

The Real Thing – Studies in the Book of Hebrews
Hebrews 7:1-28 - Real Greatness
Andrew Evans - 29th October 2006

There's nothing like trouble to make us want some really good company. When we're in a difficult situation or facing pressure we want, don't we, to be close to someone?

You can see that in countless Hollywood movies where a couple are brought together not in spite of adverse circumstances but precisely because of them. In fact it's a basic ingredient of almost every action/adventure movies from the last 30 years!

But it's not just in fiction where, in a trying time, being close to someone really matters. The world's great adventurers consistently record how on a high mountain, in a stormy sea or stranded in an icy waste or barren desert it was the companionship of others that got them through or, conversely, that loneliness and solitude is one of the hardest things to bear when your life is threatened. And, for the vast majority of us, when bad news comes we don't want to be on our own. We want someone else there. Not to say anything necessarily. Just to be close to. In times of trial we want to draw near to others.

But what about God? Can we draw near to him? After all, for many people, a time of trial – bereavement, illness, stress, persecution or poverty – is a sign of the distance of God – or maybe even of his absence or non-existence. Can we really be confident that, in times of trial, or at any other time, we can genuinely and meaningfully be close to God?

Not the kind of closeness to God that people of all religions and none describe watching a sunset over the Caribbean or on a sunny day looking down from a snow capped mountain or staring into the depths of the Grand Canyon or gazing into the stained glass depths of some gothic cathedral. No, I'm talking about a closeness of relationship. A confidence that God is present to help us in our time of need.

Well if you've been with us over the last weeks as we've looked at the letter to the Hebrews you will know perfectly well what answer the writer of this letter would give to that question. He has already told his readers – Christians struggling under the burdens of everyday life and of active hostility to their faith from the surrounding culture – that they can approach God's throne of mercy and grace with confidence that he will help them in their hour of need. And at the end of the passage we looked at last week we learned that those who have, 6:18, run to God to take hold of his promises in Jesus

Christ may be greatly encouraged by the fact that Jesus is, v20, a high priest in the order of Melchizedek.

But what does that actually mean? Who was Melchizedek? Why is Jesus like him? And how is a priest like Melchizedek better than any other kind of priest? Well those are the kind of questions we'll be getting the answers to in this chapter.

And don't worry. Although it's a passage that seems complicated at first reading it's actually not that difficult – much easier than last week I think.

It's a passage that, if you're a Christian here this morning, should leave you feeling greatly encouraged and uplifted. And, if you're not a Christian, this passage will give you a really good reason to seriously consider becoming one.

I Melchizedek is a better kind of priest (v1-10)

As a general rule it's probably best not to have any words in your sermon headings that put people off listening. So I think I've comprehensively broken that rule by having not one but two in one heading. Melchizedek sounds like just the sort of person that people who weren't allowed TV when they were little might know about from some pointless Bible version of Trivial Pursuit. And priest sounds like Father Ted only less funny.

Well the good news this morning is that priest is just a Bible word for representative. Someone who represents people before God. And the other piece of good news is that understanding everything there is to know about this character Melchizedek won't require you to have a theology degree because he's only mentioned three times in the whole Bible!

And the other two are quoted almost word for word here in Hebrews 7!

The essential facts about Melchizedek, who was a real historical person, are set out in v1-3 of our passage: He was king of Salem (the city known to us today as Jerusalem). And he was a priest of God Most High – the God who is really there, the God of the Bible. He appears almost from nowhere, in Genesis 14, as Abraham, the great father of the Jewish nation, is returning from a battle which he has just played a decisive role in winning. Abraham offered Melchizedek 10% of all the spoils of war

from the battlefield and Melchizedek, in turn, blessed Abraham.

There are two things that the writer of Hebrews wants to draw our attention to in v1-3.

The first one is that Melchizedek was a king AND a priest. He held both of those roles or offices – king and priest.

And the second one is that what the Bible *doesn't* say about Melchizedek is important.

What on earth do I mean by that? Well if you read through the book of Genesis you'll find that almost every important character is explained in terms of who their ancestors were and who their descendents were. There are genealogies all over the place in Genesis. It's like an episode of the BBCs "Who do you think you are?" without all the helpful diagrams. And yet Melchizedek doesn't have any of that. As far as the record in Genesis is concerned he is without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life.

That doesn't mean this historical man Melchizedek wasn't born – or course he was. And of course he died. And of course he had a father and mother. But because we have no record of them it is as if he doesn't.

Think of it like this. If you are driving along in your car one night on a country lane and a badger suddenly ran across your path you might say "it came out of nowhere." Obviously it didn't come from nowhere – it didn't just materialise in a Star Trek manner in front of your car. But it was AS IF it had.

