

The Majestic Jesus  
Hebrews for Today  
vii. Our Great High Priest (Heb 4:14-5:10)

The word 'better' occurs some seventeen times in the New Testament, thirteen of which occur in Hebrews alone. Whilst in one sense the majestic Jesus is incomparable being the unique Son of God, God through him "planned something better for us" (11:40). The passage before us describes Jesus as a better high priest. The writer draws on the history of Israel in the wilderness and the role of the High Priest on the Day of Atonement offering sacrifices on behalf of the people and himself in the Tabernacle.

The focus is not simply on the person and work of Jesus on earth, the empty cross and the resurrection, but the ongoing work of Jesus as high priest, having passed through the heavens as the human high priest passed through the curtain in the Tabernacle into the holy of holies to make atonement for sin. This is the main point of the passage, indeed the whole of the book: Jesus' ongoing work presenting the fruit of his sacrifice before the Father and interceding for his people on earth.

On the basis of an indicative, what Christ has done for us as great high priest (4:14a), the writer exhorts us by way of two imperatives i.e. what we must do in turn viz "let us hold firmly to the faith we profess" (v14b); "let us approach God's throne of grace with confidence" (v16a). Grace enables faith. The resources necessary to persevere and maintain spiritual health come from God. However, we are not simply passive recipients. Faith leads to action based on the prior acts of God in Christ. Faced with the temptation to bolt and run when confronted with hostile opposition, the readers of the letter receive a sweet surprise – like them, Jesus the divine Son was called to walk a path of obedience through suffering. Like a human high priest "able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray" (v2). Jesus, as the God-man, understands our human frailty. He deals with sin seriously, and patiently with the sinner. He invites us to be with him at the throne of grace.

Jesus is not simply a go-between priest representing the people before God, he has opened the way to the Father's home; continually applying the propitiatory power of his sacrifice, not simply appeasing God's wrath directed at sin, but covering sin and removing its offence having experienced judgement on our behalf. The writer alludes to Jesus' experience in the Garden of Gethsemane where "he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death" (v7). Having resisted the temptation of Satan, having "learned obedience from what he suffered" (v8), Jesus chose the way of the cross.

Seated at the right of the Father he "was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek" (v10) an enigmatic priest-king Abraham met after defeating an enemy coalition, to whom he offered a tithe of the spoils. (Gen 14:30). The point is, unlike the hereditary high priesthood of Aaron, Melchizedek was both priest and king whose two-fold role was non-hereditary, i.e. not dependant on family lineage. In that sense he was a type of Christ, albeit in a limited sense.

Though strange and enigmatic to modern eyes and ears, the implications of this symbolism are profound. We are not alone, left to our own devices. We are not rugged individualist trying to make sense of life. We have a spiritual elder brother in Christ (2:11), "the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" (v9). What God starts he finishes. He does not abandon us when we pass through the wilderness and our lesser Gethsemanes. Just as Jesus "was heard because of his reverent submission" (v7b), God does not turn a deaf ear to our pleas. He keeps careful watch over our lives enabling us to make safe passage home.

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