

The book of Hebrews in our Christian Testament is rather complicated, tough for the modern day reader. Like what was the role of “priests” among the ancient Hebrew people? And who on earth was the priest Melchizedek, as a *high* priest, a priest forever? Some say he was an angelic being, who never died. A priest, now as in those early temple days, is a human being who was like a mediator, or an intercessor between humans and God. Melchizedek was also a “king (the word *melech* means king, and *zedek* means righteous) So Melchizedek was like a good king, a righteous king, who lived the ways of God. When Abraham came to the promised land, it is said that Abraham honored him and bowed before Melchizedek. So the anonymous writer of the letter to the Hebrews is making the point, especially to Jewish readers, that *Jesus* was of the highest order of priests, that he was like Melchizedek, that legendary figure whose reign and priesthood was said to be everlasting, a priest forever.

I think that Jesus as a “mediator” is a key point of the book of Hebrews, a mediator between humans and God. Jesus as a high priest was surely a human being, called “Son of Man” (Son of Humans). But he was also called Son of God, He was “near to the heart of God” as our opening hymn says. This makes Jesus the perfect go-between, or intercessor for all of us. He is able to bear and lift up to God the needs that are common to us all. That is why most Christians end our prayers with “In Jesus Name.” Prayer is a central point of our reading this morning: that “in the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers with loud cries and tears.” It is clear that Jesus has a human side, that he truly suffered and felt his cries going out to a higher power, to one he called “Father.”

I’m reminded of a very successful young adult (who will go unnamed) who argued against the AA 12-step principles, something like this: we shouldn’t need a “higher power,” since that is not being confident of our own power and the strength. It is being weak to admit we are “powerless” over our condition or addiction, as is said in Step 1

of AA. Well... I think that life brings all of us, at some point, to the realization that we *are* indeed powerless over some things... or at least limited in what we can do. I know I felt that way last weekend; I had a distinct feeling of weakness, even helplessness ... Heart not acting as it should, breathing too shallow... eating did not change things, exercise was out of the question, sleeping seemed like the best thing, but you can't do that ALL day! ... and being on a hospital bed for hours on end feels very limiting! Yup, you can feel helpless and powerless... for a time anyway.

Good to know that even Jesus had cries and tears, to a higher power, "to one who was able to save him" as our reading says. In other words Jesus went through suffering like all humans do, maybe of a different sort, but he had very human emotions and suffering. That's why he is able to understand us and be a mediator in prayer for us. When I was younger, I did not care much for the song "What a Friend We Have in Jesus;" it sounded sort of sappy or needy. Maybe I was like my young adult friend, trusting more in self-reliance, getting what we need mostly through our own strength and power. But having recently been hooked up to various machines, I know full well that my body has weaknesses, will not last forever. We do what we can, we eat and exercise as carefully as possible, but we do well to look for help at times. We can receive angels that come as friends, and we can pray with and to Jesus as Risen Lord, our great high priest, a "priest forever." We trust that He can actually bridge the gap between earth and heaven, and between body and spirit.

Of course one of the key extrapolations from the book of Hebrews is that not only is Jesus a kind of priest, an intercessor with God Most High, but that *we all* can be priests as well, ministers to one another. The Reformation theologians like Luther and Calvin loved this reasoning, and came up with the slogan "The priesthood of all believers."

Most protestants identify with that part of the reformation. We often say that the ministers are *all members* of the church. We no longer

put much faith in church hierarchy, in priests and bishops and cardinals and popes. Rather, all followers of Jesus can go directly to God in prayer, can have the heart of Christ and act like ministers to one another. The heart of Christ is a compassionate, understanding heart, so we can more easily understand our neighbor, and minister to each other with grace and love. In times of need, *I receive* help from many of you. As with the good AA model for healing, it often takes someone who has been there, to lead another into healing. As I add more entries in my address book that start with “Dr.” I know that many of you have been there. With faith, we also add prayer, and say that Jesus “knows our every weakness and will all our sorrows share.”

Our reading from Jeremiah Ch31, is a favorite of Christians, as it foreshadows the emphasis on the Holy Spirit *within*. It states that “the time is coming when I the Lord will make “a new covenant... not like the covenant laws my people keep breaking,” but “*I will put my law within them, I will write it on their hearts!*” “No longer will they teach one another!” ... there can be no sense of superiority, no haggling over right and wrong, no debates over morality even, for hearts touched by God have an *intuitive* sense of what is good and right and helpful and beautiful. Jesus fulfills the prophesy of Jeremiah, saying “If you abide in me I will abide in you. The Holy Spirit will come to you and live within you.” When each person in a community takes the gift of grace to heart, receives the Holy Spirit of Christ in mind and heart, then there will always be loving kindness, even dealing with differences and different visions. At Belleville, we pray to and with our great high priest, the Risen Christ... to continue in His Way of Grace and Love, written on our hearts. Amen.