

**JESUS THE ONLY PRIEST**

## Jesus, the only priest

### Jesus, our One and Only Priest

In the Christian Church there is only one priest, Jesus, ‘the one mediator between God and humankind’ (1 Timothy 2:5). Whatever we say about the priesthood of the ordained, it can only be a special sharing in the priesthood of Christ. In this chapter we will reflect on Jesus as King, Prophet and Priest. An argument can be made that it is the aspect of Priesthood that offer the best perspective on the way in which Jesus can be said to be King and Prophet.

#### Jesus as King

Jesus’ mission was to bring about the reign of God ‘on earth as in heaven’. He fulfilled in his person, in his words, and in his deeds, the role of the king in Israel. This is a familiar idea. What is essential for our reflection is to note how Jesus functioned as king. He did so as a humble servant – clearly demonstrated in the washing of his disciples’ feet at the Last Supper: ‘You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet’ (John 1:13-14). His way of being king was as the Good Shepherd ‘who lays down his life for his sheep’ (John 10:11). He was a King by giving himself throughout his ministry, culminating in his gift of himself in love on the cross. As we will note shortly, giving oneself is essentially a priestly act.

#### Jesus as Prophet

This, too, is a familiar theme. Jesus not only spoke God’s word, he is God’s Word-made-flesh. His mission was to ‘testify to the truth’ (John 18:37). The truth is, of course, that God is love. Jesus testified to this by ‘bringing Good News to the poor’, by ‘proclaiming liberty to captives’ and ‘new sight to the blind’, by ‘setting the downtrodden free’ (Luke 4:18 = Isaiah 61:1-2). In his ministry he fulfilled the following words of Isaiah:

The Lord YHWH has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he awakens— awakens my ear to listen as those who are taught ... I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting’ (Isaiah 50:4-6).

The Good News that Jesus proclaimed came from his communion with God. His words impressed people because he ‘spoke with authority’. As he said himself: ‘What I say is what I have seen in the Father’s presence’ (John 8:38). His words impressed because they expressed who he was and how he lived. As with his way of being King, so with his way of being Prophet, the key is found in his offering of himself to his Father and to us. He was a Prophet by giving himself throughout his ministry, culminating in the gift of himself on the cross. Giving himself is essentially a priestly act.

#### Jesus as Priest

In the New Testament only the Letter to the Hebrews speaks of Jesus as a priest. The reason for this is not difficult to find: Jesus did not belong to the tribe of Levi and was not eligible to be a priest in the Jewish cult. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews, however, recognised that in his person and in his ministry Jesus brought to perfection the

priestly ministry. Priesthood focuses on the holy. It is, as the following diagram illustrates, about the presence of God (in the 'sanctuary') and drawing people into communion with God. While Jesus was not a Levitical priest, he brought to fulfilment their ministry, not by offering animal sacrifices in the sanctuary, but by the offering of himself, to God and to the world. It is as Priest, in his self-offering in love, that he lived and fulfilled the role of King and Prophet.

### The Levitical priests

The cultic priests of Israel carried out their ministry in the sanctuary of the temple. They mediated God's word to the assembly, recalling God's action in the people's history and revealing God's will. They also received the sacrifices of the people and offered them to God:

'The priests officiate in the sanctuary and approach Yahweh to serve him' (Ezekiel 45:4).

'The Lord set aside the tribe of Levi ... to stand in the presence of Yahweh, to do him service, and in his name to pronounce blessing' (Deuteronomy 10:8).

'Moses consecrated Aaron ... to bless his people in the name of the Lord ... to offer sacrifice to the Lord ... to make atonement for the people. He entrusted him with his commandments, committed to him the statutes of the law, to teach Jacob his decrees and enlighten Israel on his law' (Sirach 45:15-17).

The high priest carried out his special function on the feast of Yom Kippur (the 'day of the cover'). He took the sins of the people into the inner sanctuary of the temple to the 'cover' (the 'mercy-seat'), God's throne. This is the meaning of to 'expiate' or 'atone': bringing sin into contact with divine mercy annihilates sin, for nothing impure can survive in God's presence.

### The priestly ministry of the King

Psalm 110 recognises the priestly role of the king by speaking of him as 'a priest according to the order of Melchizedek' (Psalm 110:4), the priest-king of Jerusalem (Genesis 14:18). His priestly role transcended that of the Levitical priests, for his sanctuary was not just the temple, but the 'Holy Land'. He was a sacrament of God and was to bring about God's reign, firstly in Israel, but then throughout the world. He was to do this by governing the people according to God's Law and in such a way that they would be faithful to the Covenant and 'be holy as the Lord God is holy' (Leviticus 19:2).

### Christ the priest

The author of the Oration to the Hebrews describes Jesus as a high priest, the perfect mediator between the divine and the human:

'Jesus had in all things to become like his brothers and sisters so that he might become a merciful and trustworthy high priest for the things of God, in order to expiate the sins of the people. For in what he has suffered himself, being tested, he is able to offer help to those who are being tested' (Hebrews 2:17-18).

## Jesus, the only priest

Though of the tribe of Judah, and therefore not a Levitical priest (cf Hebrews 7:4), Jesus brings to perfection the functions carried out imperfectly by the cultic priests of the Old Testament. They carried out their mission in the sanctuary. Jesus is God's chosen temple, the sanctuary in which God dwells and where God's Word is incarnate. The Levitical priests mediated between God and the people when they spoke God's word from the sanctuary and when they declared God's will as inscribed in the Torah. Jesus speaks only what he receives from the Father (John 8:28), and he reveals God's will, thereby showing not only who God is but also how we are to respond to God and so enjoy the divine communion in which holiness consists. The Levitical priests mediated between the people and God when they received gifts from the people and offered them to God as sacrifices. Jesus gives God's Spirit without measure (John 3:34), welcomes everyone and offers to God all who are in communion with him. Through this communion in self-offering, he sanctifies and saves all who come to the Father through him (Hebrews 7:25).

The high priest offered the sacrifice of expiation (atonement) for the sins of the people. Jesus self-offering was 'for the sins of the world' to bring about communion of love for the whole of humankind:

'He is the expiation-sacrifice that takes our sins away, and not only ours but the whole world's' (1 John 2:2; also 4:10).

'All are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation-sacrifice by his blood, to be received by faith' (Romans 3:24-25).

The king was God's especially anointed one, mediating God's word to the people by governing according to God's law and binding the people together as God's covenant people. Jesus made the reign of God effective among those who became his disciples: 'a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek' (Hebrews 5:6). He is the 'the one mediator between God and humankind' (1 Timothy 2:5). The priesthood of Jesus is the priesthood of the Shepherd-King whose mission is to bring about the reign in the whole world, to draw everyone to himself and so to his Father, to make the world the holy place that God wills it to be.

The priesthood of the ordained is a special sharing in this priesthood of Jesus. Before we look at this, however, we must examine the context within which the ordained priest carries out his ministry. We must reflect on the priesthood of the Church in which all the faithful, including the ordained, share. It is only in this context that we can make sense of that special priesthood that is entrusted to the ordained.