

PART TWO 3:1 - 5:10

**A trustworthy and compassionate
high priest**

Therefore, brothers and sisters, holy partners in a heavenly calling, consider [NRSV adds 'that'] the apostle and high priest of our confession, Jesus, being [NRSV 'was'] faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses also 'was faithful in all God's house.'
(Numbers 12:7)

The author addresses his 'brothers and sisters' in the Christian community as 'holy' (Greek: *hagios*), a cultic term echoing what he said earlier about our being 'sanctified' (Greek: *hagiazō*) by Jesus who shares the same Father and who calls us his 'brothers and sisters' (2:11-12). Jesus 'the apostle and high priest of our confession' has gone before us into the eternal sanctuary of the all-holy God, and he is calling us to join him there (compare Philippians 3:14). In calling Jesus an 'apostle', the author keeps our attention on God, for it is God who sent Jesus to us, and it is God's word that he conveys. In calling Jesus 'high priest', he picks up the theme that he has just introduced (see 2:17), for he is going to reflect with us upon the profound significance of the communion with God that is offered us through Jesus. I have slightly adapted the translation. The author is asking us to contemplate Jesus, not just to consider certain things about him.

He introduced this theme by referring to Jesus as 'a merciful and faithful high priest' (2:17). Here he wishes to develop the second characteristic, for it is essential in one who is appointed to mediate God's word. The Greek is *pistos*. It is an adjective derived from the word for 'faith' (*pistis*, see the commentary on James 1:3), and has a number of rich connotations. In relation to God, it describes Jesus as one who *believes* in God and who is *faithful* to God. Because of this, in relation to us, he is *trustworthy*. We can believe in him and rely on 'the apostle and high priest' of the faith which we profess ('our confession').

Having spoken of Jesus in this way, our author goes on to make a comparison between Jesus and Moses. Because of his unique position in the religious tradition of Israel, Moses combines in his person the mediatory roles later divided between the kings, prophets and priests. He is, for them, the mediator par excellence. His intimacy with God was proverbial: 'Moses and Aaron were among his priests, Samuel also was among those who called on his name. They cried to the Lord, and he answered them' (Psalm 99:6). Moses is the model for the oracle spoken through Eli, when God promised: 'I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who shall do according to what is in my heart and in my mind. I will build him a sure house' (1 Samuel 2:35). There are echoes here of the description of Moses given in the Book of Numbers:

When there are prophets among you, I the Lord make myself known to them in visions; I speak to them in dreams. Not so with my servant Moses; he is entrusted with ('faithful in') all my house. With him I speak face to face – clearly, not in riddles; and he beholds the form of the Lord.

– Numbers 12:6-8

God invited Moses into his presence and confided to him the Torah (see Exodus 33:12 - 34:15). It was Moses who led the people as their priest in responding to God's covenant by offering themselves to God through the symbolic offering of the blood of the sacrificial animals, and who was invited to enjoy communion with God (see Exodus 24). Yet, in 'glory' and 'honour' (see 2:7) Jesus, the one in whom the Christian community has placed its trust, is superior even to Moses (compare 2Corinthians 3:7-8).

The wonder of creation evokes praise. In verse four we are reminded how much more wonderful must be the Creator? We have already been reminded of the role of God's Son in creation. Our high priest is superior because Moses was faithful *in* God's house as a *servant* (see Numbers 12:7), whereas Jesus, God's Son, 'through whom God created the worlds' (1:2) is faithful *over* God's house as a *Son*.

We, the Christian community, are in the privileged position of being those who form the house (the 'temple') built by this greatest of all high priests. As we read elsewhere in the New Testament:

Set yourselves close to him, so that you ... may be living stones, making a spiritual house.

– 1 Peter 2:5

God has put all things under Christ's feet, and has made him head over all things, for the church which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all things, completely, everywhere.

– Ephesians 1:22-23

The faithfulness of Jesus should encourage us to be faithful. We have been promised a place with him in the eternal sanctuary of heaven. Let us hold fast to this 'hope' and not be ashamed of the faith which we profess. We have been given a share in the life of the son and therefore we have been given the right to share in his inheritance. Our boast lies not in anything which we have done, but in the amazing love that we have been given and in the promise which this love holds for us. It is in this that we place our hope. For a reflection on 'hope', see the commentary on 1Peter 1:13.

Yet Jesus is worthy of more glory than Moses, just as the builder of a house has more honour than the house itself.

