high priest has to be able to deal gently, or literally to “moderate his anger” with those who are ignorant and going astray.

That meant the high priest had to have the same first-hand experience of life that the people had – otherwise he wasn't truly representing them.

He had to be subject to the same weaknesses as the people he was representing. He had to be able to understand what it was like to be tempted to stop listening to God and to drift away from him.

He also had to be called by God. You couldn't answer the ad in the Sinai Morning Herald to apply to become the High Priest.

5:4 says:

"No one takes this honour upon himself; he must be called by God, just as Aaron was."

Aaron, the brother of Moses, was the first in the long line of priests who were called to serve God among his people.

The role of High Priest was an honour given by God to those who he chose to give it to.

So the High Priest was to:

- a) be selected from among men
- b) to represent God's people before God
- c) subject to weakness just like the people he represented
- d) to be able to deal gently with those who shared his human-ness
- e) called by God.

These are the qualifications to be a High Priest.

Jesus qualification as High Priest

In 4:14 it says that Jesus is the great high priest. He not only fits the bill – he's the only one who perfectly and permanently fits it.

In 5:5 it says:

'So Christ also did not take upon himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father."

Jesus didn't take the glory of becoming high priest – God the Father has given it to him as part of his authority over all creation – as we saw in chapter 1 where this quote from Psalm 2 appears for the first time.

Psalm 2 talks about the Son of God, who is the one God has anointed as the king or Messiah sent by God to rule over all the world.

But added to that quote from Psalm 2 now is a quote from Psalm 110: *The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind: "You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek."*

Jesus is not only the king or messiah sent by God – he's also a priest.

Not only a priest, but a priest *forever*.

Melchizedek is a mysterious character that appears in Genesis 14:18 who is the king of Salem and was also a priest of God.

There is no account of his beginning or his end. He appeared before the sacrificial system came into operation.

So he's not a priest 'in the order of Aaron'. He's in a class of his own.

But we know that Abraham – the first ancestor of God's people the Israelites – recognised his greatness by giving a tenth of the plunder of the battle he's just won, and then receives a blessing from Melchizedek.

Jesus, the Son of God, has been sent by God to be both our great ruler, and high priest in the order of Melchizedek.

That means that Jesus' priesthood is greater than, and earlier in history, than the priesthood set up by God for Israel, that began with Aaron.

So, Jesus has been called and sent by God to be our high priest.

And we know from what we've seen earlier in Hebrews that he's been chosen from among men – that he's human like us.

Verse 7 shows us that he's qualified by being subject to the same weaknesses as the people he represents as priest.

‘During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.⁸ Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered’.

From the beginning of Mark’s Gospel we know that Jesus was tempted by Satan to turn away from God and seek glory his own way without the life of suffering that he knew he had come to live.

In this verse in Hebrews it seems like the writer is talking specifically about the temptation Jesus faced the night before his death.

The temptation Jesus faced that night was to ignore God and depart from what he had said must happen.

I can’t think of any greater temptation than what Jesus experienced that night. Here he was, about to give his life in obedience to what God had said.

He experienced the same temptation as us – and then some!

He was tempted to stop listening to God and to try a different way.

The difference is that he didn’t give in to the temptation.

Instead, he cried out to God in prayer – entrusting himself to the one who could save him, saying ‘if there’s any other way... but your will, not mine’.

And he was heard. Though he suffered and died, he was given the strength and will to endure the cross, and he was raised according to God’s word and promise.

By experiencing the temptation to turn away from God, Jesus put himself in our shoes.

What that means for us is very special. Jesus can sympathise with us Christians as we struggle to listen and obey in the face of temptation...

... because, v8 says, he learned obedience from what he suffered.

God cares so much about us and our situations and struggles against sin and temptation that he came and shared our humanness to learn about our suffering first hand, by experiencing it himself.

In Jesus, God put himself in our shoes!

So Jesus has perfected the role of high priest... called by God... selected from among men to represent people before God... subject to the same weaknesses as the people he represents, so able to deal gently with us.

But Jesus is superior to any other priest – firstly because he is in a class of his own, like Melchizedek.

His priesthood doesn't have a beginning or an end – meaning his work of representing people before God has permanent effect.

And where the Old Testament High Priest had to offer sacrifices for his own sins as well as for the sins of the people he represented, Jesus had no sin of his own that required a sacrifice.

And so he is the perfect high priest – as v8 says.

And he is the perfect high priest because the sacrifice he offered – the sacrifice of obedience to God even to death – has brought eternal salvation for all who obey him.

And friends that's what we keep coming back to in Hebrews...

Listening to and obeying Jesus is listening to the gospel and obeying it by trusting in the sacrifice of his life for our eternal salvation.

Jesus is the perfect high priest has offered the one true sacrifice that all the sacrifices of the Old Testament are meant to teach us about – the sacrifice that brings lasting forgiveness and salvation for all who believe in it.

Why do we need a priest?

Why do we need a high priest like Jesus? Come back to 4:14

Because his fulfilment of the role means that we can have confidence to hold firmly to the faith we profess.

We mustn't fear that somehow God doesn't understand when we're tempted and when we sin in our weakness... and that we somehow put ourselves beyond his forgiveness.

Because Jesus shared our humanity and understands how we struggle to keep listening and obeying God, we know that God is not a harsh, mean character looking for the first opportunity to send us to judgment.

Yet because Jesus never sinned when he met temptation, we have even greater confidence... because his perfect obedience means that all our failures to listen and obey have been forgiven because of his sacrifice on the cross.

That's the gospel of grace that we have confidence in. All our sins have been atoned for – paid for – in the one true sacrifice that our great high priest has made.

And finally, (v16) his priesthood gives us confidence to approach the throne of grace to receive mercy, and grace to help us in our time of need.

Jesus' sacrifice means that we can come to God in prayer – confident that we'll find him merciful to sinners like us.

For anyone who believes in Jesus, God's throne is not a throne of harsh judgment. It's a throne where sinners like us find grace, mercy and forgiveness.

And in that grace, we have everything we need when we struggle against the temptation of sin.

We have the gospel promise of life restored to what we were created to be – to be like Jesus. He is our example of faith and obedience – showing us the way through the struggle of our weakness to hear and obey.

And he is always there at the other end of a prayer to hear us, understand us, and help us when we're tempted to drift from trusting him.

Dwell this week on what it means for Jesus to be our great high priest.

And let this great truth help you to grow in your confidence to keep listening to the gospel – God's final word to us in Jesus.