

Sunday 16th December 2018
Jesus Christ, Prophet, Priest and King
Priest.
Hebrews 10.11-18

Anyone who has read the Bible in any way will know that large portions of the Old Testament deal with the subject of Priests, High Priests, the Tabernacle in the wilderness, and a plethora of sacrifices offered for all sorts of reasons and occasions. We read in Luke about Mary and Joseph going into the Temple to offer the sacrifice appropriate for a new born child and there encountering Simeon and Anna.

In the Gospels, Priests and others are amongst the people who rejected Christ and were party to the mockery of His trial, and subsequent execution on a Roman Cross. However, what is the significance of referring to Christ as not only a Priest, but as High Priest?

Last week we looked at Christ as the great prophet of God, the One who declared the very words of God so giving us a statement and a revelation of the mind and will of God from creation to the end of the world. Now if that is not important, what is? Anything else is small fry in comparison to that, I would have thought. Despite this, we remain in ignorance of God's revealed will because we do not consult His Book or meditate upon it asking the Holy Spirit to illuminate our understanding.

If the Prophet stood before men and spoke from God, then the Priest does something fundamentally as important. The Priest stands before God on behalf of the people, and is the intermediary who offers sacrifices and offerings to atone for sin, remove the grounds of God's displeasure towards us over our rebellion and provocation due to our disobedience and defiance of His Holy Law. Atonement deals with this and opens a way for us to receive grace and mercy from God instead of wrath and judgment. It is only when we see the role of the priest in this light that all the Scriptures which condemn the Hebrew people make sense, and all the complicated instructions about the sacrifices and offerings make sense.

There are two things which we need to understand in order to understand the significance of Christ becoming a Priest on our behalf. The Book of Hebrews has a lot to say about all this, and it would pay us to read the chapters around chapter 10 to get a grasp of what the author is saying.

The Old Testament gave very exact instructions about the construction, furnishings and duties of the High Priest in the Tabernacle. The Tabernacle was given to the Hebrew people in the wilderness under the leadership of Moses. It was not a casual construction, but the pattern, the dimensions, the materials and the order of placement and workings of every item was given in detail with the explicit instruction not to depart from the pattern given. It was not left to Moses or anyone else to decide what would do, it was not a fabrication of any man's design, but was dictated by God Himself.

Why was this? The Tabernacle was given to be the place where God would dwell in the midst of His people. He would not just hover about as it were, but could not be in the midst of the people without mediation because God is Holy, and people are not. One picture of God's holiness is expressed by fire, and if God was in the camp amongst unholy people, they would be consumed, and sometimes were.

The priests were not volunteers either. The priestly families were chosen by God to perform duties that He specified. The major act was performed on the Day of Atonement, when the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies, the inner court of the Tabernacle, where God was present in His glory. The High Priest was only permitted to enter there once a year, and his sole task was to offer a sacrifice of blood to make atonement for the sins of the people. Sin brings us under wrath because it is utterly opposite to God. The consequence of sin is death, but God in His mercy and love for His creation provided a means of holding back the sentence of death which was the due to the people. Instead of their blood being shed, the blood of an animal was shed. Instead of people losing their lives, an animal lost its life. The animal was substituted for people, and the sentence of the Law, which demanded death for its transgression, was enacted on the animal, and men would go free.

I am sure many of you will have connected all this up with Christ by now.

The book of Hebrews gives us insight into the Old Testament sacrificial system. It tells us that the substituting of an animal for the life of a man was a temporary measure. It tells us that the earthly Tabernacle was a model, a representation of heavenly realities, and was given in such a way to prepare us for the coming of the real things of which the Tabernacle was but a shadow.