(For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.)

Now Moses was faithful *in* all God's house as a *servant*, to testify to the things that would be spoken later.

Christ, however, was faithful *over* God's house as a *son*,

and we are his house if we hold firm the accorded right [NRSV 'confidence'] and the pride that belong to hope.

Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says,

‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, as on the day of testing in the wilderness, where your ancestors put me to the test, though they had seen my works for forty years. Therefore I was angry with that generation, and I said, ‘They always go astray in their hearts, and they have not known my ways.’ As in my anger I swore, ‘They will not enter my rest.’

(Psalm 95:7-11)

The Christians to whom this oration is addressed were well acquainted with Psalm 95, as it formed part of their regular Sabbath liturgy in the synagogue. It has proved as popular in the Christian liturgy, where it is used each day to open the liturgy of the hours. As is his custom, our author shows no interest in the human author (see especially 2:6). These are the words of ‘the Holy Spirit’.

Behind the psalm stands the story of God taking a rest on the Sabbath, having completed the work of creation (see Genesis 2:2-3). For the people of Israel, whom God had rescued from Egypt, and led safely through the wilderness, entrance into the Promised Land was seen in terms of sharing God’s Sabbath rest. However, at the oasis of Kadesh, when they were on the verge of entering Canaan, they refused to believe in God and to act on God’s promises. The story is narrated at some length in Numbers 13-14. Led by Joshua and Caleb, chosen scouts went into Canaan and spied out the land. After forty days they returned with a report of a land ‘flowing with milk and honey’ (Numbers 13:27). They also told them of the opposition they would have to face. Fear won out and the people resolved to ‘go back to Egypt’ (Number 14:4). In response to the pleading of Moses, God forgave their sin, but added with an oath:

None of the people who have seen my glory and the signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have tested me these ten times and have not obeyed my voice, shall see the land that I swore to give to their ancestors ... your dead bodies shall fall in this very wilderness ... and you shall fall by the sword; because you have turned back from following the Lord, the Lord will not be with you.

– Numbers 14:22-23,29,43

Only Caleb and Joshua, who had listened to God and believed in God’s promise, were exempted (Numbers 14:30). Terrified by what God had threatened, but against God’s command, the people decided then to go into Canaan, but were routed by the Amalekites and Canaanites (Numbers 14:45). It is to this that Psalm 95 refers. In the Hebrew text reference is made also to the people’s failure in faith at Meribah and Massah (see Exodus 17:7). The Greek text, used throughout Hebrews, by translating these names according to their meaning, ‘rebellion’ and ‘testing’, keeps the focus sharply on the incident at Kadesh.

The application is an obvious one. Living as we are ‘in these last days’(1:1), we, too, are on the verge of entering the promised rest. Whatever dangers face us, we must not lose faith and ‘turn away from the living God’. We must not go back on our ‘confession’(3:1). As the author said earlier: ‘how can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?’(2:3).

The community is having to face difficulties. He has already reflected with them on the sufferings which Christ, who is now ‘crowned with glory and honour’(2:9) had to endure. Christ will ‘help those who are being tested’(2:18). He will do so, in a particular way, through the mutual encouragement which members of the community offer each other. For the first time he uses the verb ‘exhort’(Greek: *parakaleō*). It may also be translated ‘encourage’. It is built up from the verb ‘call’(*kaleō*), already used by our author when he spoke of Christ ‘calling’ us his brothers and sisters (2:11). This same Jesus is calling us to join him in the Promised Land. We are to be instruments of his call, calling each other to faith, hope and love, and to endurance.

He has already spoken of our being ‘partners in a heavenly calling’(3:1). He reminds us here that we will share in Jesus’ intimate love-communion with God only if we ‘hold firm to the principle (Greek: *archē*) of what is ultimately real (Greek: *hupostasis*)’. The ultimately real is the living God revealed to us through his Son. Those to whom the oration is addressed once committed themselves to Christ in faith. They must remain faithful, or they, too, will not enter the rest promised them.

In a series of rhetorical questions, the orator reminds us that those who rebelled were the very ones whom God had redeemed from Egypt under the leadership of Moses. The implications are that we who have been redeemed from slavery to ‘the devil’(2:12) and to ‘fear of death’(2:15), by the ‘champion’(2:10) who is superior to Moses, could also fail to reach our goal if we are ‘rebellious’, sinful, ‘disobedient’, and refuse to believe; if we cause God to complain as he did in regard to the generation in the wilderness, who ‘refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them?’(Numbers 14:11). ‘Unbelief’(Greek: *apistia*) is a failure to follow the ‘faithful’(*pistos*) Jesus (3:2).

“Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.

“But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

“For we have become partners of Christ, if only we hold firm to the end to the principle of what is ultimately real [NRSV ‘to our first confidence’].

“As it is said, ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.’

“Now who were they who heard and yet were rebellious? Was it not all those who left Egypt under the leadership of Moses?

“But with whom was he angry forty years? Was it not those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness?

“And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, if not to those who were disobedient?

“So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.

Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest is still open, let us take care that none of you should seem to have failed to reach it.

For indeed the good news came to us just as to them; but the word [NRSV 'message'] they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened

(or 'because it [the word] did not bind in with faith those who listened').

The words of the 'Holy Spirit' expressed in Psalm 95, demonstrate that 'the promise of entering his rest is still open'. Otherwise what would be the point of warning people not to follow the example of their ancestors at Kadesh? Those to whom this oration is being addressed are being tested. They must take care to pass the test and not be judged to have failed it.

The reason for the failure of the people in the wilderness is given in verse two. However the manuscripts are divided. Some render the perfect passive participle of *sugkerannumi* ('to mix with') as an accusative plural (*sugkekerasmenous*), referring to those who did not benefit from hearing the good news. This is the option taken by the NRSV. If this is the correct option, we are being told that that the good news did not benefit them because they were not bound in with those who heard with faith, namely Joshua and Caleb (Numbers 14:7-9,30). The orator is stressing the importance of remaining bound in with others in the Christian community.

Other manuscripts read *sugkekerasmenos*, a subjective singular describing the word which they have failed to hear. If this is the correct reading, we are being told that the problem was that the word was received, but only outwardly; it was not mixed with faith, either in the sense that the people were not inspired to faith by it, or, alternatively, that the word itself was not energised by the power of faith to produce its proper fruit.

Each of the readings contains a truth and a lesson to be learned. They both concern 'faith' (Greek: *pistis*), mentioned here for the first time. For a lengthy reflection on the meaning of faith see the commentary on James 1:3. It is the cognate noun for the adjective that expresses the key theme of this section, '*pistos*' (3:2,5), one of the qualities that is characteristic of our faithful and trustworthy high priest (2:17).

The argument here relies on the Greek version of Genesis 2:2 where we find the verb ‘rest’ (Greek: *katapauo*) which is cognate to the noun in Psalm 95. One of the standard techniques of Jewish interpretation of scripture was to look for passages in which a word is repeated. Their understanding was that God inspired this repetition with a view to helping us grasp the fuller meaning of what is being revealed. We noted earlier that the rest to be experienced in the Promised Land was related to God’s rest on the seventh day.

In the creation hymn which opens Genesis, the beginning and the ending of the first six days is explicitly noted: ‘there was evening and there was morning, the first (second etc) day’. We are then told: ‘On the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done’ (Genesis 2:2).

Nothing is said about the terminating of the seventh day. Though ‘God’s works were finished at the foundation of the world’, the whole of human history unfolds within it. We live in the seventh day, so that, though some refused to believe and failed to enter into the glory of God’s rest, the call to enjoy God’s rest remains. What matters for each generation is our ‘today’, and the orator is exhorting his brothers and sisters in the Christian community to listen to the call and not to harden their hearts, but to respond in faith.

Our author plays also with the fact that the Greek *Īsōus*, is Jesus’ name, and also the Greek form of Joshua, who led the people into the Promised Land. That entrance could not have exhausted God’s promise of rest, otherwise ‘God would not speak later about another day’. It is the Christian Joshua (‘Jesus’) who has entered into the fullness of the rest promised by God, and we Christians are the privileged recipients of his call to follow him there. We are on the verge of entering, ‘let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest’. We must not imitate the ‘disobedience’ (Greek: *apeitheia*) of our ancestors.

For we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said, ‘As in my anger I swore, “They shall not enter my rest,”’ (Psalm 95:11) though his works were finished at the foundation of the world.

For in one place it speaks about the seventh day as follows, ‘And God rested on the seventh day from all his works’ (Genesis 2:2). And again in this place it says, ‘They shall not enter my rest’ (Psalm 95:11).

