

The Offer is Still Open

Proper 25, Year B – Hebrews 7:23-28

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, October 25, 2015

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Last week, I took a bye from our reading from the Letter to the Hebrews, because, you might remember, I figured I had already said everything I knew to say about the ancient high priest, Melchizedek. But the author of the Letter to the Hebrews isn't done with his argument that, in his life and suffering and death, Jesus the Christ is a more perfect priest for us than any high priest *could* ever be. Part of this perfection of priesthood, he argues, is that unlike all the others in the ancient line, Christ is not subject to the limitations of time and space. Part of it, he argues, is that unlike all the others who had gone before, only Christ is "holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens." But the part of the author's argument that really stuck with me this week as I thought about our great High Priest, is that in his life and death, Jesus the Christ offered what no other has, or *can*. "This he did," the writer wrote, "once, for all, when he offered himself."

You see, from the beginning, our great High Priest offered his sacrifice at Bethlehem, when he laid aside the glories of heaven itself, to become a part of the human experience. He emptied himself of all that it meant to be God, in order to take on all that it means to be you and me. Before the clay from which we were formed, before the stars were sung into existence, before any *thought* of time, he offered himself for the love of us. Christ offered himself a sacrifice to be *part* of us, so that we can be part of him. And that offer is still open.

Our great High Priest offered his sacrifice on a Galilean hillside, when he took a child in his arms and said, "anyone who does not receive the kingdom of God like a child, will *never* enter it." In spite of all we know of Jesus' teaching and example, we still grapple to be first in line, don't we? We still clamor to be at the top of the heap. We still fight to be number one, first time, *every* time. And yet he called us to lay aside the trappings of our self-importance, our pride of privilege or place, and to look to the very heart of the matter – that is, to our own heart, and to the heart of the person sitting next to us, and to the heart of the one we're pretty sure doesn't *deserve* it, and to the heart of those we have yet to even meet. Christ offered himself a sacrifice to show his love for every one of us, even, or perhaps *especially*, the *least* among us. And that offer is still open.

Our great High Priest offered his sacrifice in a quiet upper room, when he laid aside his robes and wrapped himself as a servant to stoop to wash the feet of his disciples. Over and over he reminded us that he came not to be served, but to *serve*. Over and over, he called those that follow him to that *same* concept of leadership. Over and over, by word and example, he showed us that the one who would be greatest *must* be servant of all. Christ offered himself a sacrifice so that we might understand that to serve *him*, we need to serve the ones that we can reach *right now*. And that offer is still open.

Our great High Priest offered his sacrifice one horrible afternoon on a hill outside Jerusalem, when he was nailed to a cross of torture and execution and shame. Through the mockery of an unjust trial, through jeers and lashes and spitting, through a crown of thorns and with nails piercing his hands and feet, he took on every fault and failing since the first prideful bite, every fault, every failing, every false step until time is rolled *up* again. Christ offered himself a sacrifice, even to the final, tragic, bitter end of brutality and suffering and death, to show us that there is *no* part of our lives that he does not know, *no* part of our lives that he does not share. And that offer is still open.

And friends, thanks be to God, our great High Priest offered his sacrifice when, on the third day after the cross and grave, he stepped *out* of the darkness of that tomb, and into the light of a *new* dawn, not just for himself, but for the *whole* of the human race. Oh, to be sure, Jesus life, and his teaching, and his example are *our* pattern of what it means to be truly human. But it is the *Resurrection* of the eternal

Christ that set the broken creation right. “Death tried to swallow the author of life,” an ancient theologian once said, “and *death* died.” Christ offered himself a sacrifice as a victory over our greatest, our *final* foe. And *that* offer, praise God, is still open.

Way longer ago than I like to think about, and a few hundred miles to the west, when I was Dean of St. Mark’s Cathedral in Hastings, Nebraska, I had the privilege of counting among my friends the pastor of the *much* larger Catholic parish in town, Monsignor John McCabe. I would be happy to tell you the story of how we first met. And I would delight to tell you the story of the time that great man asked for *my* blessing. But while thinking of this morning’s lessons, I was reminded especially of our *last* meeting just a handful of days before he died of the cancer that he had fought nearly all the years I knew him. The Monsignor had been a very strong, very large, very *imposing* man, so it was distressing to see him weary and weak and withered lying in his hospice bed. The nurse had told me that I couldn’t stay long – I think she only let me in at *all* because I didn’t correct her assumption that I was Roman Catholic. “How are you my friend?” I asked once I had taken his gaunt hand in mine. “I’m tired,” he said in little more than a whisper, “but I’m almost done now.” My eyes filled with tears and my own voice wouldn’t come even as a whisper to reply. “I figure I can get some rest soon,” he continued, “I think our Father doesn’t much *need* priests in heaven.”

Our great High Priest has *completed* his offering. Our great High Priest has *finished* his work. Our great High Priest has accomplished *all* that needed to be accomplished, and now sits at the right hand of his Father and *ours*. And when, as in our readings from the book of Job here lately, the Accuser comes to condemn us before the great Throne of heaven, when the Accuser whispers in the ear of our darkness or our despair or our doubt, when the Accuser lays bare our failures and our weaknesses and our willful sinfulness, then our Savior and our Redeemer, then the Lover of your soul and mine, then our great High Priest, holds out his nail-scarred hands and proclaims, “That accusation *will not stand*.” “That debt has been paid.” “That battle has been fought – and *won*.” “The sacrifice has *already* been offered.” And that offer is *always* open.