

# A GREAT HIGH PRIEST

*Hebrews 4:14-5:10*

As a preacher the author of this sermon to the Hebrews is something of an expert, using many of the devices still taught in sermon classes. One particular device is used twice in this section of the sermon – that of suspense. On one occasion this suspense is relieved by going back to an earlier question, while on the other it is highlighted by leaving a further question to be answered. There is also a second device; repetition and expansion that underline the sermonic nature of this letter.

But to what end does the Preacher use these techniques? Firstly, to avoid the charge of being simplistic, the Preacher, a couple of chapters back, (2:17; 3:1), introduces Jesus to us as our 'high priest'. At the time he did not elaborate on what this might mean, leaving the congregation to wonder. But the Preacher is not just a good speaker who knows how to keep a crowd interested; he is also a good theologian. He knows that one of the problems Christians face is their tendency to put things into boxes. The Preacher has so far presented Jesus as the Divine Son, the suffering pioneer, the imprint of God's very being, the heavenly heir and the high priest, among others. But he does not want us to think of these as separate titles, as though this morning he is God's agent of creation and this afternoon he will be our mediator. Rather, he is all these things, and more, at once. So the Preacher plait a rope made of many strands. It is possible to separate the strands, but the strength of the rope lies in the weave.

A second effect of the Preacher's methods is to build on what has gone before. If the hearers agree that "A" is true then it follows that "B" must also be true. We have already seen the Preacher's repetition of key ideas like, "Don't trust your eyes, use your ears". In these last verses of Hebrews 4 he repeats the pattern of the Glorious Son becoming the Suffering Son, becoming the Triumphant Son. But he is not simply repeating the same information. The first time he draws our attention to this pattern (1:1-4), he wants to reassure the congregation that the shifting currents of our lives, seemingly random and often meaningless, are actually presided over by the gracious and Powerful Son. The next time he uses the same pattern (2:5-18), comforts us by reminding us that Jesus, on that downward sweep, joined himself fully to us, so that, "he is able to help those who are being tested" (2:18). The third use of the same pattern has yet another lesson to teach, and it is about prayer. In 5:16, the Preacher tells us that another result of the Son's descent and ascent is that we may approach God's throne of grace with confidence, receiving mercy and finding grace in our time of need. And this is because Jesus is, to expand on an earlier idea; our great high priest (4:14).

This whole section is geared towards encouraging daring prayer, of approaching God's throne with 'boldness' (4:16 NRSV). The Preacher wants the congregation to move beyond fearful prayers, tidy prayers, formal and distant prayers, towards a way of praying that storms the gates of heaven with honest and heartfelt

cries. He does not want us to view prayer like applying for planning permission; but like children who cry out in the night, they will be heard and comforted.

However, the preacher knows that prayer is not a matter of technique. Prayer, bold prayer is an expression of bold theology. How we pray reflects what we believe about God and our relationship with him. That is why the Preacher tells the congregation to “hold on firmly to the faith we profess” (4:14), that is, to the conviction that Jesus is all these things the Preacher has been proclaiming up to now.

How does the theology empower prayer? Well, in the first place it tells us how we may approach God. It’s all too easy for us, who have largely been brought up on a tame, domesticated picture of God, to forget the sheer audacity of coming before God with our prayers. That’s why many of our prayers sound like orders at MacDonald’s, “God, I would like this and that, with a side order of those”. God’s job is then to fulfil the order. True prayer, informed by sound theology, is nothing like that. Moses, in approaching God, took off his shoes because he knew he was in the presence of God (Exodus 3:5). Isaiah cried out, “Woe is me”, when he saw the Lord (Isaiah 6:5). The tax collector in Jesus’ parable lowered his eyes and beat his chest saying, “God be merciful to me” (Luke 18:13).

The question is, “Who is worthy to speak to God?” The answer, according to our confession, is no one, except Jesus, who is alone without sin (4:15). The good news of this bit of theology is that Jesus makes possible what we could not do for ourselves. We have a high priest who knows firsthand all about our difficulties and weaknesses who we acknowledge us as his brothers and sisters, (2:11) and served us as our great high priest.

The task of a priest is to approach God on behalf of the people. He takes to God their offerings, their prayers, their repentance, their cares, their deepest needs. But a priest faces both directions. Not only does he turn to God on behalf of the people, he also faces the people on behalf of God. The priest represents God to the people. What do we see, then, when we face Jesus? We see a God who stoops down from the holy heights to bear our grief and carry our sorrows. We see a God to whom we can pray freely, confident that we will “receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (4:16)

But this is the very problem faced by the congregation. How can they, and we, know this is indeed the case? It sounds fine, but saying it doesn’t make it so. There is no doubt Jesus is a fellow sufferer – anyone with eyes can look at the Cross and see that. The question is, is this suffering Jesus truly our great high priest in a way that eyes cannot see? Can we really trust him with our heartfelt prayers? The Preacher turns to this question in Hebrews 5.

Having reminded the congregation that they need to “hold firmly to the faith we profess” (4:4), which in turn reminds them to “pay careful attention to what we have heard” (2:1), the Preacher now gives another bit of theology. This time it is a ‘right man for the job’ speech (5:1-10). He sets out the qualifications for a priest as laid down in the Old Testament, particularly Leviticus, and shows that Jesus not only matches the job description, but goes beyond it in every aspect.

Taken as a whole, 5:1-10 contains three sets of comparisons; the function of the high priest, (5:1, cf 5:9f), the person of the high priest (5:2f cf 5:7f) and the appointment of the high priest (5:4 cf 5:5f).

5:1 tells us what a high priest is supposed to do. They are appointed to stand in the gap between God and his people. Jesus, the Preacher tells us, in 5:9ff, does this supremely well. Not only does he represent God and his salvation, he is the source of that salvation. Furthermore, the salvation that Jesus brings is eternal. (This is a theme that we will return to when we get to Hebrews 9).

Moving on to 5:2ff, we see that Jesus fills and overflows the requirement for the type of person a priest should be. The priest shares a common humanity with his people – as does Jesus, except he was without sin. Jesus himself, “offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death” (5:7). Jesus surpasses the old priesthood. Like them, Jesus was fully human. Unlike them his humanity did not erode into despair, loss of faith and sin. Jesus, as a human being, suffered and was limited and weak, but pain taught him obedience, not faithless despair (5:8); his frailty deepened his reverence for God rather than stiffened into rebellion (5:7). Even in the muck and mire of human anguish Jesus never forgot he was the Son. Not only in his compassion towards those who have lost sight of the truth that they are God’s own children, Jesus can also take them by the hand and lead them home.

5:4-6, at the centre of this ‘right man for the job’ speech, proclaims that, like the Old Testament priests, Jesus is appointed by God (5:4). Two quotes from Psalms 2 and 110 underline this. Once again Jesus exceeds the job description, but there is a twist in the tail which brings us back, to where we started, and the idea of suspense as a technique in sermonising. In both 5:6 and 10 the preacher uses the expression, “a priest after the order of Melchizedek”. Now I wouldn’t mind betting that at this point in the sermon many in that original congregation went blank. Who or what is Melchizedek? Well, we will get there and find some answers, but not this week – so don’t forget to tune in next week for the next exciting episode of ‘Hebrews- the Sermon’.

Amen

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