

Behind it all stands Jesus

5:1 For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. 2 He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness. 3 Because of this he is obligated to offer sacrifice for his own sins just as he does for those of the people. 4 And no one takes this honour for himself, but only when called by God, just as Aaron was.

5 So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him,

*“You are my Son,
today I have begotten you”;*

6 as he says also in another place,

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

7 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. 8 Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. 9 And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, 10 being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek. (Hebrews 5:1-10 ESV)

A dipping into the media's recent reporting on religion here is personal and idiosyncratic at best and not the basis for much more than broad brush stroke observation. Three quick ones:

Apparently there is a growing movement for people to be able to formally 'debaptise' – cancel their baptism – with a certificate to boot which reads in part and at the time of the news report had been downloaded over 60,000 times:

“I, [name], having been subjected to the rite of Christian baptism in infancy ... hereby publicly revoke any implications of that rite. I reject all its creeds and other such superstitions in particular the perfidious belief that any baby needs to be cleansed of original sin.” (BBC Atheists call for 'debaptism' 14/3/09)

The Archbishop of Canterbury spoke recently about free will and that in relation to climate change, God whose love is faithful will not give us a 'happy ending' if we stupidly wreck this planet. (BBC God will not give happy ending 26/3/09)

English author and playwright Hanif Kureishi CBE in an interview on religion when asked “What religious leader, if any, most inspires you?” replied, “Most religious leaders are ignorant fools. It's a shame so few of them are intelligent or even interesting. It makes you wonder why the dumbest people hang around religions. Gives the whole thing a bad name.” (BBC Interview 28/3/09)

I didn't search for these items per se – their links were just a curiosity and a click away. Religion is news in this country – as it is everywhere – and here it seems to me that religion is not central so much as fringe in the community and reported in ways that pit it against something. And I suppose that is to be expected if the religion has internal issues, appears hypocritical, or is not the cheer squad for the state. And so when people think about religion or church they can easily think of the general, organisational face of religion – the stereotype, the generic representation that is promoted in the media – and not consider the personal, the local, the church, or minister or member directly in front of them.

And I haven't even begun to talk about God yet – and he is further removed – an almost unknowable Being obscured by religion and institutions. I'm not overly fussed about that because it seems to me that the media's knowledge and promotion of Allah, the Buddha, Brahman, and other gods is similarly limited. They are hidden behind the texts and organisations.

Now I don't expect the media to present Jesus – that's my job and not because I'm a pastor – but because I'm a follower. All followers have this opportunity when talking about where they're going, telling people whom they follow and even introducing Jesus. Again there is nothing new in this – it's been happening since Jesus appeared after his death – not as an apparition, not as an angel, not as a half man half god – but as the Son of God who knows what it is like to live our lives precisely because he also was one of us. Welcome to the New Testament book we called the Letter to the Hebrews. Written probably in the 60s prior to the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, this letter seeks to introduce Jesus to people as the Son of God (and not an angel) and describes him and what he has done for us by using the term 'high priest' or 'great high priest'.

Our 2nd reading picks up part of the writer's presentation of Jesus as high priest and we hear two key things. A high priest offered sacrifices for the sins of the people – including his own – most particularly on the Day of Atonement – and consequently he is able to sympathise with sinners, understand and be gentle towards the sinner while not condoning sin. High priests do not self select – that's the way of cults – but rather the high priest is called and prepared by God for his tasks. This is pretty straight forward stuff to Jewish folk of the first century.

Then the writer to the Hebrews simply describes Jesus in similar terms – something he will return to again and again in the letter – and points out that Jesus was called by God at his baptism and declared to be God's Son. Jesus is not a cult leader. Like a high priest, he offers sacrifices and gifts and here the writer juxtaposes the animal or grain offerings on the altar with Jesus' own offerings of prayers, supplications, loud cries and tears to God – and we can easily go first to the Garden of Gethsemane and then stay with Jesus from then on. Jesus' learning of obedience doesn't imply that he was disobedient but rather that he felt in his flesh what obedience to God is about. And his completion of his rescue for us – his sacrifice of himself – was total, 100%, and thus perfect and so he becomes the source of salvation, life, forgiveness, blessing – in ways never possible with animal sacrifices. Of course this is mysterious – the entire Old Testament sacrificial system conflated into one body – a human one at that – but this priest is also mysterious – after the order of Melchizedek – that enigmatic character who appears in the pages of Genesis – this king of righteousness who blesses Abraham and receives offerings from him – and then disappears back into the pages.

To the readers back then Jesus has become quite personalised. People knew about sacrifices and high priests and Jesus becomes both. As high priest he still is one of us – human who truly understands our human lot, our joys, our achievements, our struggles, our failures and shames. Just prior to our text the writer to the Hebrews says: ¹⁴ *Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.* ¹⁵ *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.* ¹⁶ *Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.* (Hebrews 4:14-16 ESV)

I meet people who don't want much to do with God and I have to admit wondering whether they've actually met Jesus. It's hard work with the barriers up to say much about God or Jesus but if there's any message that the writer to the Hebrews would want us to find is the words that would help people hear that God is not remote, far away, and unable to understand what we're going through. In Jesus he is very close to us. He can be trusted. He is faithful and is dependable.

We learn that truth and we also learn obedience to him as our relationship lengthens because knowledge of Jesus is not of itself faith or trust in Jesus. And again many people fear this reality: 'You trust Jesus? You follow him? That sounds cultish to me – handing over too much control of your life.' And again we have an opportunity to share that Christianity is not just a mind game, a cerebral exercise but a physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual relationship that involves us completely. After all, that is what Jesus gave up for us – himself, his body, everything about him – and he will not let us down. These words are not magic bullets – say them once and you can notch another conversion on your bible – but they are words of life for the Gospel – and especially the stories we hear in Lent – tells us what Jesus did for us. And crosses will always generate a response.