

“Grace to help in time of need”—The Cross, the Christ, and the Coronavirus

Based on Hebrews 4:14-5:9; Leviticus 16; Genesis 14; and Psalm 109

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Despite the upset of Church closings and quarantine this spring, Great Lent still has great riches to offer us. We have, after all, many readings from the Old Testament during these weeks, and we also plumb the depths of the book of Hebrews, which interprets much of the Old Testament for us. For the Third Sunday of Lent, even in our homes we are directed towards the Holy Cross, by which we see that our High Priest indeed does “sympathize with our weaknesses,” entering into our human condition in the fullest way possible. Our reading from Hebrews leads us to marvel at his compassion and humility:

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. For every high priest taken from among men is appointed for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins. He can have compassion on those who are ignorant and going astray, since he himself is also subject to weakness. Because of this he is required as for the people, so also for himself, to offer sacrifices for sins. And no man takes this honor to himself, but he who is called by God, just as Aaron was. So also Christ did not glorify Himself to become High Priest, but it was He who said to Him: “You are My Son, today I have begotten You.” As He also says in another place: “You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.” (Hebrews 4:14-5:6)

There is a lot to unpack here. First, Christian people must understand the general contours of the Old Testament faith in order to see what it is that our LORD Jesus has done for us. Unless we know what the High Priest did in Israel, we cannot comprehend what Hebrews is telling us here. Of course a priest is a bridge figure, representing God to the people, and the people to God. The word “pontiff,” or priest, comes from the Latin word “pons,” which means “bridge”—and this is a good picture of the priestly role. In the times of the Tabernacle and the Temple, the High Priest was a special mediator, with a role beyond the normal duties of the priests as a group. His most important action was to “go beyond” the barriers in the Temple, only once a year—beyond the women’s and men’s courts, into the priestly court, and beyond that holy place, through the curtain, into the Holy of Holies. But Jesus has passed into the immeasurably holy place, beyond the heavens: “we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God,” explains Hebrews. For the veil of the Temple was rent in two when He died, and there is no longer any need for the Holy of Holies, and for what went on there.

But what DID go on? Leviticus 16 fills in the details for us, explaining the Lord's instructions to Aaron and every High Priest who followed him. Once a year, the High Priest was to wash himself, to dress in white clothes of repentance, and then to slaughter a bull. The blood of the bull was to be brought into the Holy of Holies, and presented to the Lord, as the priest dabbed its blood on the mercy seat and in the area before it, in order to cleanse the priest himself. Then two goats were selected, and one was also sacrificed before the people. The blood of the first goat was to be sprinkled on the people, while the rest of it would be brought into the Holy Place, and again presented to the LORD, and sprinkled on the Ark of the Covenant and around. Even the sanctuary had to be cleansed in this way, presumably because it was touched by sinful human beings, the High Priests. As for the second goat, the priest laid his hand on its head, and recited the sins of the people over it. Then it was sent off into the wilderness, symbolizing the removal of their sins. So, both by sacrificial blood and by distancing, the people understood that atonement had been made their sins had been atoned.

We can immediately see the connections and differences. Jesus, by his own blood, made atonement for our sins, but did not have to make atonement for his own, as the high priest did. Jesus is both the goat that is slaughtered, and the goat who is taken "outside the camp", distanced for our sake. Jesus takes on Himself our sin, and by his blood atones for it, cleansing us. Though He was by nature God, He put himself in a position to "learn obedience," as we see him doing in the gospels, when he is praying "not my will, but thine!" The book of Hebrews, in the verses immediately following our reading, reminds us of that scene in Gethsemane, and the paradox of Jesus as both fully God and fully human:

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. Son as he was, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him (Hebrews 5:7-9).

What a mystery we encounter here! The Greek is ambiguous, and so I have rendered it "Son as he was"—does the phrase mean "although he was Son" or "because he was Son"? Maybe both. These verses describe a fully human sufferer who was not simply play-acting as He prayed for relief, but whose prayers were heartfelt and heard. Though He had no intrinsic need to suffer, for He was righteous, He did so for our sake. Though by nature He was God, He put himself in a position to "learn;" or, because He was truly a son, obedience was His natural response to suffering. Later in Hebrews 12, we will hear that just as a father punishes for the sake of his true sons, so Jesus took on suffering as the true Son of the heavenly Father. His taking on our nature is both astounding, and apt—astounding because he knew no sin, but apt because He is the very image of God, and we are made after God's image. This is truly a paradox.

