

I remember a factoid from an Anthropology lecture during my undergraduate days at Tech. The professor told us that there are Polynesian islanders whose language has no word for snow. Makes sense--they don't have snow in the South Pacific, so their language wouldn't need a word for it. The professor added that the Inuit dialects of the Eskimos have dozens of different words to describe different kinds of snows. That also makes sense--if you live with so much snow, you'd need a way to distinguish various types: powdery snow, wet snow, compact snow you can use to build an igloo. Of course in English, we just have the one word, "snow." Yes, that's one more than those in the Tropics. But it doesn't match the complexity of those in the Arctic.

We have the same dynamic with another English word: "priest." This causes confusion when we look at scripture. There are several different Greek and Hebrew words that we lump together with the one English word, "priest." It adds confusion when you talk about someone like me. My job title is "priest." And yet, in a biblical sense, I'm not much of a "priest" <<one hand>>, but really more of a "priest" <<other hand>>.

When you talk about a priest in the Episcopal Church, you're mainly talking about us in terms of the Greek word "presbyter." It's a word which is usually translated as "elder" in the New Testament. 99% of my role as priest—preacher, teacher, pastor, leader—is really my role as a presbyter, or elder, in the church.

But there's another biblical word for priest that refers to "someone who offers sacrifices to God." In the OT, the Jewish priests stood as a buffer zone between the people and God. They also offered many different kinds of sacrifices: doves, lambs, bulls, grain, oil. They would ritually slaughter or burn or destroy these things as a way of offering them to God.

In fact, that sense of priest, as someone who sacrifices something, is completely off our cultural radar screen. I mean think about it. When's the last time you saw someone knife a goat on an altar? When's the last time you've seen someone cremate an entire bull? It's just not a part of our cultural experience. In fact, we're somewhat like those Polynesian islanders with no word for snow. We just don't understand that kind of sacrificial priesthood. Priests, high priest, temples, sacrifices. We just don't have a good frame of reference for those kinds of things.

Which is what makes the Epistle to the Hebrews so hard for us to understand. In the NT, Hebrews is second only to Revelation in its difficulty for us in our culture. Consider what we've heard from Hebrews over the past few weeks: 3 weeks ago we heard about Jesus as the priest who makes purification for sins. 2 weeks ago we heard about how Jesus is our high priest who has passed through the heavens. Last week we heard a discussion about how Jesus is our high priest according to the order of Melchizedek. OK. A bit confusing. But did you hear the common thread? Did you hear the message over and over? Jesus is our priest. Jesus is our HIGH priest.

And because we don't understand the significance, we say, "Jesus is our high priest. Yawn." But what we should be saying is, "Jesus is our priest. Jesus is our high priest! Wow!"

So today, I'd like to focus briefly on just 3 verses from today's reading in the 7th chapter of Hebrews. We have in this brief reading a pretty good summary of the supremely good news of Jesus' priesthood.

The lead in is v23: "The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office." That's a no brainer. Before Jesus, the Jewish people needed lots of priests because priests were mortal. They would eventually die.

v24 "But (Jesus) holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever." That's so wonderful. We live in a culture with planned obsolescence. We live in a culture where things are disposable. We live in a world with "low introductory APR's" that go up in a few months. We live in a land where offers are good "for a limited time only."

But Jesus is permanently our high priest. He continues forever. Jesus is not some fly by night operator who'll close up shop in the middle of the night leaving you stranded. He'll be there for you tomorrow, and the next day, and the next decade, and the next century. In fact, the word translated "permanent" has an even richer meaning. Not only does it mean forever. It also means "unalterable" and "nontransferable." Jesus is our high priest forever. That will never be taken away, and no one else will have his job.

Plus, it is a strong theme in Hebrews that Jesus has access to his Father that none of us has. Jesus has got the full access backstage pass. Because of his obedience and because of his relationship with the Father, Jesus gives us a direct link to God. We don't have to approach God through a group of human priests bearing the blood of goats. We can approach the Father directly through the Son.

There's a story from the Civil War. A Union soldier had found out his father and his only brother had been killed in battle. He went to the White House to see President Lincoln, to ask to be released from military service so he could go home and help his mother with the family farm. But at the White House he was turned away. Mere privates don't get to have access to the Commander in Chief.

So the soldier sat down dejectedly on a nearby park bench. A little boy came up to him and asked why he looked unhappy. After hearing the story, the boy asked the soldier to come with him. And he took him to back of the White House, past the guards, through the back door, past the government officials, straight to the president's office. He didn't even knock. He simply opened the door and walked in.

President Lincoln looked up and asked, "What can I do for you Tad?" And Tad Lincoln replied "Daddy, this soldier needs to talk to you." And after the soldier made his case to the President, he got his discharge.

The Son has special access to the Father. And through the Son, we have access to the Father.

That's why we usually end our prayers with "In Jesus' name," or "Through Jesus Christ our Lord." This is not just poetic language. This is a basic statement that we come to the Father through Jesus. He is the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through him.

Thus Hebrews continues in v25a: "Consequently (Jesus) is able for all time to save those who approach God through him." Because Jesus is our unique and eternal high priest, he has the power to save all those who come to him in faith. This could be a whole sermon in itself.

While we don't like to admit it, our greatest human problem is separation from God and all that that entails. Without God there is no hope, there is no light, there is no life. Our lifespans are finite. Without God, all that we are will come to an end. And all that we build or do, no matter how long it might last, will eventually end. In other words, without God, anything we can possibly do is ultimately an exercise in futility.

And that even applies to the creation around us. The universe is finite. Eventually, entropy will win and the entire universe will crank down to destruction and death. Without God, everything in the universe is ultimately futile and meaningless.

But Jesus, through his death and resurrection bridges the gap between us and God. We are made citizens of God's eternal kingdom. And we are given a meaning and a purpose to life that transcends the finitude and the futility of creation. We can work for something that will always endure and be meaningful, God's kingdom. Jesus brings us into that kingdom through his sacrifice on the cross. "(He) is able for all time to save those who approach God through him."

And it's more than just a one time deal. Jesus continues to work on our behalf: 25b "Since (Jesus) always lives to make intercession for them." Do you know what that means? Jesus lives to make intercession, to pray for us. After his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension he could have kicked back. He could have relaxed. He could have hung out on the beach somewhere until the second coming. But that's not what he does. Instead, he is constantly praying for us to his Father. Can you grasp that? It feels wonderful to have my fellow Christians praying for me. Imagine how much more wonderful it is to have Jesus praying--praying for you, praying for all of us.

When you feel discouraged or alone, remember, Jesus is praying for you. He is praying that you may have the strength to walk the walk. Before his Father's throne, Jesus is praying for you.

The Good News of Hebrews is that we do have a perfect and wonderful High Priest. Jesus stands in his Father's presence. He has paid for your salvation by shedding his own blood. He didn't offer a goat in sacrifice. He sacrificed his own life. The only perfect high priest offered the only perfect sacrifice--himself.

And he continually offers prayer on your behalf that the good things that have begun in you may be strengthened, and that you will become more and more like him.

He loves you just as you are. But he doesn't want you to stay just as you are, because he loves you.

He wants you to be transformed, to live more and more into what really being human is all about, in other words, to be more and more like him.

Jesus knows firsthand what it is to be human. He knows the struggles we face. He knows our joys and our pains. He knows that life can be tough, that our circumstances can be tough. And so he prays for us.

He saved us in the past through his death. But not only that, he continues his saving work in the present through his prayer. And he will always be able to keep safe those who come to him in faith, because he is our unique and eternal high priest.

With a high priest like that, we don't need any other. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. May his holy name be praised.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

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