Since therefore it remains open for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, again he sets a certain day — ‘today’ — saying through David much later, in the words already quoted, ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts’ (Psalm 95:7).

For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not speak later about another day.

So then, a Sabbath rest still remains for the people of God; for those who enter God’s rest also cease from their labours as God did from his.

Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one may fall through such disobedience as theirs.

12Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

13And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to his eyes.

The Word for us is towards him.

[NRSV 'to whom we must render an account']

In polished rhetoric, our orator draws out the implication of what he has just said. All that is said here relates to the word of God that we have heard in the promise of Genesis, in the terrible judgment of Kadesh, and in the challenge and hope held out by Psalm 95. It is true of all God's words, those spoken 'long ago to our ancestors in many and various ways through the prophets'(1:1), and those spoken through God's faithful servant Moses (3:5); but it is most true of the words that God has spoken and continues to speak through his Son, Jesus.

He is speaking of the living and active word of 'God, for whom and through whom all things exist'(2:10). He is speaking of the word of him who said 'Let there be light' and 'there was light'(Genesis 1:3). 'God spoke, and it came to be; God commanded, and it stood firm'(Psalm 33:9). 'By the word of the Lord his works are made; and all his creatures do his will'(Sirach 42:15).

My word that goes out from my mouth shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

– Isaiah 55:11

God's word is sharper than the sword of the Amalekites, for it exposes the origin of our feelings and intentions. It shows up in our day to day physical life ('joints') and in what comes from the centre of our vital energy ('marrow'). Indeed, as Saint Paul says, 'the sword of the Spirit is the word of God'(Ephesians 6:17). We are reminded of the words of the Book of Wisdom:

While gentle silence enveloped all things, and night in its swift course was now half gone, your all-powerful word leaped from heaven, from the royal throne, into the midst of the land that was doomed, a stern warrior carrying the sharp sword of your authentic command.

– Wisdom 18:14-16

In the Book of Revelation, the risen and exalted Jesus is portrayed standing in the midst of the Christian assembly dressed as a priest: 'From his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword'(Revelation 1:16; see 2:12; 19:15). The final words of verse thirteen according to the NRSV translation correspond to the warning nature of the author's words. However, they are capable of an alternative translation. God's word faces us towards God as our heart recognises the One for whom we yearn and for whom we are made. John speaks of the eternal Word as being 'towards God'(John 1:1). Created by God and for God, we are drawn by God's word calling us to share in the intimate communion of love enjoyed by God's Son. Let us not neglect 'so great a salvation'(2:3).

The author concludes his opening reflection on Christ our high priest with the image of Jesus, the Son of God, passing through the heavens to the throne of God. This image is found elsewhere in the New Testament: ‘He ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things’ (Ephesians 4:10). ‘He has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God’ (1 Peter 3:22).

Our author began by speaking of Jesus as God’s ‘Son’ (1:2), and developed the implications of this special intimacy in the opening sections of his oration. He returns to it here, concluding this section by linking ‘Son’ with ‘high priest’. ‘Son of God’ was a confessional formula in the early church. Luke describes Paul immediately after his conversion as proclaiming in the synagogues that Jesus is ‘the Son of God’ (Acts 9:20). In Paul we read: ‘He was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord’ (Romans 1:4). The beloved disciple, who constantly draws attention to the intimate communion between Jesus and his ‘Father’, constantly refers to Jesus as the Son. In the First Letter of John we find:

The blood of Jesus, God’s Son, cleanses us from all sin.
– 1 John 1:7

God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God,
and they abide in God.
– 1 John 4:15

Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that
Jesus is the Son of God?
– 1 John 5:5

Jesus, our brother, is now enjoying God’s rest in the sanctuary of heaven. Living as we are on the verge of entering with him, ‘let us hold fast to our confession’.

**“Since, then,
we have a great
high priest
who has passed
through the
heavens, Jesus,
the Son of God,
let us hold fast
to our confes-
sion.**

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.

Our author began by portraying Jesus as being in intimate communion with God as the Son, and in intimate communion with us as our brother. He is thus the perfect mediator, bringing to fulfilment the ministry of the Jewish high priest. We recall his words:

He had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

— Hebrews 2:17-18

In the section just concluded, he focused on Christ as a faithful high priest. We can have complete confidence that his word is indeed the ‘word of God’. Now he focuses on his mercy.