Our reading also tells us that Jesus is the only begotten Son of God, and a Priest forever—like Melchizedek, without beginning or end. Now it is unlikely that the mysterious shadowy figure of Melchizedek had no actual father or mother. However, in the story in Genesis 14, and then in the words of Psalm 109 (MT 11), we hear that he is *eternally* a priest, without genealogy—the silence about his origins is seen as pointing forward to the Messiah. Melchizedek of course, blessed Abraham, and so must have been greater even than the patriarch. And his name means "King of Righteousness." But Melchizedek comes and goes quickly in the narrative, and doesn't appear to have a role beyond his first appearance. The details of his story foreshadow Jesus, who is not simply grand in a single narrative, but is, of Himself, and in His being, the very King of Righteousness. He has no human father, truly. He will always be the only true Priest between all of us and God the Father,

because of His nature, and He did not need to be appointed. So all that grandeur of the shadowy figure of Melchizedek belongs to Jesus, in spades. Yet, He is also truly a human being, THE human being, the Dier-for-our-sake.

And Jesus did all that the High Priest did, and more! The High Priest required sacrifice for his own person, but Jesus did this wholly out of love for us. The High Priest had recourse to animals, but Jesus was himself the sacrifice. The High Priest risked dying at the sight of a righteous God—entering into the place where God dwells is risky business! Jesus did not merely risk, but embraced death—and came out the other side! The Priest had the privilege of going into the Holy Place, beyond the curtain that warned of holiness: Jesus *belongs* in the heavenly throneroom, and in returning to it, took us with him, for he was embodied in our flesh, wholly in solidarity with us. And when He entered, He, like the High Priest, “offered both gifts, and sacrifices for sins.” St. John Chrysostom puts it this way:

Haven't you seen how he dissolved the enmity, how he did not depart before doing all, both suffering and completing the whole business, until he brought up the one who was both hostile and at war—brought that one up to God himself, and he made him a friend? Receiving, as it were, the first fruits of our nature, he bore it up in this way to the Master. And indeed just as it happens in the case of plains that bear ears of corn, it happens here. Somebody takes a few ears, and making a little handful, offers it to God, so that because of the little amount, he blesses the whole land. Christ also did this: through that one flesh and “first-fruits” he made to be blessed our [whole] race. ... Therefore he offered up the first-fruits of our nature to the Father, and the Father was so amazed with the offering, both because of the worthiness of the One who offered and because of the blamelessness of the offering, that he received the gift with his hands that belonged, as it were, to the same household as the Son. And he placed the Offering close to himself, saying, ‘Sit at my right hand!’” (*Sermon on the Ascension, D.N.J.C., Migne 50.446*)

Here we see how the life, death, resurrection, and ascension were a single action of God, designed to reclaim us—each of us, for St. John speaks personally of “the one who was both hostile and at war.” In Christ, we sit close to God, for a blameless offering has been made, and we are reconciled. It is not simply to deal with sin that Jesus acted but to offer us as a gift to God. We are God's work of art, and He means to perfect us.

Which reminds us of a mystery—how can it be that Jesus is “made perfect”? Isn't he perfect by nature? I don't think we can pry very far into this mystery. It is certainly the case that He was fully human, though, and Luke tells us that he “grew in stature and in knowledge” at the time when he was obedient to his parents. The Greek word “to perfect” also can mean “to become mature.” God entered into TIME and SPACE, and took on a human body—and that must mean that Jesus *grew* in some way. How the true humanity and true Godhead come together, we cannot fathom. But they did. For our sake, He learned and grew, and suffered—while never being separated from the Father or the Holy Spirit. He put himself in a place of vulnerability, in order to rescue us. One verse of the children's carol, *Once in Royal David's City*, puts it simply, yet profoundly:

For He is our childhood's pattern,
Day by day, like us He grew:
He was little, weak, and helpless,
Tears and smiles like us He knew;
And he feeleth for our sadness,

And He shareth in our gladness!

This little verse highlights the helpfulness of our epistle reading for this time and place in history. Our vulnerability in the wake of the Coronavirus has many reeling: but Jesus knows all about it! He feels for our sadness in the closing of our churches, and shares in the gladness that we may have for other things during this strange time. He is aware of our infirmities, for He felt the full extent of them during His passion. We may be tempted to think that the merely-human Old Testament High Priest might have understood the people better, since He shared in their sin. Not at all! As C. S. Lewis points out, it is by standing up against the hurricane wind, not by lying down in it, that one feels its full fury. And Jesus stood up. He is the only High Priest who fully understands every trial that any one of us can meet—including the difficulty of social distancing for extroverts, the loss of pay for casual workers who are now unemployed, the fear of those who are aged or immunocompromised, the disappointment of those who had thought to attend family celebrations or graduations, the irritation of those who have to teach and learn by distance, the isolation and crowded condition of big families that are quarantined, the uncertainty of knowing how all this will work itself out. He knows this, and so much more. For He learned obedience, for our sake.

As we approach Him to worship, even in our homes, we are not alone, but surrounded by a crowd of witnesses. And we are joined to that host in communion with Him, receiving “grace in time of need”—not a substance, but the Grace that is Himself. During this Lent, we are called to an extraordinary time of obedience (is all this is really necessary?) and patience (when will it be over?) May we allow God to use this, as He did the suffering of Jesus, for our growth into His likeness. “For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are.” And His throne of grace is available to us when we seek Him in prayer.