The passage in Hebrews 10 gives us some important contrasts and details about the ministry of Christ as our High Priest. The weakness and insufficiency of the earthly Tabernacle and sacrifices is explained. Firstly there is a contrast between the Priesthood of Aaron and the Levites and Christ, Every Priest in the Old Testament performed his duties in his lifetime and then aged and died. The Priest was not permanent, but fleeting. Then there were the sacrifices. It was only God's goodness that accepted an animal in place of a life, there is no equivalence between a human life and that of a sheep or an ox. This is demonstrated by the fact that a priest had to offer the same sacrifices day by day and year by year, because all that the blood of an animal could do was cover sin, it could not fully pay the debt, cancel the record or remove the criminal record. Furthermore, every sacrifice and offering was made in a representation of the dwelling place of God, an earthly place, not a heavenly place. Therefore we have to conclude that the sacrifices of the Old Testament were given by God as a holding mechanism, a representative model, an indicator of something greater which had to be done if our sin was once and for ever to be removed from us to God's satisfaction. If God is not satisfied, then we face the prospect of a deferred sentence eventually being carried out. It would mean that we would be on a sort of death row. Our execution would not necessarily come soon, but it would come eventually.

Contrast all that with Christ. He came to earth, the Incarnation, by becoming 'clothed in flesh, the Godhead seen' as Wesley said. He qualifies to be a priest on behalf of humanity having become a man Himself. However, Christ was not just a man, He is also God, and so is qualified not only to make earthly sacrifices, but is able to enter into the heavenly place of which the Tabernacle was only a shadow. It does not stop there though. Since Christ was sinless. He was able to take the place of humanity and take our sinfulness upon Himself and offer His life in our place. Christ is the Lamb of God, the one who deals with sin for time and eternity. The life of the Perfect Man was subject to the just sentence of the Law, Christ died as our substitute. A human life instead of an animal, and as the perfect High Priest, He offered His life as a sacrifice in the heavenly places.

Christ did everything that was done on earth in the Tabernacle, but in the heavenly reality, with a perfect sacrifice, presented by a priest who lives forever, and so in that regard is a perfect priest able to mediate between God and us forever.

This is why the passage in Hebrews 10 tells us that there is no longer any sacrifice for sin. There is no longer any sacrifice for sin, because Christ has fulfilled all the requirements for our sin to be removed and dealt with forever. The proof offered in Hebrews is that Christ, after completing this office, sat down at God's right hand. No earthly priest ever sat down in Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle. It was only because the work of atonement had been completed that Christ sat down with no more sacrifices needing to be made. The Old sacrifices were completed, the model, the shadow had been replaced by the true work. God Himself had made the way open to us to enter His presence without fear of death. This is what the ripping of the curtain in the temple signified when Christ died on the cross. God tore it from top to bottom!

So what has this to do with Christmas? This is why Christ came, to secure an eternal salvation for us. This is why there was a baby in the manger, why He had a mother, and a heavenly Father, why He is different from any man ever born, and yet so identical to every man born. Corinthians tells us the Christ was the last Adam, and the second man, He was a man of the present age and the age to come. Jesus ended the reign of darkness and instituted a new race of humanity, Christians, those born of God through faith in Christ.

It is vital that we understand the practical consequences of all this.

Christ is the sacrifice and the priest. It is only the Blood of Christ that was shed that brings us into peace with God. The Christian life is meant to be a life lived in a very different way, but this is as a result of what Christ has done. There is absolutely no merit in anything we do, we do not do things to earn salvation, we do things because we are grateful for salvation and desire to return love to God who has been so gracious to us. It is not being a church member that makes us right with God. It is false and foolish to hope for heaven because we are a minister, or an elder or have done our best, or have never spoken badly of anyone, or all the other things we hear when someone has died. The only grounds for hope is that we are partakers of this sacrifice of Christ by faith.

Therefore, as we draw closer to Christmas, let us ask ourselves this question, have we believed in Christ, Christ only and fully for salvation, or are we depending of some merit of our own to secure a place in heaven. The Scripture says that without faith it is impossible to please God. The Scripture also says that God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

Before we open any Christmas present this year, let us be sure that we have a faith to confess, otherwise all we do is make a mockery of this event of events, the Son of God coming into the world to save sinners.