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September 14th: Hebrews 4:14—5:10 & John 12:23-33

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Christ's suitability as high priest. The hour come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Hebrews 4.14—5.10 Hebrews 4.14—5.10 It was appointed by Him who said to him, You are my Son, today I have begotten you. As He says also in another place, You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek. In the days of His flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His reverence.

Although He was a Son, He learned obedience through what He suffered. And being made perfect, He became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey Him, being designated by God a High Priest after the order of Melchizedek. Hebrews introduced the theme of Christ as the Great High Priest back at the end of chapter 2. Therefore He had to be made like His brothers in every respect, so that He might become a merciful and faithful High Priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.

For because He Himself has suffered when tempted, He is able to help those who are

being tempted. Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in the heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession, who was faithful to Him who appointed Him, just as Moses also was faithful in all God's house. Now after an exhortatory interlude, the author of Hebrews returns to the theme.

One of the things that he will be demonstrating is that Christ both enters fully into our weaknesses and can graciously act on behalf of us in His strength. Both dimensions of this will be very important to his argument. The final three verses of chapter 4 are the transition into the chapters that follow, concerning the priesthood of Christ.

Jesus, the Son of God has passed through the heavens and sat down at God's right hand. He has gone in advance of us as our Great High Priest, completing His sacrifice and entering into rest. However, despite His character as the Great Champion that goes before us, He has entered into the same struggle with temptation that we face.

The temptation here isn't so much with sin as such, as it is with the temptation to draw back from our calling, to fail to persevere through suffering to the end, the temptation of not firmly holding on to God's promise and entering into rest. Despite being tempted to divert from the pain of the cross, Jesus endured the pain and the shame and has entered into the glorious rest of God as the High Priest and the leader of His people. This is an assurance to us that we will enter too.

We must faithfully follow Jesus and look to Him. Through Him we also can draw near to God's very throne, which is a throne of grace for us, a place where we will find aid when we need it and from where we will discover the strength that we need to persevere and to receive the promise of rest that God holds out to us. There will be many times of need, times when we feel the weakness of our flesh, the empty seductions of Satan, the bitter assaults of others and the darkness of a veiled heavens.

Christ has been there before us. When we come to Him, we come to the One who has gone before us and blazed a trail for us. We come to the One who fully entered into our struggle, so that we might fully enter into His life.

His throne is the throne of grace, not the throne of one who is seeking to trip us up, but one who desires as our great High Priest to bring us to God. The opening verses of Hebrews 5 give a sort of job description of the High Priest. The author of Hebrews will seek to demonstrate that not only does Christ fulfil the requirements for High Priest, He fulfils the duty of a High Priest more perfectly than any other could.

The argument of verses 1-10 of Hebrews 5 takes a rough there and back again, or bookended character, what scholars can often call a chiasm. It begins with the function of the High Priest in verse 1, moves to the person of the High Priest in verses 2-3, proceeds to the appointment of the High Priest in verse 4. Then it moves back through these aspects of the High Priest, like drawing the boxes that a High Priest needs to tick,

before going back through the list, placing a big tick in every one of the boxes. However, while doing this, he shows that not only does Jesus clearly fulfil each of the criteria, He goes far, far beyond.

He begins with his appointment in verses 5-6, then moves to his person in verses 7-8, before concluding with Christ's fulfilment of the function of his High Priesthood in verses 9-10. The High Priest is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, offering both gifts and sacrifices for sins. They are representatives, acting on behalf of a people to whom they belong.

They are also mediators, acting on behalf of that people towards God, going between the people and God. However, while these official functions of the High Priest's role are important and primary to the definition of what he is about, his person matters too. The High Priest is not only a representative and a mediator, he is also a shepherd of the people.

He needs to pastor those under his oversight, exhorting and encouraging them in faithfulness. As a fallen human being, like those to whom he is ministering, the High Priest should be all too aware of the struggles those in his flock are experiencing. Consequently, he is gentle in dealing with the weak, the wayward and those lacking in wisdom.

However, given his own sinful nature, he must sacrifice both for his own sin and also for the sins of those to whom he is ministering. His greater suitability as a pastor comes at the expense of his capacity to act vicariously for them. He always has to deal with his own sins first.

The High Priest doesn't appoint himself, nor for that matter is he appointed directly by the people he is serving. He is a minister of God. Aaron, who was directly chosen by God, is a clear example of this.

Christ meets the criterion of divine appointment. To prove this, the author of Hebrews quotes Psalm 2 verse 7 and Psalm 110 verse 4. Like a number of the other ways that he uses the Old Testament scriptures, these might seem rather strained as proofs at first glance. However, this is almost certainly because he expects his hearers to be familiar enough with, and as imaginatively steeped in, the story of Christ and the scriptures to be able to join the dots.

We should be able to reconstruct the reasoning that led him to connect these things. The first quotation from Psalm 2 verse 7 speaks of the anointing of the Davidic Messiah as king. However, anyone familiar with the story of Christ should know that this verse corresponded with an event in Christ's life.

