

Ten minutes a day through Lent

A reading from *Hebrews*
a short reflection
ideas how to pray
for each day

**Fourth week
16-21 March**

**Jesus Christ
is
our great high-priest**

Last week we read how, in Jesus Christ, God had intervened in the world beyond anything that had previously happened. Now *Hebrews* moves on to its second main theme: Jesus-Christ, as our high-priest, mediates between us and God in a way that is effective and enduring.

Monday 16 March

Jesus Christ, our great high priest

Hebrews 4:14-5:10

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

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

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 forever, according to the order of Melchizedek."

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.

Comment Jesus' faith in God never wavered, even though he faced every human temptation and suffered terrible humiliation. As a result, he is right up there, with God. So, in him we have someone who understands our weaknesses, yet has access to God. Jesus is our high priest, the one through whom we receive the grace and mercy of God.

Notice the three closing paragraphs (from *In the days of his flesh...* to the end), and how:

1. even in his agony, Jesus kept faith with God;
2. it was that obedience which fitted him to be high priest; and
3. as our high priest, he won for us eternal salvation.

If Jesus did all that, how might I to respond to him?

We will come back to Melchizedek on Thursday.

Tuesday 17 March

Exhortation to hope

Hebrews 5:11-6:12

About this we have much to say that is hard to explain, since you have become dull in understanding. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food; for everyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is unskilled in the word of righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil.

Therefore let us go on toward perfection, leaving behind the basic teaching about Christ, and not laying again the foundation: repentance from dead works and faith toward God, instruction about baptisms, laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And we will do this, if God permits. For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, since on their own they are crucifying again the Son of God and are holding him up to contempt. Ground that drinks up the rain falling on it repeatedly, and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it produces thorns and thistles, it is worthless and on the verge of being cursed; its end is to be burned over.

Even though we speak in this way, beloved, we are confident of better things in your case, things that belong to salvation. For God is not unjust; he will not overlook your work and the love that you showed for his sake in serving the saints, as you still do. And we want each one of you to show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope to the very end, so that you may not become sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

Comment This is an exhortation to get on with being a Christian, with the wonderful things on offer to us through Christ. It is full of pictures.

So it is high time to be weaned off the mother's milk that introduced us to faith and to draw on the power of the Holy Spirit that will help us to make the best of our lives. We must not stall, for if we do, we may not be able to start again. Slugs eat the green shoots of new growth and eventually kill the plant. So let's not be sluggards, but let's keep going, patiently and faithfully. That is how we will fulfil our Christian hope.

Wednesday 18 March

A sure and steadfast anchor of the soul

Hebrews 6:13-end

When God made a promise to Abraham, because he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, "I will surely bless you and multiply you." And thus Abraham, having patiently endured, obtained the promise.

Human beings, of course, swear by someone greater than themselves, and an oath given as confirmation puts an end to all dispute.

In the same way, when God desired to show even more clearly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it by an oath, so that through two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible that God would prove false, we who have taken refuge might be strongly encouraged to seize the hope set before us.

We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.

Comment God promised to bless Abraham and his seed. But the promise was no sooner made than came Abraham's worst moment - the binding of Isaac. All seemed lost, yet still Abraham kept faith, God then transformed that situation, re-enforcing his promise to Abraham. The point, says *Hebrews*, was to show Abraham that God's promise of blessing was unchangeable.

Christians are the heirs of that blessing, first promised to Abraham. Our hope of salvation is doubly guaranteed, because it is God's promise and also because, on the other side of the curtain that separates us from God is Jesus, our high priest, our advocate with God.

The coronavirus may be upsetting our plans, even threatening our lives. Yet however the epidemic develops, whatever storms may assail us, we have the solid assurance of God's eternal blessing, as a sure and steady

anchor, able to hold us secure. How that hope will be realised, we do not know. Like Abraham, our hope is in trusting God, come what may.

Thursday 19 March

One greater than Abraham

Hebrews 7:1-10

This "King Melchizedek of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham as he was returning from defeating the kings and blessed him"; and to him Abraham apportioned "one-tenth of everything." His name, in the first place, means "king of righteousness"; next he is also king of Salem, that is, "king of peace." 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.

See how great he is! Even Abraham the patriarch gave him a tenth of the spoils. And those descendants of Levi who receive the priestly office have a commandment in the law to collect tithes from the people, that is, from their kindred, though these also are descended from Abraham. But this man, who does not belong to their ancestry, collected tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had received the promises. It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior. In the one case, tithes are received by those who are mortal; in the other, by one of whom it is testified that he lives. One might even say that Levi himself, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, for he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him.

