

**Kiama Anglican Churches****August 27, 2023****"Jesus: A Priest Forever"**Hebrews 7:1-10Hebrews 7:11-28

Here's a question you could ask your friends – when do you need a priest? I'm guessing there could be lots of different answers to that question – when you want to arrange a baptism, a marriage or a funeral (hatches, matches and despatches); when you need to confess or receive spiritual advice; if you are looking for an exorcist; or maybe even when you think you need to hear a sermon! We tend not to call them 'priests' any more, rather 'presbyters' (the Greek word for 'elders'), but we usually know what we mean when we are talking about priests.

What, then, is the definition of a priest? What makes a person a priest, and how is a priest supposed to function? According to ancient and orthodox Christian tradition, a priest must be ordained – our word for the public 'laying on of hands', which is passed on in an unbroken line from the time of the apostles by those elevated to be bishops within the church. Once so 'ordained', our priests are licensed to lead and teach churches, to pastor the 'flock' committed to their charge, and to exercise their duties with spiritual maturity and integrity. This is a high calling, and is never to be taken lightly, even if there have been (and sadly continue to be) some catastrophic failures. Unfortunately, priests are also human, tainted with the same condition we all share – the essential human tendency to go off the rails, to be self-focused rather than God-focused, and to fail, sometimes abysmally, to achieve the high standards we are all called to live up to – *'Be perfect, therefore'*, said Jesus, *'as your heavenly Father is perfect.'* (Matt 5:48).

Of course, priests appear in many religions other than Christianity and/or Judaism, where they always share the same function. Their role is to be a mediator – to stand between their deity (however that may be presented) and the people, representing their 'god' to the people, through teaching, example, encouragement, exhortation, etc, and also representing the people to their 'god', standing in the people's place, sacrificing and interceding on their behalf, pleading their cause when necessary. This role of intermediary is basic to the idea of priesthood, and it has been so throughout human history.

I wonder what it must have been like for Abraham, returning from a decisive victory over a conglomerate of four Canaanite kings and their armies, when he was first met by the King of Sodom, whose town had been recently ransacked by the four kings and was now coming out to welcome him, and then by

Melchizedek, who is described as *'king of Salem'* and *'priest of God Most High'* (Genesis 14:18). In the Genesis account, we read, *'He blessed Abram, saying, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And praise be to God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand." Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything.'* (Gen 14:19-20).

*'King of Salem'* connects Melchizedek with Jeru-salem, but it also means *'king of peace'* (as we read here in Hebrews 7:2). While his name also means *'king of righteousness'* (v.2), he is described in both Genesis and Hebrews as *'priest of God Most High'* (v.1). All wrapped up in this one man is a combination of peace and righteousness, king and priest, representing *'God Most High'* and belonging to Jerusalem! That's a whole lot of qualifications, and yet his mention in the Genesis account is so very fleeting. Unlike just about everybody else in the early chapters of Genesis, he comes (as the writer to the Hebrews points out here in chapter 7) *'without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever'* (v.3).

Already, this guy is a mystery – unconnected to any past or future, in the story before there is any mention of Israelite nationality, Mosaic law or Levitical priesthood, recognised as both king and priest, representing *'God Most High'* – and he brings with him an ordinary picnic lunch to share with Abraham in the desert, and then blesses him with a simple, yet profound, blessing, in the name of *'God most high, Creator of heaven and earth.'* (Gen 14:19).

*'Just think how great he was: Even the patriarch Abraham gave him a tenth of the plunder!'* (v.4). There is the proof of Melchizedek's greatness – Abraham offered him his tithe – *'a tenth of everything'*. The writer goes on to speak of the requirement of the Mosaic law for all Israelites (Abraham's descendants) to give a tenth to the Levitical priesthood – but this man, Melchizedek, was not descended from Levi, nor even from Abraham, yet he collected the tenth from Abraham, and blessed him, although he already had the promise of God! The author even suggests that Levi (who should *receive* the tenth) actually *paid* the tenth to Melchizedek, because he was yet to be born in Abraham's family line, and therefore still in his ancestor's body. All this firmly establishes that Melchizedek was clearly greater than Abraham – the greater offers the blessing, the lesser pays the tithe – that's how it works!

