

'Jesus, the High Priest'. Bethesda Coffee Morning. 7 October 2015.

As you know, we are now well on our way through our series of talks on many of the names, titles and descriptions of the Lord Jesus found in the New Testament. Some of you may remember that, when I spoke two weeks ago, my subject was that of 'Jesus, the forerunner', and we thought then of our Lord as the One who, because He returned to heaven by way of His sacrificial death on the cross, made it possible for others to follow Him there safely.

Well, this morning, I want to think with you about one of the functions which He – the Saviour – has been performing in heaven now for almost 2,000 years. For my subject today is that of 'Jesus, the High Priest'.

We often refer to His suffering and death on the cross as His 'finished work' – and so it is, for there He did absolutely everything necessary for the salvation of all who trust in Him. None of *us* can do anything to add to it, and our Lord Himself will never need to suffer again to enhance or improve on what He accomplished then. The work of the cross is complete in every way. It is, I say again, His 'finished work'. But this morning I want you to ponder briefly that which can be said to be His '*unfinished work*' – our Saviour's ongoing work as His people's High Priest.

And, as two weeks ago, my Bible reading comes from the letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament, and these are the writer's words: 'Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need'.¹

At the outset, I need to point out that when we read the word 'priest' there, we must shut out all ideas of a Roman Catholic priest or of an Anglican priest. The image is rather that of the priests and high priests who had functioned in ancient Israel for some 1500 years before our Lord was here.

In our short reading, we find three things. First, what Christians **do have** – namely, 'a great High Priest'. Second, what Christians **do not have** – namely, 'a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses'. And, third, what we, if Christians, **have to do** – namely, to hold on to all we profess to believe, and to come into God's presence (not with cringing fear, but) with boldness and confidence, to obtain His mercy for the past and His help for the future.

First then, what Christians **do have** – namely, 'a great High Priest'. This, in part at least, is the writer's response to the taunts and jeers of first century non-Christian Jews, who were quick to argue that, in their eyes, Christianity was clearly lacking and deficient in that it had no visible high priest with his sacred office, his splendid robes and his impressive ministries. 'Ah, but', the writer responds, 'we have something better'.²

For, far from being badly off in comparison, these early Christian converts had – and we have – what Judaism never had! It has been estimated that there were *about 100,000* Jewish **priests** in those days. And Israel then boasted *many chief priests* (members of the families of the various recent high priests). And, over the entire history of the nation, there had been *more than 80 high priests* – although, sadly, over half of these (those who functioned over the previous 250 years or so) were not genuine high priests of the proper line, for they were not descended from Aaron.³

But, leaving aside these less worthy specimens, *even* Aaron himself – though called and appointed by God – had not been a *great* high priest. We Christians, the writer is saying, have a High Priest who far transcends all others.⁴

And what is more, our text assures us, our 'great High Priest ... has passed through the heavens'.

When I spoke two weeks ago, I pointed out that the date then coincided with the most important and sacred day in the entire Jewish calendar – that which is known in the Bible as 'the Day of Atonement'. I explained that, in the time of Moses, the people of Israel worshipped God at a structure known as the Tabernacle. This structure was divided into two chambers by a large curtain, known to many as 'the veil'.

The privilege of entering into the inner chamber (known as 'the most holy place'⁵), where God revealed His presence in a very special way, was reserved for only one man – for Israel's high priest – and that on only one day in the year, on the Day of Atonement. On that day, the high priest sacrificed animal offerings at an altar near the gateway into the outer court, then he '*passed through*' the court of the Tabernacle, *through* a first curtain, *through* the holy place, *through* the second curtain (or veil), into 'the most holy place'.⁶

But *our great High Priest* towers over all of Israel's high priests in that *He passed*, not through the various compartments of some earthly structure,⁷ but (having first offered Himself as the one great sacrifice for sins forever, at the cross) He has passed through the heavens – through both the atmospheric heavens and the vast stellar regions. As the same New Testament writer explains later, 'Christ is *not* entered into the holy places made with hands ... but *into heaven itself*, now to appear in the presence of God for us'.⁸

But, having spoken of that which Christians **do have** – namely, ‘a great High Priest’, our text stresses that which Christians **do not have**; ‘we do not have’, we read, ‘a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are’. And with these words the writer meets head on the fairly obvious objection that, *if* our great High Priest is as glorious and as dignified as he (the writer) was claiming, then surely He must be at such a distance from us that we cannot really expect Him to take any keen interest in us – that we cannot believe that He is capable of *any* fellow-feeling with us. Ah, no, the writer insists, our Lord Jesus most certainly is *not* detached, unfeeling and indifferent to our experiences and trials.

To the ancient Greeks, one of the chief attributes of God was ‘apatheia’, the inability to feel anything – the inability to be affected by anything. I read of one school teacher who asked one of her pupils, ‘Johnny, what’s the meaning of the word ‘apathy?’ Johnny responded instantly, ‘I don’t know, Miss – and I don’t care’. And, without knowing it, young Johnny hit the word’s meaning on the head – that is apathy.

But, thank God, our great High Priest isn't like that. He isn't **apathetic**; He is **sympathetic**. He *does* know what we face, and, what is more, He *does* care – He *is* able to sympathize. And His capacity to both feel for and with us in our weaknesses, infirmities and trials rests foursquare, the writer explains, on our Lord’s own personal experiences of trial and temptation while on earth.⁹ ‘It is true’, the writer is saying, ‘that He *is now* where none of us have yet been – in heaven itself. But then He *has been* where we *are now*’. For He has not only passed *through the heavens*, but previously He passed *through experiences of the severest testing and trial* while on earth.

Now it goes without saying that the Lord Jesus did not experience in detail every possible trial and external temptation which men and women face – which trials and temptations vary, of course, according to whether a person is married or single, is powerful or weak, is wealthy or poor, and so on. But He *did* experience the whole range of temptations and trials which pressurize His people to give in and to throw in the towel as Christians.

Our Lord knows well what it is *to suffer pain and to feel sorrow* ... what it is *to be poor* ... what it is *to be weary* ... and what it is *to be hungry*.

He knows well what it is *to be rejected* ... what it is *to be alone* ... what it is *to be reproached* ... what it is *to be deserted by friends*, and what it is *to be attacked by Satan* – and how!

I close by repeating our text for today ... ‘Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly (with confidence, that is) to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need’ – to help, that is, just when we need it.

Endnotes

¹ Heb. 4. 14-16.

² 'Better' being one of the key words of the letter to the Hebrews; Heb. 1. 4; 7. 19, 22; 8. 6 (2); 9. 23; 10. 34; 11. 16, 35, 40; 12. 24.

³ Over the previous 240 years or so (stretching back to the days of Antiochus Epiphanes and the Maccabees) there had been no less than 42 high priests – five had been appointed by Greek kings, eight by popular decree, 22 by Herod and his family, and the remaining seven by Roman governors (procurators or prefects) – with the office often going to the highest bidder.

⁴ A high priest is a relative term, involving others of lesser degree, yet in this Epistle the saints are never referred to as priests. The reason would appear to be that their attention should be concentrated on the One who represents them in the presence of God, rather than an explanation of their privileges as priests. Peter and John bring before the saints the truth of their being priests, yet on the other hand never refer to our Lord as being High Priest.

⁵ Exod. 26. 34; Num. 18. 10; cf. 1 Kings 6. 16; 7. 50; 8. 6; 2 Chron. 4. 22; 5. 7. Cf. 'the holiest of all', Heb. 9. 3, 8.

⁶ To sprinkle blood both on and before the mercy-seat there.

⁷ Whether of the Tabernacle or (as later) of the Temple.

⁸ Heb. 9. 24.

⁹ On account of which He (our Lord) is able to aid and help us – for, as the writer expresses it elsewhere, 'in that He Himself has suffered being tempted, He is able to succour them that are tempted', Heb. 2. 18. In summary, the Christian's High Priest is able both to succour and to sympathise. That is, in the symbolic language of the Old Testament, He bears and carries us – with each of us known by name – both on His breast and on His shoulder, Exod. 28.12, 29. Six of the tribes' names were engraved on an onyx on one shoulder, and six on an onyx on his other shoulder according to their birth. On the breastplate their names were engraved on different stones, and this time according to their tribes. This in picture suggested both the strength and the affections of the priest who represented them in the presence of God.