Well that is what the writer is saying here. It's as if Melchizedek comes from nowhere and his priesthood is never recorded as having ended. The Bible's silence on that, the writer of Hebrews says, is a pointer to the fact that Melchizedek is like Jesus, the Son of God.

And he was great, v4. Just how great he was is illustrated by the fact that Abraham gave him all those things from his battle. The law by which Old Testament Jews lived said that the tribe of Levi weren't allowed to own any land. They couldn't be farmers because they had to devote their time to looking after the sacrifices and offerings that God told his people to make. So, because they didn't get any land, all the other people of Israel had to give them a 10% share of the crops. The Levites, v5, collect a tenth from their brothers. It's a mark of the fact that they are God's representatives or priests.

But, v6, Melchizedek wasn't descended from Levi – he lived centuries earlier. And yet he collected 10% from Abraham. Which not only means that he really is a priest but that he is a much greater priest than any of the Levitical priests because he gave a blessing to Abraham. And it is always, v7, the greater person who gives the blessing to the less important person.

In fact, the writer goes on, you could even say that Levi and his descendents, who normally collect 10% in their role as priests, paid the 10% to Melchizedek because when Melchizedek and Abraham met Levi was still inside Abraham – he would come from Abraham's line.

Well that might all be historically very interesting – but so what?

Well to answer that question we have to go back to 6:20. Jesus, the writer of Hebrews says, has become a high priest in the order of Melchizedek. And that would have been difficult for the first readers of this letter to understand. Because coming from a Jewish background all their ideas about what a priest was would have been bound up with the descendents of Levi, and the sacrifices those people offered in the temple and all the things that kind of priest, that order of priest did. So our writer goes out of his way to establish that the Levites are not the only kind of priest in the Old Testament. And in fact that aren't even the best kind of priest in the Old Testament.

In fact there are two orders of priests in the Old Testament:

- there is, verse 11, the order of Melchizedek
- and there is the order of Aaron, the Levitical priests.

Now that all might seem a bit obscure to most of us. But actually it's more relevant than you might think. Because essentially what was going on here was that there was a group of people in this church who wanted to abandon the high priesthood of Jesus and go back to the old system – back to Jewishness, the temple and the synagogue. And you can see why. Apart from the fact that being Jewish was an official religion and meant you wouldn't be persecuted, it was all so much more obvious. More physical and visible and, it must have seemed, more real.

And still today there is a steady flow of people who leave churches like this one where we want to emphasise that Jesus Christ is the only priest, the only representative, we need and go to Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox or high Anglican churches where there is someone who acts like a

priest and claims to be a priest. Someone with magic hands who alone is qualified to preside at the Lord's Supper. Someone whose prayers for you are somehow more effective than your own prayers. Somewhere where the church building is designed to make you think "temple" and where the Lord's supper is presented as if were some sort of sacrifice. So please, if you are ever tempted to think that that kind of church is more mystical and spiritual remember Hebrews. Jesus is the only priest you need. Anything else isn't going on – it's going backwards.

Melchizedek is a better kind of priest.

2 Jesus is like Melchizedek (v11-21)

But why did we need a better kind of representative? What was wrong with being Jewish? Well nothing. And everything! The old priesthood of Levi and the sacrifices it offered were fine. They were commanded by God in fact. But they could not, v11, bring about perfection. That means they could not bring about the fulfilment of God's plans and purposes. And they could not fully make people right with God.

In a couple of week's time we'll see that the gifts and sacrifices offered in the temple in Jerusalem could make people outwardly clean, but they could not cleanse the conscience. They could not cover the cost of our sin.

And that meant that another kind of priest, another kind of representative was required. There was, v11, "need for another priest to come."

And it because Jesus is another kind of priest that Melchizedek is so important.

Imagine if the writer of Hebrews said: "Listen guys. The old Levitical priesthood didn't work. So God's created a new kind of priesthood. A new sort of representative who can do all the things the old system couldn't do. There's nothing about it in the Old Testament because it's a completely new thing that God is doing."

Well I think we'd have some questions about that wouldn't we? Like:

- How on earth do we know this is true?
- Doesn't that mean God is just randomly changing his mind and going to plan B?

But we don't have to ask those questions. Because the idea of a completely different kind of priest is already there in the Old Testament. That's what Melchizedek is. Melchizedek teaches us that Jesus is not plan B. Melchizedek shows us that God's plan

was always going to be fulfilled in a different kind of priest. A priest who is not descended from Levi.

If the only kind of priesthood that there was in the Old Testament was the Levitical priesthood then Jesus would be an illegal priest. He could not be our representative because, v14, he descended from the tribe of Judah and the Old Testament law says nothing about priests being able to come from that tribe.

But Melchizedek shows us that there is another kind of priesthood. A kind of priesthood that is not based, v16, on being able to trace your line of descent from Levi through Aaron. Not based on descent but based on the power of an indestructible life. A royal, eternal kind of priesthood.

That kind of priesthood was pictured in Melchizedek – whose death, unlike almost every other character in Genesis, is deliberately not mentioned. And that picture of an unending life was literally fulfilled in Jesus Christ, whose divine life was so indestructible that he bodily rose from the grave never to die again.

He is, v17, a priest, a representative, forever in the order of Melchizedek. God has fulfilled his plan of a royal, eternal priest in Jesus. And this is why Psalm 110 is so important in this passage.

It is a Psalm about a king. About God's anointed King. It was written the best part of 1,000 years after Melchizedek. And yet it envisages a king who will also be a priest in the order of Melchizedek. God has promised, and will not change his mind, about Jesus and his qualification to be a perfect and indestructible representative for us.

And that has huge implications. Hebrews 7:18 – the former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless. The Levitical priesthood is no more. It was good for what it was intended for. It was good at pointing people to horrible, vicious reality of sin and their need for a rescuer. It was good at pointing people to God's graciousness in choosing a people who did not deserve his love and rescuing them from slavery. It's regulation that only one person once a year could venture into the presence of God in the temple was good at showing how hard it is for sinful people to live with a perfect God. But as far as making things perfect. As far as bringing about the fulfilment of God's plan. As far as making people right with God was concerned. Well it was weak. Worse than that it was useless for those things. It couldn't do them and it was never meant to.

So now that Jesus, the better priest, has come the Old Testament system of priests is obsolete. It no longer has any validity whatsoever. We need no priest apart from Jesus. And we must be really, really clear about that. No other priests. None. Not one. No pope. No special people to preside at the Lord's supper. No need for someone with "Rev'd" in their title to baptise you. No other priests. Just Jesus.

And being clear about that might have some consequences for us. It means, I think, that Christians cannot in good conscience take communion in a Roman Catholic church. Or indeed in any church where the person at the front thinks or acts like they are being a priest, like they are representing us to God, rather than leading us all together in remembering Jesus.

It means that here at Christ Church you must never treat the elders like priests. The Bible is very clear that church leaders should be people worthy of your respect as Christians. And Hebrews is quite clear that you should treat your leaders with respect. But there is no elder in this church who has any more access to God than any other Christian in this church. The elders' job is to teach you the Bible and pray for and with you. But that isn't because we have some magic key to the Bible that you don't or because our prayers are especially effective. It's simply because the church has chosen to free us up from other work in the church to do those things that you, I hope, think we're capable of doing.

No other priests. Just Jesus.

3 So we can trust Jesus (v22-28)

So what about God? Can we draw near to him? Can we be really confident that God is present to help us in our time of need?

Well yes we can.

Because Jesus, v22, is the guarantee of a better covenant. A better agreement with God about our relationship – an agreement we'll hear much more about from Maurice next week.

You see the priests of the Old Testament had to keep being replaced. Because they died. It's thought there were 85 different High Priests between Aaron and the time of Jesus. Generation after generation of people who died.

But Jesus, v24, lives for ever. So he is able to save completely those who come to God through him because he always lives to intercede for them.

Is that not amazing news this morning? Jesus will save you completely. He always lives as your representative before God. He will never die. He's never off sick. He never takes a holiday. He's never asleep on the job. He always lives to pray for us. Always.

- When you wake up in a cold sweat in the middle of the night worrying about something - Jesus is there to intercede for you.
- When all your housemates have gone away for the weekend and you're feeling a bit low – Jesus is there to intercede for you.
- When you've offended someone in your workplace and you know you need to repent and go and deal with it with them – Jesus is there to intercede for you.

He is able to save you completely – right through this life and right into eternity – because he lives always.

7:26 is one of my favourite verses in this book. "Such a high priest" – one exactly like Jesus, one exactly like the one we have – "meets our need." Isn't that brilliant? God has provided a priest-king for us who exactly meets our needs. All of our needs. In all of our different situations and with all of our different personalities. Jesus meets our need.

He doesn't always meet the things we think we need. We may think we need more money, or better health, or a wife or husband or children, or a new job or better friends or more interesting sermons. But everything we really need – a holy, blameless, pure, exalted priest-king – who will not only be our ruler but is also our representative, is found in Jesus.

That may mean that we have to adjust our thinking about what we really need in life. The first readers of this letter probably thought they needed an end to persecution. But they didn't. They needed to trust Jesus. So the next time you're tempted to feel down because you don't have something you think you need, remember that it is Jesus who meets our need. And if you look round and think that everybody else is doing OK and they have more than you and you're tempted to be envious and bitter. Well remember that everybody in this church is broken and messed up and struggling. And all of us only have our needs met in Jesus.

And the way he has achieved that, v27, is to offer himself. And if you want to know more about that you'll have to come back for Hebrews chapters 8-10. Because Jesus isn't just a better kind of priest – he's also a better kind of sacrifice!