But then, having only just appeared, Melchizedek completely disappears from any further mention – until Psalm 110, listed as a psalm of David, many centuries later, a psalm where David writes, *'The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: "You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek."'*

(Psalm 110:4). This is the same psalm to which Jesus himself referred, when he was teaching in the temple, and said, *‘David himself, speaking by the Holy Spirit, declared: ‘The Lord said to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.”’* (Mark 12:36-37). Peter also quoted the same section of the psalm in his Pentecost address (Acts 2), describing David as a prophet, and saying *‘Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ.’* (Acts 2:31). We can be confident that David was speaking by the Holy Spirit when he wrote the psalm, prophesying that there was one to come who would be regarded as a priest like Melchizedek – *‘a priest forever’!*

The writer to the Hebrews, therefore, is on solid ground when he makes these claims about the greatness of Melchizedek by comparison with Abraham (who was the greatest of the Israelite patriarchs and the champion of the nation’s beginnings) – and then he goes on to describe the significant connections between the priesthoods of Melchizedek and Jesus.

Follow the argument from verse 11. If the Levitical priesthood, established as a result of God’s instructions to Moses, was able to achieve perfection for those who were served by it, there would have been no need for any further priesthood to be introduced, and certainly no need for a new one to be established following the pattern of Melchizedek, rather than of Aaron and his family. If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it! But a new priesthood has been established, no longer according to the old law, drawing priests from the tribe of Levi, for Jesus was from the tribe of Judah, which has no record of priests. When David wrote Psalm 110, about the coming Messiah being *‘a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek’*, he was declaring both a change in the law, and the establishment of a new and better priesthood, no longer based on ancestral lines, but rather, *‘on the basis of the power of an indestructible life.’* (v.17). This was the clincher – there is nothing recorded about Melchizedek’s birth or death, so the writer, like David, presumes he was *‘a priest forever’*. And *‘forever’* now applies even more to Jesus (in the order of Melchizedek) than to anyone else in human history.

But wait – there’s more! The former priesthood was established under the old law which applied at the time, but it had proved itself unable to achieve all that it seemed to promise it could. So now, it has been *‘set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God.’* (vs 18-19). This new hope is better, no longer *‘weak and useless’* – because it no longer depends on passing priests, all of whom eventually die, but is finally something which is forever, and is therefore able to achieve *‘perfection’* for those who are served by it.

And even more, unlike the former Levitical priesthood, where men became priests purely on the basis of being descendants of Aaron and certainly without the requirement of any oath, in the case of Jesus' priesthood, the writer claims, *'He became a priest with an oath when God said to him: "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: 'You are a priest forever.'"*' (v.21). Once again, the quote is from Psalm 110:4, and the choice of words raises the bar on our expectation of this new priesthood – *'the Lord has sworn, and will not change his mind'* – this is it, for all people, for all ages, for ever! So the writer adds, *'Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantor of a better covenant.'* (v.22). Better? Only better? As David had commented, the Lord *'will not change his mind'* – this is not just a better covenant – it's the best you can get!

As the chapter comes to its conclusion, the writer comments further on the temporary nature of the Levitical priests – *'There have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office;'* (v.23). That's one of the problems with our priests today – they don't last. Sometimes that's a good thing, but there are times when we'd like them to stay longer – we know them, we trust them, we have become used to them, and they suit us and our needs – but they still move on, one way or another. Here we are told that *'because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood.'* (v.24) – he is definitely not going anywhere, he's around for keeps! *'Therefore,'* says the writer, *'he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.'* (v.25). His permanence guarantees his efficacy – the salvation he offers is complete, because he will never fail to be the intermediary between us and God. Just as God had said to Joshua when he called him to the leadership of his people, so Jesus says to us, *'I will never leave you nor forsake you.'* (Josh 1:5).