Comment *Hebrews* presents Jesus as our high priest. Yet Jewish priests came only from the tribe of Levi, while Jesus is from the tribe of Judah. How can this be?

Hebrews recalls the *Genesis* story where Abraham defeats the Five Kings. On his return, he is welcomed by "King Melchizedek of Salem, ... priest of God Most High", who blesses him. Clearly, Melchizedek is no levitical priest. Then Abraham gives Melchizedek a tithe. Does not this mean that Abraham looks to him as his superior? So any subsequent levitical high priest, as a son of Abraham, should do the same.

Hebrews uses Melchizedek to show what Jesus is like. What makes Jesus our high priest is that his human experience, completed in his agony, makes him perfect as one able to represent us; and his call by God ensures that he will be heard. We may be less bothered than early Jewish Christians about whether Jesus was outside the levitical line. For us, as for the Jewish Christians, what really matters is that we can have no more effective advocate with God than Jesus.

Friday 20 March

A priest forever

Hebrews 7:11-end (some verses omitted)

Now if perfection had been attainable through the levitical priesthood-- for the people received the law under this priesthood-- what further need would there have been to speak of another priest arising according to the order of Melchizedek...? For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well...

There is, on the one hand, the abrogation of an earlier commandment because it was weak and ineffectual (for the law made nothing perfect); there is, on the other hand, the introduction of a better hope, through which we approach God.

This was confirmed with an oath;... "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, 'You are a priest forever'"-- accordingly Jesus has also become the guarantee of a better covenant.

Furthermore, the former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office; but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he has no need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for those of the people; this he did once for all when he offered himself. For the law appoints as high priests those who are subject to weakness, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever.

Comment The point of the argument is to persuade Jewish Christians that their best hope lies with Jesus, not with the old order.

The old order could not achieve perfection. That is why the priesthood of Jesus is needed. It is indeed new. Yet it was long foreseen in Israel's tradition. For did not God announce long since, with an oath, the call of his anointed king, his Messiah, to eternal priesthood?

The old, mortal, levitical priesthood and the law, with its endlessly repeated sacrifices, was ultimately unable to bring salvation to all. Now we have Jesus, a priest of another order: perfectly adapted by his profound experience of our misery to represent us humans; called by God after he faithfully kept trust through the cross; whose sacrifice is once-for-all, eternally living with God where he intercedes for us.

Jesus, our high priest, offers us what the old order could not attain.

Saturday 21 March

Jesus mediator of our new (and greater) covenant

Hebrews 8:6-end

But Jesus has now obtained a more excellent ministry, and to that degree he is the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted through better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no need to look for a second one.

God finds fault with them when he says: "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah; not like the covenant that I made with their ancestors, on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; for they did not continue in my covenant, and so I had no concern for them, says the Lord. This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall not teach one another or say to each other, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more." In speaking of "a new covenant," he has made the first one obsolete. And what is obsolete and growing old will soon disappear.

Comment The new order with Jesus as high priest is nothing less than a new covenant between God and his people. But the idea of a new covenant is not new to Judaism. It has long been anticipated, not least in famous words from the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, written 500 years earlier. *Hebrews* sees the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as marking the fulfilment of Jeremiah's words.

Jeremiah announced that God's new covenant will bring God and his people much closer together. Then his people will know God's ways, "for they shall all know me" and they will be sure of his mercy and forgiveness. We know God, his ways, his mercy and his forgiveness, says *Hebrews*, because God makes himself known to us through Jesus Christ.

Some of *Hebrews'* arguments may seem strange to us. Well, we are not 1st century Jewish Christians. But knowing God, being certain of his mercy and forgiveness, knowing that he hears us and understands us, is as important today as it ever was. Jesus gives us those gifts.

One Prayer

Pick up one thought from the reading and bring it before God as a short prayer.

It need not be complicated. God understands what we try to say to him.

One Thought

Think about the issues raised by the reading. What could it mean for me? Is this the way the world is, or the way the world might be? Carry the thought with you through the day and try to remember it before you go to sleep.

One Thank-you

Find something in the reading that you can thank God for. Try to be explicit, however little it may seem. Then thank God for it, just as you would thank someone who gave you a gift.

Sum it up

*Almighty God,
whose most dear Son went not
up to joy but first he suffered
pain,
and entered not into glory before
he was crucified:
mercifully grant that we, walking
in the way of the cross, may find
it none other than the way of life
and peace;
through Jesus Christ your Son
our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever .*

*Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name;
your kingdom come;
your will be done
on earth, as it is in heaven.*

Give us today our daily bread.

*Forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin
against us.*

*Lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.*

*For yours is the kingdom and the
power and the glory forever.*

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