We looked at the various levels of meaning of this rich biblical concept when commenting upon 1Peter 1:3. Mercy (Greek: *eleos*) speaks of God’s gracious care and all the ways in which God looks after us. It speaks of God’s tenderness, and there are innumerable texts in which it speaks of God’s faithfulness to the commitment of love which he has made to us. Like Father, like Son. The mercy which is characteristic of God fills the heart of his Son Jesus. We can ‘approach the throne of grace with boldness’, knowing that we will ‘receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need’, because the one who is ‘seated at the right hand of the Majesty on high’(1:3) is our brother, Jesus.

Those who knew Jesus came to see in him the incarnation of God himself, the perfect expression in human nature of God’s own Word. Influenced by this central belief of the Christian community, it is difficult for us to avoid thinking that this truth in some way changed his humanity, making him someone very unlike us in his way of thinking, feeling and responding. We are in danger of imagining Jesus as somehow half-God and half-man. Unwittingly we are in danger of being caught up in the oldest heresy in the Church, being so dazzled by his divinity that we think of him as really God and as only appearing to be man. It is as though he is acting a part just to give us good example, without being really human himself. To think in this way is to deny the reality of the Incarnation.

The author of Hebrews is quite straightforward in stating the real humanness of Jesus. The one who is faithful, and whose word, therefore, can be trusted as he continues to speak to us from the throne of glory is one who knows our human condition from personal experience.

What sets Jesus apart – and it is an extraordinary and wonderful truth – is that while being human he did not sin. He was tested, as we are. He had to struggle, as we do. He succeeded in the struggle because he heroically and steadfastly clung to ‘every word that comes from the mouth of God’ (Matthew 4:4). He did not sin, not because his humanity was of a different kind to ours, but because he refused to act from anything less than his humanity – something that we, sadly, find ourselves doing under the stresses of life. He remained loving, even when circumstances tempted him to act otherwise. He remained prayerful, believing, gentle and truthful. While giving expression in his life to God’s being and to God’s love and fidelity, he showed us how it is possible to respond to God in a fully human way, despite pressures to the contrary. He can therefore ‘sympathise with our weaknesses’, for he experienced them. However he showed that, with faith, hope and love, we do not have to act out of them. It is possible to be human and not sin.

Our author will return to the subject of Jesus’ sinlessness (see 7:26; 9:14 and 10:5-10). It is asserted also in other New Testament writings:

For our sake God made Christ to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

– 2 Corinthians 5:21

In him there is no falsehood.

– John 7:18

Which of you convicts me of sin?

– John 8:46

You know that he appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin.

– 1John 3:5

You were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.

– 1Peter 1:18-19

He committed no sin; no guilt was found on his lips.

– 1Peter 2:22

Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.

– 1Peter 3:18

Sin has the effect of desensitising us. Being sinless, Jesus’ heart remained sensitive to the horror of sin. Knowing our human condition from personal experience, his heart goes out to us who have been tested and have failed. He knows the price that sin demands of us. He knows that repentance will not be easy for us. As our mediator he continues to give himself to us in love to encourage us to ‘approach the throne of grace with boldness’ seeking the mercy which we need.

¹⁶Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

In the Jewish cult only the high priest could approach the 'throne of grace', and that only once a year. Now, thanks to Christ, the way is open for us all. We will 'receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need'. Since it is a common experience for us to approach and not to experience receiving the help we need, a comment on the timing of grace may be in order, though it goes beyond the text of Hebrews. It is a fact that the timing is not always according to our desires. In the first place we do not always have the wisdom to know what is best for us. Our prayer like that of Jesus himself should recognise this as we pray with him: 'Not my will but your's be done' (Mark 32:36). In the second place we are not always ready for or truly open to grace. We pray, but are not yet ready to receive God's grace which is being offered us whether we pray or not. The price of truth is sometimes beyond what we are willing to pay. The purpose of prayer is to face us towards God, to open us to his word and to the energy of his creative Spirit. But God's grace will be fully effective in our lives only to the extent that we are ready to respond to his word with all our hearts, all our minds, all our souls and all our strength. The measure of God's grace is the measure of our openness to it. The timing of God's response is a matter of our genuineness and openness to grace. Perhaps this explains the present tense used by our author: 'Let us *keep on approaching* the throne of grace'. If we persevere in prayer we may become ready for God's response.