Think about that – where else can you be offered a salvation so complete, so all-encompassing, so definitive and guaranteed to last? Nowhere! In all the passing phases of this world – the vast sweep of human history; the rising and falling of nations; the proving and disproving of significant theories about life, the universe and everything; the ever-changing popularity of various philosophies and religions; the coming and going of great thinkers, great leaders, great teachers, great influencers – there is nothing to match the wonder of the eternal God loving his creation and his creatures so much that he sent his Son to become one of them, showing them what he is like, and then, through the sacrifice of himself, establishing this kind of permanent priesthood to maintain a full and forever restoration of relationship with them. Only this *'better covenant'* is able to *'completely save'*!

And surely that's why the author ends the chapter as he does. *'Such a high priest truly meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.'* (v.26) – nothing and no-one else even comes close! *'Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people.'* (v.27) – he is blameless, without sin, as we've already heard in chapter 2 *'God ... [made] the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered.'* (2:10) – there is no sacrifice necessary for one who is perfect. *'He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself.'* (v.27). His sacrifice was not at all for himself, but for you and me and all his people.

As a result, there is no further need for a priesthood of any kind – whether Levitical priests in relation to the original recipients of this letter, or even Anglican priests today. Peter says in his first letter, (1 Peter 2:4-5), *'You also ... are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood ...'* – in that sense, we are all 'priests', exercising our roles as intermediaries between God and the wider communities in which we live. With Jesus as our *'priest forever'*, all other priesthoods are made obsolete.

There will be more to say about covenant, tabernacle, priesthood and sacrifice over the coming weeks – but for now, it is important for us to grasp the wonder, the fulness, the freedom, and the grace that is ours, because Jesus is our 'priest forever' – permanently mediating between us and the Father. Jesus represents God to us, as he has revealed God's character, love and forgiveness in his ministry, his relationships, and supremely in his death and resurrection. He also represents us to God, having sacrificed himself, once for all, on our behalf, and now permanently intercedes for us before the Father, forever at his right hand.

*'For the law appoints as high priests men in all their weakness; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever.'* (v.28). It is only Jesus who can make us 'perfect forever' too.

## **Hebrews 7:1-28**

*7 This Melchizedek was king of Salem and priest of God Most High. He met Abraham returning from the defeat of the kings and blessed him, <sup>2</sup> and Abraham gave him a tenth of everything. First, the name Melchizedek means "king of righteousness"; then also, "king of Salem" means "king of peace."  
<sup>3</sup> Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever.*

<sup>4</sup> Just think how great he was: Even the patriarch Abraham gave him a tenth of the plunder! <sup>5</sup> Now the law requires the descendants of Levi who become priests to collect a tenth from the people—that is, from their fellow Israelites—even though they also are descended from Abraham. <sup>6</sup> This man, however, did not trace his descent from Levi, yet he collected a tenth from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. <sup>7</sup> And without doubt the lesser is blessed by the greater. <sup>8</sup> In the one case, the tenth is collected by people who die; but in the other case, by him who is declared to be living. <sup>9</sup> One might even say that Levi, who collects the tenth, paid the tenth through Abraham, <sup>10</sup> because when Melchizedek met Abraham, Levi was still in the body of his ancestor.

<sup>11</sup> If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood—and indeed the law given to the people established that priesthood—why was there still need for another priest to come, one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron? <sup>12</sup> For when the priesthood is changed, the law must be changed also. <sup>13</sup> He of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe, and no one from that tribe has ever served at the altar. <sup>14</sup> For it is clear that our Lord descended from Judah, and in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests. <sup>15</sup> And what we have said is even more clear if another priest like Melchizedek appears, <sup>16</sup> one who has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life. <sup>17</sup> For it is declared:

“You are a priest forever,  
in the order of Melchizedek.”

<sup>18</sup> The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless <sup>19</sup> (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God.

<sup>20</sup> And it was not without an oath! Others became priests without any oath, <sup>21</sup> but he became a priest with an oath when God said to him:

“The Lord has sworn  
and will not change his mind:  
‘You are a priest forever.’”

<sup>22</sup> Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantor of a better covenant.

<sup>23</sup> Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; <sup>24</sup> but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. <sup>25</sup> Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.

*<sup>26</sup> Such a high priest truly meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. <sup>27</sup> Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself. <sup>28</sup> For the law appoints as high priests men in all their weakness; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever.*

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