In Luke chapter 3 verses 21 to 23, the baptism of Christ is described. Now when all the

people were baptised, and when Jesus also had been baptised and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove, and a voice came from heaven, You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased. Jesus, when he began his ministry, was about thirty years of age.

Throughout Luke's gospel, the temple and priesthood are prominent. From the first announcement of the birth of John the Baptist, to Jesus' presentation in the temple, to the boy Jesus in the temple, through to the end of the book when they are continually in the temple praising God, priestly themes pervade the book. There is a need for the purification of the Lord's house and John the Baptist, the son of a priest, announces the coming one who will accomplish this.

In the Old Testament, entrance into priesthood involved the baptism, as we see in Exodus chapter 40. Levites, and we should probably assume priests also, began their ministry at the age of thirty. Christ's sonship had already been connected with his presence in the house of his father.

Beyond this, a number of scholars have noted the presence of several names in Luke's genealogy with suggestive associations with priesthood. Jesus will later implicitly appeal to John's baptism as the basis of the authority by which he cleansed the temple. John's baptism is framed then as a baptism into, and an anointment for, a sort of priesthood, a priesthood that perhaps might also remind us of the prophetic priesthood of Ezekiel, whose ministry also begins with an appointment in the thirtieth year by a river with opened heavens and a vision from God.

Ezekiel is also frequently called son of man. At the heart of Jesus' baptism, however, are the words of the Father, You are my beloved son. These are the words with which Jesus' public ministry begins, the words of the Father's approval, and as the early readers of scripture recognised, the words of his appointing to office.

The words allude back to the words of Psalm 2 verse 7. The author of Hebrews is not randomly reaching for a text here, but is alluding to the event of Christ's baptism, an event with a manifestly priestly character, as the fulfilment of the messianic appointments spoken of in Psalm 2. And the second text is similar. It comes in another psalm which is more famous for its first verse, the verse that is the Old Testament verse which is the most quoted in the New, Psalm 110 verse 1, which he himself had quoted in chapter 1 verse 13. The Lord says to my Lord, sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.

That verse connects not with the beginning of Christ's priestly ministry, but with the elevation of Christ into the heavenly temple in his ascension, having completed his once for all sacrifice. To the mind of the reader that is familiar with scripture and the story of Jesus, it should be clear that the author of Hebrews has selected two texts that between them sandwich the full reality of Christ's priestly ministry in divine statements of

appointment. Going back through his list, the next box that needs to be ticked is that of personhood.

Is Christ suitable, not just as one properly appointed, but also as an effective pastor of the flock, compassionate and gentle? We are to be left in no doubt. He has experienced the same struggles as we have. His anguish in wrestling with God in the tribulation of Gethsemane and on the cross at Calvary set the pattern for the tribulations that come upon his people.

What priest has experienced such extremes of suffering? What priest has such acquaintance with the depths of human anguish and struggle? Yet while the typical high priests were sinful in their flesh, and so their compassionate acquaintance with the struggles of their flocks came at the cost of effectiveness as vicarious servants on their behalf, Christ is faithful in his suffering. Christ is the Son himself, one with all of the prerogatives and authority that come with that. Yet he also enters fully into the reality of suffering, and is formed in his humanity by the full trials of suffering that we experience.

How much more effectively can he represent us, acquainted with the weakness and the struggle of faithfulness in the flesh, but uncompromised by sin, and enjoying all of the privileges of the Son, so that while acting with gentleness and compassion he can act with power on our behalf? The function of the high priest was to act on behalf of men in relation to God to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. They were limited in their performance of this function by their human sin and frailty. But Christ is the source of salvation.

His salvation is eternal, not something that requires the continual repetition of sacrifices. His priesthood is also unending, as he is a priest for ever according to the order of Melchizedek. Christ not only ticks the box of the high priestly function, the last box of the list, he completely eclipses anything that any other high priest could perform.

A question to consider. In relation to Christ's priesthood, this passage alludes to Christ's baptism, his sufferings in the garden and on the cross, and his ascent into heaven. Where else in Jesus' earthly ministry can we see him as the great high priest? Then a voice came from heaven.

The crowd that stood there and heard it said that it had thundered. Others said, an angel has spoken to him. Jesus answered, This voice has come for your sake, not mine.

Now is the judgment of this world. Now will the ruler of this world be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.

He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die. Throughout John's Gospel there is a repeated note of expectation, sometimes subtle and sometimes more pronounced. His hour had not yet come.

An hour is coming. His hour had not yet come. An hour is coming.

Now in chapter 12 we finally read, the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. What the awaited hour will involve is not always clear, especially as it can be accompanied both by a sense of foreboding or of expectancy, depending upon the context. Here it is described as the hour in which the Son of Man will be glorified.

