

Trinity 20 (Proper 24)

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew, Guernsey, on Sunday 17 October.

Readings: Hebrews 5 verses 1-10 and Mark 10 verses 35-45

'Is the applicant the right person for the right place, and is there a good fit?'

'What knowledge, skill and experience does this person need to be successful in this role?'

And, 'Do we believe that God is calling this person to serve in this parish and lead the people of God in their mission and ministry?'

These are some of the questions which I will be asking when we consider some appointments in the Deanery of Guernsey over the coming months. They are important questions, because we must be satisfied that we are making the right appointments, both for the parish and for the person being appointed.

Today's New Testament reading is helpful as we begin to prepare for this process of discernment. But even more importantly, we are drawn into a reflection on why we can describe Jesus as our high priest, and the significance of that title.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews asks a similar question to those I have posed. Is Jesus qualified for the office of high priest? The answer is unambiguously 'Yes.' But demonstrating the reasons for this position is initially difficult because Jesus is not from the tribe of Levi (which is one of the twelve tribes of Israel), from which Jewish tradition expected the high priest was appointed. And as this letter was directed to Christians with a Jewish heritage, the question is important. Jesus' lineage, which we find in the genealogies at the beginning of Matthew's and Luke's gospels, appears to disqualify him. In the New Testament reading this week, the writer responds to this problem and shows that Jesus *is* qualified to function as our high priest.

The writer examines two qualifications in particular. Humility and compassion.

With respect to humility, the author first notes that high priests do not grasp at this position of honour. Those who arrogantly seize the office disqualify themselves. Aaron and his descendants who followed him as high priest came to their position because God called and appointed them.

Jesus fulfills this qualification as well. He has not presumed to take the office; God selected him. The author quotes two passages of scripture to support this claim. The first reference is to Psalm 2 verse 7. The second quotation is Psalm 110 verse 4: 'You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek'. This quotation proves central in the argument.

The author knows Jesus does not fulfill the requirement of physical descent from Levi. How can he then continue to argue that God has appointed him to be high priest? The writer uses an entirely different proposition to deal with the objection. *Christ, he points out, is not a priest like Levi at all. He is a priest like Melchizedek, who belongs to an older (and therefore better) order of priests.*

Later in the letter, as we will see next week, the author examines the relationship of Jesus and Melchizedek (a mystical figure whom Abraham meets) in more detail. In today's reading, the writer quickly turns to explore a second qualification, that of compassion or mercy. The high priest must be able to deal mercifully with the ignorant

and the errant since he too is beset by human frailty. High priests must also offer sacrifice for their own sins as well as those of others.

Despite his exalted status as Son, Jesus too is able to sympathize with human frailty and limitation because of what he experienced in 'the days of his flesh'. The analogy between Jesus and the other high priests does not hold in every respect because Jesus is without sin. Nonetheless, his experience of living amongst humanity encompasses the full range of human experience; so that he is able to sympathize with us.

In particular, the prayers of Jesus illustrate the depth of his identification with us. Just as the high priest offers 'gifts and sacrifices for sins', so Jesus sacrificially offers 'prayers and supplications'. But Jesus did not offer these prayers isolated from human need and pain. Instead, Jesus prayed to God in the midst of crisis, fervently and passionately, 'with loud cries and tears'.

This may allude to Jesus' experience of prayer in Gethsemane, to his prayer from the cross, or to the role of prayer throughout the entirety of his passion. What matters most is that Jesus stands in solidarity with us in our vulnerability and, like us, cries out to God for help.

Jesus' identification with humanity extends beyond prayer to obedience. His obedient suffering (and here the writer has in mind his suffering and death on the cross) is essential in determining his vocation as our high priest. In his own experience, Jesus learns how to respond to and obey God's call. He does not cling to his prerogatives as Son but becomes obedient.

That obedience qualifies him for his service as priest, for it demonstrates his capacity to sympathize with us in our struggles. Learning obedience, Jesus became 'the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him'.

But why should the obedience of Jesus as a human being matter? Why does salvation depend on a high priest who is subject to weakness, who prays in crisis, who learns what the human lot is like? Why does Jesus' service as high priest require his identification with us?

Simply because of two crucial verses in the passage from this letter which we heard last week: '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.'

We heard in the gospel this morning Jesus' own statement of his mission and his calling to be our great high priest and our saviour: 'For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'

And in the words of the hymn,

There was no other good enough
to pay the price of sin;
he only could unlock the gate
of heaven, and let us in.

For that, thanks be to God.