Our author has shown that as a mediator of God's word to us, Jesus is superior to Moses (2:3-6). He now wishes to demonstrate that as a mediator who enables us to approach the throne of grace Jesus is superior to Aaron. He begins by describing the sacrificial aspect of the ministry of a Levitical priest. This is not intended as a complete definition of a priest's role, as we have already been reflecting on his main function which is to be a mediator of the word. The offering of sacrifice is a response to that word, and so necessarily secondary and complementary.

Our author wants to demonstrate the underlying continuity of the priesthood of Christ with that of Aaron, while indicating a new perspective. For this reason he stays with the fundamentals. The details require change. He will deal with these later. His stress is on the fact that the high priest shares the human condition of those whom he represents before God. He has just shown how this is true of Jesus. In the case of the Levitical priest – and in this Jesus is different (see 4:15) – it included sharing our sin.

He then speaks of the 'honour' that goes with the priesthood (see 2:9). Before we hear what he has to say on this subject we might note the following descriptions:

He raised up Aaron, a holy man like Moses, his brother, of the tribe of Levi. He made an everlasting covenant with him, and gave him the priesthood of the people. He adorned him with impressive vestments, he dressed him in a robe of glory.

– Sirach 45:7-8

How splendid Simon the high priest was with the people thronging around him when he emerged from the curtained shrine (on the day of Yom Kippur), like the morning star among the clouds, like the moon at the full ... when he went up to the holy altar, and filled the sanctuary precincts with his grandeur.

– Sirach 50:5-6, 11-12

How different were the choices made by Jesus who:

poured himself out taking the form of a slave. Being born in the likeness of men, and being found in human appearance, He humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him, and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at Jesus' name every knee should bow... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

– Philippians 2:6-11

Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf,

to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.

He is able to deal gently with those erring through ignorance [NRSV 'with the ignorant and wayward'], since he himself is subject to weakness;

and because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people.

And one does not presume to take this honour, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was.

So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, 'You are my Son, today I have begotten you';

(Psalm 2:7)

as he says also in another place, 'You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek'.

(Psalm 110:4)

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.

Our author returns to Psalm 2 which celebrates the investiture of the king (see 1:5), and to Psalm 110 which speaks of the special priesthood of the royal Messiah (see 1:13). He goes on to speak of how it is that our high priest is capable of experiencing mercy towards us, his brothers and sisters.

The traditional portraits of Jesus found in the Gospel records reveal, again and again, his capacity for compassion. Sometimes our attention is explicitly drawn to it, as in his encounter with the leper (Mark 1:40-45), in his response to the needy crowd (Mark 6:34), and in his dealings with the widow of Nain (Luke 7:15). He draws attention to this quality of love in his parables of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:33) and the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:20).

A problem could arise for us in the light of Jesus being sinless. We might wonder how he could understand what it is like for us who, because we have sinned, have lost our innocence and suffer from the confusions, hurts, temptations and habits that result from sin. This is surely a valid question, for there are things that we can learn only through experience. The fact that Jesus was sinless does say a lot about what he did not experience. However, it seems true that in many and important ways sin dulls rather than sharpens our perceptions. Does a person who is always giving way to self-interest really understand selfishness? Does a person who frequently acts violently really have a feeling for the true nature of violence? Does a proud person have a deep appreciation of the reality of pride.

Is it not true that in some ways it is only the very gentle person who is sensitised to the horror of violence; it is only the genuinely humble person who sees pride for what it is. In the same way it is the saint who knows the awful reality of sin. Jesus' sinlessness meant that his sensitivity to evil was never dulled. His beautiful and faithful humanity meant that he never lost his sensitivity to man's inhumanity to man. Precisely because sin had never dulled his conscience, Jesus did not know the experience of one who sins. But this does not mean that he had less compassion. The contrary is true. He saw sin, and its effects on people, with lucid clarity and he responded to evil with the response that is possible only to a mature person who has retained the innocence of childhood, and so has not learnt to rationalise, to pretend, to cover up, to run away, to protect himself from the awful clarity that belongs only to the innocent.

Our author speaks of Jesus crying out to God in his need. He speaks also of him learning obedience through suffering. It is not accidental that the word for obedience in the Hebrew Bible is identical with the word for listening. Listening from the heart is essentially what obedience requires. The Greek for ‘to obey’ is *hupakouō* which is derived from *akouō* (to listen), with the prefix *hupo* (‘under’), indicating a listening from a position of submission. The Latin for ‘obeying’ is *ob-audiens*, from which our English word ‘obedience’ is derived. *Audiens* means listening and *ob* indicates that the listening is from close contact and not from a distance. We are obedient when we are listening right up close. To obey God is to be close to God and to be listening for the slightest indication of God’s will with the desire and intention of doing what God inspires us to do with all our heart and with joy, knowing that God’s will is the most beautiful and liberating thing we can do.

Jesus constantly insists on the central importance in his life and in ours of wanting only what God wants and of being committed in all things to doing God’s will. In essence he is calling us to be attentive to the movements of God in our hearts and in our world. The reason for this is obvious. God is love and God is creating us moment by moment in love and for love. To be guided by God’s inspiration is to be guided along the path of holiness. To resist God’s inspiration is to resist the gravity of grace drawing us into divine communion. Let us listen to Jesus as he resists the tempter:

It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’

– Matthew 4:4

Again and again Jesus reveals the importance of obedience:

I do nothing on my own ... And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him.

– John 8:28-29

Jesus threw himself on the ground and prayed, ‘My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want ... My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.’

– Matthew 26:39 and 42

Jesus asks the same of his disciples:

Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.

– Matthew 7:21

Pointing to his disciples, Jesus said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.’

– Matthew 12:49-50

A reflection

Let us spend some time reflecting on two scenes from Jesus' public life: one towards the beginning, and the other towards the end. Both show us Jesus in the process of learning to listen ever more deeply to the word of God. Both show us Jesus following his discernment in circumstances that brought suffering. They are good examples of what our author is claiming: namely, that it was through such suffering that Jesus learned to listen and to obey. It was this that trained his heart in compassion.

That evening, after sunset, they brought to him all who were sick and those possessed by demons. The whole town came crowding round the door, and he cured many who were suffering from diseases of one kind or another; he also cast out many demons ... In the morning, long before dawn, he got up and left the house, and went off to a lonely place and prayed there. Simon and his companions set out in search of him, and when they found him they said, 'Everyone is looking for you'. He answered, 'Let us go elsewhere, because that is why I came'. And he went all through Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.

– Mark 1:32-39

According to Jewish law, understood as expressing God's will, a leper must be declared unclean by the priest: 'He must wear his clothing torn and his hair disordered; he must shield his upper lip and cry, 'Unclean! Unclean!' ... He must live apart: he must live outside the camp'(Leviticus 13:44-46). Watch what this leper does, and watch Jesus' response:

A leper came to him and pleaded on his knees: 'If you want to' he said 'you can cure me'. Moved with compassion for him, Jesus reached out and embraced him. 'Of course I want to!' he said. 'Be cured!' And the leprosy left him at once and he was cured ... The man went away, but started talking about it freely and telling the story everywhere, so that Jesus could no longer go openly into any town, but had to wait outside in places where nobody lived. Even so people from all around would come to him.

– Mark 1:40-45

We might contemplate also Jesus' Agony (Mark 14:32-42). Faced with an unjust and apparently meaningless death, Jesus penetrated to the deepest level of identification with our human condition. In his prayer, he remained obedient in faith, and his obedience opened up his situation to the action of divine grace. From a cry of agony, he rose to a higher trust that if he remained true to his mission of love, God his Father would not abandon him.

Abba (Father)! Everything is possible for you. Take this cup away from me. Let it be as you, not I, would have it.

– Mark 14:36

As is his custom, our author concludes this part of his treatment by preparing his audience for what is to follow. He has just examined the two connections which a mediator must be able to make: the connection with God which ensures that his word is truly the word of God; and the connection with us that ensures that the word really connects with our experience. As to the first, our high priest is superior to Moses. As to the second, he is superior to Aaron. He is about to move on to examine the three essential characteristics of priesthood to show how in each of these the priesthood of Christ surpasses that of the Levitical priesthood.

He tells us that Christ has been made perfect (Greek: *teleio*, used for the consecration of a priest). He is preparing us for the centrepiece of the following section in which he will demonstrate that Jesus, unlike the priests of the Old Covenant, has been made perfect (reached fulfilment) in the sanctuary of heaven.

He goes on to say that Christ has become ‘the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him’. He will go on to demonstrate that the mediation from mankind to God is complete in Jesus who draws us into the eternal salvation of complete communion with God.

In verse ten he introduces the theme that he will develop first as he demonstrates that the mediation from God to mankind which is effected by Jesus is more secure than that of the levitical priests, and is eternal, not being bound by the vicissitudes of time.

**and having been made perfect,
he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him,
having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.**