

SERMON, 17 OCTOBER 2021 – HEBREWS 5.1-10, MARK 10.35-45



Melchizedek in the tiles of Christ Church, Belper

“You are a priest for ever, according to the order of Melchizedek” – one of my favourite biblical passages. If we go right back almost to the start of our bible, back to Genesis chapter 14, Abram (later to be known as Abraham) was travelling. He was met by Melchizedek, described as the King of Salem and priest of the Most High, and Melchizedek offers him refreshment of bread and wine. That is the only mention of him, just that fleeting incident – but by early Christian history, just a few decades after Jesus’ death and resurrection, Melchizedek is seen as a forerunner, an example, of the priestly ministry of Jesus. The offering of bread and wine, the offering of himself.

In Jesus we have that Melchizedek example, we have the example of the High Priests of Judaism – the writer to the Hebrews wants his readers to deepen their understanding of Jesus by looking to the example of a High Priest. The priest is the one who stands between humanity and God – and Christ is that one.



Go to Hampton Court palace, and in Henry VIII’s great hall, there is a tapestry depicting this scene. Reminding the King of his descendants, of the way his Majesty, his Royalty, has deep, deep roots – how he is God’s anointed, just like back in the beginning of time. Go to the building that was Lincoln Theological College and I believe, if you can talk your way past the security firm that now manage a very exclusive block of flats, you can still get into the Chapel and see

Melchizedek in the stained glass windows – there to inspire generations of students that we are to be “priests for ever, according to the order of Melchizedek”. I really must have a trip to Lincoln and see if I can get in and get some photos.



Moses and Aaron in the church of St Oswald, Oswestry

The writer to the Hebrews also gives the example of Aaron – Moses brother, worth re-reading the beginning of Exodus to remind us of the story. Moses grew up in Pharaoh’s court, Aaron didn’t – but when God calls Moses, Moses says he’s not a good speaker, so God sends Aaron to work with him. He’s there starting the first of the plagues. Once out in the Wilderness, Aaron develops a role as a priest. When Moses goes to Mount Sinai, receiving the Law from God, Aaron is with the people. As religion developed, it was Aaron and his sons, his clan, his tribe, who become the priestly clan. Like Moses, Aaron did not enter the Promised Land, but his descendants were the ones who served God, and served his people. The important point that the writer to the Hebrews makes, is that priesthood is given by God – you don’t grab it for yourself.



Christ in Majesty in Inverness Cathedral

This line continues. Jesus is the greatest gift of God, he is the complete, the final sacrifice. He deals gently with the ignorant and wayward – but while a human priest is a sinner, just like any other human, Jesus is without sin. He does not

glorify himself, he glorifies God – he offers up prayers, supplications, and has made our salvation possible, because of his death on the cross.



Deerhurst, Gloucestershire goes back to Baldwin in 1059

Melchizedek is not central, Aaron is not central, no priest should ever be central – because Christ is central. The list by the door of “Incumbents of this Parish” is a salutary reminder to me that I am in a line, many priests before me, and (I hope and pray) many more to come after me. And while I hope that in 50 years’ time someone in this village will look at the lists and think “I remember him coming into school”, for most I will simply be a name on a list. After all, we remember Walter Evans who built this church, but do we remember the bloke who did the work? And there’s generations of Vicar’s wives saying to me “we did most of the work, and we don’t even end up on a list”!!

And, of course, that is how it needs to be, how it should be. Any Vicar with a huge personality, or who is in post for several decades, makes life very difficult for their successor. And in this changing world and changing church, the days of one Vicar one church have gone, I suspect one Vicar two churches won’t last much longer, there will have to be a lot more working in teams, and all of us are going to have to step up and do more, to share the load of ministry far better than we do. That is not particularly a criticism of you for not doing enough, it is just as much (if not more) a criticism of me for not being good at encouraging and enthusing and working together and building teams and getting people involved. I’ve done my best over the last year to provide worship material when churches have been shut, I’ve done my best to work with you to get churches reopen, I’ve done my best to keep in touch with people, to keep church alive – but the number of people committed to being part of the regular, on-going, life of these churches has declined by at least a quarter, if not a third. We’re not the

only ones – stunning worship in the Cathedral on Thursday evening, beautiful Choral Evensong, the sort people say is one of the treasures of English culture, but Cathedral numbers have seen decline as well (on Sundays and during the week). I have no doubt that for all of us the future is going to see difficult decisions having to be made about money and finance and ministry – and our role in Society – and it may well be that the church in 20 years' time looks very different to the church as it does now. I suspect the power dynamics, how important we think we are in Society and to each other, is going to change drastically – and that may be no bad thing.



In Mark's gospel, James and John the sons of Zebedee, know what they want from Jesus – they want power, to sit on either side of Christ when he comes in glory. In other gospels it is their mother who asks Jesus for this privilege for her son – mother or boys, we can understand why they wanted it. Most of us have ambition, most of us want power, authority – go to any meeting of clergy and watch the power-play (and it is just the same in a school staff room, and I suspect in places where you work or worked).

No, says Jesus, that is not my way – that is not the way I want for my followers. I do not want great ones, rulers, tyrants – I want my followers to be servants, slaves. That's hard – I can cope with the idea of serving most of the time (I get a bit fed up with it on occasions, usually when I'm tired, or when the people I serve are being particularly obtuse), but most of the time I'm OK. Being a slave is not an image I want – and none of us would. We balance it with the knowledge that we are in a positive relationship with Jesus, that – while he is my Lord and my Saviour – he is also my friend, and I will walk with my friend.

Can you drink the cup that I will drink, be baptised with my baptism? I'm sure those coming for baptism this afternoon don't really understand what that means – but actually, do I? If I thought that baptism was going to lead to pain, suffering, even death – would I bother with it? A reminder that, for some Christians in the 21st century, that is the reality of life.



And closer to home, so much hatred and violence. David Amess, a man of the people – but it doesn't take much for someone to take a dislike to you, to hate you, to want to kill you – in this case to succeed. Who knows why? