

March 17, 2024  
Fifth Sunday in Lent

“He Who Make Intercession”

Mark 10:35-45

In my humble opinion, Hebrews is one of the toughest books of the New Testament to comprehend. It's no book of Revelation, mind you, but it is quite challenging because it heavily depends on the reader's understanding of the ancient Jewish religious practices at the temple in Jerusalem and us westerners truly are not much for the semitic mindset.

Take our Epistle reading today as an example. You'd be kind of lost if you didn't understand the high priest holds a very special office in the temple worship system. He wears a very ornamentally elaborate outfit with the names of the 12 tribes of Israel engraved on his breastplate. After making a sacrifice as a sin offering for himself, it is he and he alone who enters into the holy of holies to sprinkle sacrificial blood on the mercy seat that covers the Ark of the Covenant on The Day of Atonement, covering the sins of the people

There are a couple important points being made here. First, an obvious point from the Old Testament that the Jewish leaders during Jesus' ministry seems to have forgotten is that people are sinful and this whole blessing of a Day of Atonement was God's grace toward them. They'd flipped things around and thought that in their obeying the letter of the law and bringing the proper sacrifices to the temple they had made themselves righteous in God's eyes. That is never the case. Forgiveness has always been by God's grace through faith.

The much greater point here is that Jesus is the High Priest of all High Priests. Jesus is our intercessor before the father, like the temple high priest. Jesus is a human man who knows our struggles and can empathize with our frailties, like the temple high priest. But Jesus goes infinitely beyond any other priest or human being.

Jesus needs no atonement for His own sin; He has none. Jesus perfectly kept God's law and in that not only is the perfect priest, but is the perfect sacrifice in and of Himself. No animal carcass bore the sins of the world to Calvary. Jesus Himself wore all of our sins not on some breastplate, but in His own flesh and blood poured out on the cross. *“In the days of His flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to Him who was able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His reverence.”* And remember, those cries were not on His own behalf; they were intercessory for sinners: *“Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.”*

Y'all know this, and of course celebrate that He this day rules at the right hand of the Father, resurrected as a *“high priest forever in the order of Melchizedek.”* We praise God for His grace, knowing that because Christ forever stands as our perfect high priest, the truth is exactly as St. John states in his first epistle: *“My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.”*

This is the Gospel, and it's really pretty straightforward. Jesus is our high priest. Jesus is the perfect sacrifice. Jesus makes atonement for all sins of all time. Jesus has risen and now reigns supreme forever. The deed is done. No further sacrifice is needed. Atonement is complete.

The weird thing is that a lot of us have trouble leaving it be that way. Maybe in Lent especially as we're trying to be super penitent, we start getting the idea that more needs to be added. “I need to feel sorer for my sins...be truly, genuinely repentant,” and maybe we never quite feel like we get there. Or maybe we feel we have to master a persistent sin and eradicate it

from our life before we can be fit for God...but that sin keeps happening. Maybe it's as simple as knowing the greatest commandment—love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength—but you just don't feel the love, and don't see it much in your life either.

Such desires aren't bad. I mean these are good goals toward which the Christian may strive. But if we think these must be present for us to come before God, aren't we just creating a type of sacrifice necessary to bring to God's temple...when the once-and-for-all sacrifice stands already given in Christ? Your sin, your failures, your lack of love—that is why atonement had to be made, and was indeed made in Christ cross! That's what your high priest is for! If you could be perfect you wouldn't need Jesus!

I know people who let this drive a wedge between them and their God. They think they are never good enough for God, that He is never satisfied. But that's the point. A sinner can't satisfy God—can't even approach God. But out of His grace He provides the means of atonement—in ancient times by the former imperfect high priest at the temple pointing to the perfect high priest on the cross! Atonement really isn't about you. It's about God in Christ. Jesus' sacrifice has satisfied God, so that's not your job!

What is your job? Jesus Christ isn't at all unclear about how those who believe in Him react to His grace: *“You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”*

You can't bring a sacrifice right to God's face. He has no need of it and does not demand it. Christ has sacrificed all necessary to gain our reconciliation to the Father. But those who know this and follow Christ crucified have their identity in Christ so their identity is shaped by Christ, the One who served and gave His life for others.

Basically, your job is not to bring a sacrifice before God, it is to imitate Christ in the way you treat others. And yes, I know St. Paul in Romans calls on us to “present our bodies as living sacrifices.” But he says this in the context of Christians living out the grace of God among one another in the world, humbly using one's gifts to serve one another as the church, the body of Christ.

So as you ponder your standing before your holy and just Creator God don't be thinking that you somehow must appease Him, bring some sacrifice of yourself to make yourself acceptable in His presence. You can't. Christ did. And though your sins are still many day by day by day, your High Priest is still making intercession of your behalf, confirming that His once-for-all sacrifice has atoned for all of your sin.

In response to His intercession, look to where others need you to reflect His sacrificial love, making intercession for them in their lives as Christ's feet, Christ's hands, Christ's mouth. This is not a burden. This is not a sacrifice. This is a blessed privilege for those who have a new identity by virtue of their great High Priest, Christ the crucified.