

THE HIGH PRIESTHOOD OF JESUS – ADVANCED COURSE (1): THE PRIESTLY ORDER OF MELCHIZEDEK

Hebrews 7:1-8:13

And so we finally come to it. Way back in 5:11 the Preacher told the congregation he had much to say on the subject of Jesus' high-priesthood and now he turns to the subject. It is not difficult to understand why the Preacher has been so hesitant in approaching this subject. The next four chapters are amongst the most theologically dense in all of Scripture. Particularly to the modern eye, this section of the Sermon is hard to follow. But therein lies the clue – this book was not written for the eye, with its tidy paragraphs and clear logical bullet points; it was constructed as a sermon. It doesn't move in straight lines. Rather it weaves about, spirals and doubles back on itself. So we are not going to try to trace a logical thread through these next four chapters. We are going to listen to a symphony. Symphonies are not simple constructions, they have major and minor themes that are picked up and developed by different parts of the orchestra at different times.

This is not to say there is no underlying pattern in the sermon. In the first place the Preacher never forgets his main point is, "Jesus – the great high-priest". He pursues this thought through three Old Testament passages; Psalm 110:4; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 40:6-8. Sometimes this unity is difficult to spot, as the Preacher speaks in a way that is at times different from the way we are used to hearing, but it is always there.

Secondly, for all his themes and variations, the Preacher uses a very sturdy framework on which to hang his thoughts. This section of the sermon, which may be seen as another sermon-within-a-sermon, similar to the one we saw in 3:7-4:13, though quite elaborate, is quite predictable. It is divided into five sub-sections, with all but the last comprised of a description of some aspect of Old Testament priesthood, which is then compared to the new and superior priesthood of Jesus. The fifth sub-section is entirely about the new.

There is a dual purpose to this first section. Like all good theology, it is a song of praise to Jesus Christ. All theology ought to have this effect on us. Even at its most academic, theology should bring us closer to God. But also, like all good theology, this section has a practical purpose. This is not theology for theology's sake. As we have seen so far in this sermon, the Preacher's aim is to renew the congregation's hope and endurance. Through baptism, they belong to Jesus; the forgiveness, peace and harmony with God achieved through the priestly ministry of Jesus are great gifts given to them. Because of this they can worship with joy and confidence, confess their faith with boldness, find meaning in the fellowship of the church, perform acts of mercy and

kindness and, most of all, keep on hoping and serving with joyful confidence in the faith. In short, what seems at first glance like a long and complex journey through the winding corridors of deep theology turns out in the end, to provide refreshments to weary Christians in the everyday living of the Christian life.

As I said earlier this first sub-section (7:1-8:13), is structured as a comparison. The Preacher lists four things about the old system, and then compares each to God's new provision. He starts this process by expanding on his previous comments about the mysterious Melchizedek. We need to be careful here, for the way the Preacher talks about this man, is confusing to us. We do not have the same shared background, nor do we think in the same way.

Although Melchizedek is an historic figure, (he meets with Abraham after a great battle, gives a blessing and receives a tithe of the spoils of war (see Genesis 14:17-20)), he is also a figure of legend. In particular, it was commonly believed by first century Jews that he had no parents, was not born and did not die. This being "without beginning of days or end of life (7:3) together with his name, which loosely translated means "king of righteousness", and title, King of Salem (=king of peace), gives the Preacher opportunity to draw certain lessons. Don't be worried by this flimsy historic background, the lessons remain true, just as surely as Jesus remains the "good shepherd", even though he was a carpenter. The Preacher's point is quite clear – back in the old days, before the Levitical priests, there was a foreshadowing of Jesus. The Preacher has told us that God has spoken to us by his son in these last days (1:1f) – the story of Melchizedek tells us that this was not an afterthought.

And how does he do this? Because right at the beginning of Israel's story there is a hint of something better. Not only does the story of Abraham and Melchizedek point to this, but a much later Psalm (110:40, quoted in 7:17 & 25) underlines it. A new system, one based on the qualities of righteousness, peace and timelessness, was needed and promised.

The argument is simple, even if the language is loaded. The Preacher points out that perfection could not be attained through the Levitical priesthood (7:11). This use of the word "perfect" is important. The Preacher has already told us that Jesus was "made perfect" (see 2:10 & 5:9) and soon he will say that the congregation, too are "made perfect" by Jesus' priestly work (10:14). The law, (by which he means the Levitical, ceremonial law), makes no one perfect. Something new was needed, something not based on old-style priests with all the accompanying ceremony, but something timeless, based on righteousness and peace – "in the order of Melchizedek" (7:17).

Having used the Melchizedek story to show up some of the weaknesses of the old system the Preacher now turns to Jesus and the new order. He begins by making explicit that Jesus is that "priest after the order of Melchizedek". It has often been noted that, given Jesus' earthly qualifications, he would never have got the job of priest. But this is the point. The old priests acquired their office through connections; they had the Law on their side and were born into the right family. Jesus is a priest by virtue of the life he led and the death he died (7:16). So now, that which was "weak and useless", unable to do the very thing we most needed, to be made perfect, was set aside. A new road to God was laid. Now we can approach God by a new and better way. What's more we now have a priest who intercedes more effectively on our part, for now we

have a priest who can save completely and for all time (7:25). Our new priest does not get sick or die, doesn't go on holiday, doesn't fall down on the job, or grow tired of our need, does not compromise his office or take advantage of us for his own gain. He is steadfast and faithful, one who can be trusted. Because of God's oath (which we thought about last week), Jesus has become the guarantor of a better covenant (7: 22).

The middle section of our passage (7:26-8:6) reminds us just how great Jesus is and is a catalogue of Jesus' life and ministry. This last reference to a covenant leads straight into the closing part of this passage. The Preacher points out the obvious: like the old priesthood, the old covenant was fundamentally flawed, and a new one was necessary. The old, (or 'first'), covenant (8:7) is the covenant made between God and Israel on Sinai. God gave the law through Moses and the people made a solemn oath, "All the LORD has spoken he will do ". (Exodus 27:7ff). The problem was that the covenant was soon broken and the people violated their promise.

But even though the people proved unfaithful, God remained faithful, and this faithfulness, the Preacher tells us, led to a new and better covenant, not based on law, obligation and ceremony, but this time based on mercy and forgiveness. The description of the new covenant comes from Jeremiah 31:31-34 and is the longest quotation of the Old Testament, in the New Testament. It serves two purposes. Firstly, it underlines the problem with the old covenant. But, more importantly it sets out the benefits and strengths of the new.

We will be returning to the benefits of this new covenant soon as we study the next two chapters. For now we conclude with 8:13 and a comment on this new covenant. If, as the Preacher said earlier, a change in priesthood means a change in the Law, that is, a basic shift, in the way God relates to human beings, then, in similar fashion, the Preacher maintains that the establishment of the "new covenant" signals the same sort of turnabout. The new covenant does not exist alongside the old it replaces it. The whole tragic history of the human race – the sin, the shame, the guilt, the broken promises, the torn relationships – is not the last word; in fact it is yesterday's news, old, "obsolete" and passing away. Those who grow weary looking at the world around them are reminded that the shadows of the long night are rapidly giving way to the brightness of God's new day of mercy.

Amen

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