John's uses of the title Son of Man are most commonly encountered in his Gospel in contexts where Jesus is lifting up, his glorification or his ascension are mentioned. Behind this we should probably hear the words of Daniel chapter 7 verses 13 to 14. I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven, there came one like a Son of Man, and he came to the ancient days, and was presented before him.

And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. The paradoxical truth is that the glorification that Jesus speaks of is clearly the crucifixion.

For John's Gospel the cross is the beginning of and the definitive moment of Christ's ascent into glory. It is the moment when the dethroning of the rebellious principalities and powers of this age will definitively occur. This statement of Christ is prompted by the arrival of Greek God-fearers who sought him out.

This is a sign that the truth of Christ is going out to the world. In Daniel the Son of Man is elevated over all of the beasts of the Gentile empires. The Greeks coming to hear Jesus is the first speck of the rain cloud on the horizon, the first indication of the fact that the Gentiles will come to Christ and the rallying sign of the cross.

Here we might also hear the words of Isaiah relating to the ministry of the servant in Isaiah 52 verses 13-15, words just before the famous Isaiah passage of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53. The crucifixion of Christ will appear like a complete and utter defeat. However it is essential for the victory and the glory.

It is like the seed that must metaphorically be buried and die in order to bear any fruit. The Apostle Paul employs a similar image in 1 Corinthians 15 where he says that the seed must be buried and die in order to bear any fruit. 1 Corinthians 15 verses 36-38 Jesus' own faithful suffering provides an example for all who would follow him, those who love their lives, who are so attached to the current conditions of their existence, their social status, their wealth, their health, their belonging, their friendships, their security and other such things, will end up forfeiting what they hold most dear.

It will be taken away from them. Moth and rust will corrupt and thieves will break in and steal. Only those who hate their lives in this world, by which Jesus means that they are prepared to abandon their commitment for preserving and advancing the current

conditions of their life for an end that exceeds this present world, will keep those lives for eternal life.

We must lay up treasures in heaven, deny ourselves and take up the cross to follow Christ. All of the tent pegs by which our temporary dwelling is driven down into the soil of this age must be uprooted. Ultimately this is all about following Jesus.

We must go where he goes. He laid down his life for us and we must faithfully do the same. Whilst speaking of the hour of his glorification with a sense of expectancy, Jesus is also troubled in himself.

He is understandably torn. Every part of his natural human instinct recoils from what the cross entails. The horror of bearing the burden of sin is also immense.

Yet this is precisely what he has come to do. To shrink back would be to deny the purpose of it all. He has not come to this hour to be delivered from it, but to pass through it.

And he prays here that its purpose would be fulfilled. God's glory would be realised through it. The statement here should make us think of Gethsemane.

We do not have the story of Gethsemane in John's Gospel, but here we have an anticipation of some of its themes. Others have also seen an allusion here to Psalm 42 verses 5-6, especially in the subtergent. The whole context of that psalm should make us think of Christ's sufferings.

And the prayer for the Father to glorify his name is a prayer for God to hasten his purpose in the cross. The voice from heaven is similar to that heard in the Transfiguration and the Baptism of Christ, neither of which are recorded in John's Gospel. However, the voice of the Father is The voice recorded here, like those voices, confirms Jesus' mission.

The voice, which is seemingly not understood by most present, as they had failed to understand most things in Jesus' ministry, is a divine testimony to the truth of Christ's mission. Perhaps the failure to perceive might be seen as having a willful element to it, with the explanations being attempts to explain away what they had heard, in a self-inflicted blindness. Satan is the great ruler of the sinful age, and Christ's death will be a decisive exorcism event of the greatest demon, the devil.

The devil wasn't just a sort of spiritual scavenger, like lesser demons. He was in the heavens themselves, with ruling authority. Christ's exorcism of Satan wasn't just the expulsion of Satan from some person into the wilderness, for instance, but the casting down of Satan from heaven.

We can see the fulfilment of this in Revelation 12, verses 1-10, which describes the

anguish of the birth pangs of the cross, followed by the joy of the new birth of the resurrection, followed by Christ's ascension to God's right hand. Now, war arose in heaven. Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon.

And the dragon and his angels fought back, but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world. He was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

And I heard a loud voice in heaven saying, Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come. For the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. While Satan will be cast down and cast out, Christ will be lifted up through the cross.

Through the cross his spirit will be given and will draw people from throughout the world to himself. Jesus plays with the double meaning of lifted up here, highlighting the ironic sense that it can have, the literal meaning of lifted up on the cross, and the metaphorical meaning of elevation to power. One sense of being lifted up having the most negative connotations, and the other sense of being lifted up having the most positive.

The literal meaning was the prediction of a specific manner of death by which he would die, but the metaphorical meaning describes what that would achieve. We might also recall here John chapter 3 verses 14 to 16. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life. Jesus is going to be lifted up like a banner to all of the peoples of the world, who when the great dragon is cast down from his power and authority in heaven and troubles the earth, would turn to him to find salvation. A question to consider.

In what ways might the other gospels also explore the idea of the cross as a sort of a glorification?