

Twenty-First Sunday after Trinity, 20 October 2024, Year B, Proper 21

Readings: Isaiah 53.4-end; Psalm 91.9-end; Hebrews 5.1-10; Mark 10.35-45

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. **Amen.** (Psalm 19.14)

The priesthood of Jesus as High Priest is according to the order of Melchizedek as we heard in the Letter to the Hebrews. What might this mean – according to the order of Melchizedek? Melchizedek is a shadowy figure. His name means king of righteousness or my king is righteousness. He is only mentioned a few times in the Bible. Through a brief appearance in Genesis we learn that he is the high priest at Salem at the time of Abraham. Salem is Jerusalem. Salem means peace. Jeru means city. It follows Jerusalem is the city of peace, if only...

In the Book of Lamentations (1.1a, 4) written in the 6th century BCE the author begins his lament after the destruction of Jerusalem wailing,

How lonely sits the city
that once was full of people!
The roads to Zion mourn,
for no one comes to the festivals;
all her gates are desolate,
her priests groan;
her young girls grieve,
and her lot is bitter.

But what can we say about Melchizedek (righteousness) and Salem (peace)? These two names point to a hope expressed in a psalm and which we believe find their fulfilment in Christ. He has become our peace, because he is our righteousness.

Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;
righteousness and peace will kiss each other. (Psalm 85:10)

Our priesthood, the priesthood of all believers, as God's people who have received a new dignity (1 Timothy 2.2, CW baptism service introduction) traces itself back to this shadowy

figure. Who is Melchizedek? What did he do? What is his significance? To approach these questions we need to hear that Old Testament passage. After Abram defeats Chedorlaomer, King of Elam, Melchizedek, as the King of Salem, the King of Peace (shalom) goes out to meet Abram. We read in the Book of Genesis 14:17-20:

And King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High. ¹⁹He blessed him [Abram] and said, 'Blessed be Abram by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth; ²⁰ and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!' And Abram gave him one-tenth of everything.

What do we note? Actually a great deal when we spend time with the passage. We note kingship, priesthood, thanksgiving, the giving of the one tenth, bread and wine, as well as defeat and victory, peace (Salem) and righteousness (Melchizedek). All these elements are familiar to us as Christians as they stretch back to Abram and beyond Abram, as we recall Christ's priesthood, a priesthood in which we have a share through our baptism, our incorporation into Christ, as we participate in the priesthood of all believers. All the elements mentioned above live on in the Church, the living Temple that we are always becoming and are to live daily. In our personhood as God's people we are to be places of offering and blessing.

We are thankful because in the words of the Book of Common Prayer Christ has become the propitiation (appeasement) for our sin; he has become the substitute for our sin. It is Christ who overcomes daily, once and for all, what separates us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. The curtain is torn that separates the creator, the life-giver, from those who are made in the creator's, the life-giver's image. The way is open that leads to God. Christ is King, as imposingly depicted in our stained glass window, but he is also High Priest and as such is also victim as captured in the hymn *Alleluia! sing to Jesus!* "Thou [Christ] within the veil hast entered, robed in flesh our great High Priest; Thou on earth both priest and victim in the Eucharistic feast." It is extraordinary that Christ, our God, as High Priest is

also victim, but perhaps even more extraordinary is that we have a share in Christ's priesthood, as members of the Body of Christ, through which we become a living temple unto the Lord. This is the new dignity of which we speak. We are a temple not built with stones, but with people made of flesh and blood, built on a sure foundation, Christ. This new found dignity of which I spoke last week raises us up. Perhaps you know the song which has been both a marriage favourite and I am told a funeral favourite: 'You raise me up!' by Josh Gorban, inspired by words from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah (40:31):

Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.

Yes, God does raise us up! He raises us up! For a moment try and capture something of God raising you up. Taking you by the hand and raising you up. For those who have been raised up into God by Christ the world can never look the same. We are invited to see as Christ sees. Seeing Jerusalem the city of peace Christ wept. We weep today. We are invited to see as Christ sees. Jesus says to the disciples on one occasion,

"Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest?' But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting." (John 4.35)

We as Christians see that the world is a place of sin and so as a royal priesthood in Christ we intercede with Christ, but we also see that the world is full of possibility, of a better way. It is in the words of Jesus ripe for harvest not only now, but also now.

Doom and gloom, possibility and hope are two ways of seeing the world. We can choose doom and gloom, but as Christians we are to choose possibility and a better way in Christ, with Christ and through Christ, as we weep and lament with him over the Jerusalems of the world, over our wreckage if you like, and as we put our hands to the plough to till the earth and to the sickle to reap the harvest through God's Holy Spirit working in us.

Melchizedek came out to meet Abram with bread and wine to sustain him after battle. We too partake of bread and wine, the life-giving bread and wine of the Lord's Supper. Abram was granted a victory and especially God's blessing. We too have been granted a victory. It is the victory over sin and death we have been gifted through God's love for the world and God's self-sacrifice (remember priest and victim, king and servant) through which we are granted a new freedom and through which the landscape in which our lives are set is also ever new, possibly even expanding. Being met by Melchizedek and receiving his blessing Abram responded by promising to give him one tenth of all he had. It is important and necessary to note that it is a response out of thankfulness.

In like manner Christ comes out to meet us today bearing bread and wine and blessings more than we can number... Are we thankful for the gift of faith, for knowing God, the blessings we receive and the assurance(s) we are given. Are we thankful and if we are what is our response? Hearts and hands and voices raised? Yes! Remember the poor? Yes! Go to where Christ is sending us? Yes! Making reparations fourfold if we have defrauded anyone like Zacharias? Yes! Making amends if we have fallen down on commitments? Yes! Perhaps what I am saying is best captured in a much loved Christmas carol (In the Bleak Midwinter).

What can I give Him,
If I were a Shepherd
I would bring a lamb;
If I were a Wise Man
I would do my part, —
Yet what I can I give Him, —
Give my heart. **Amen.**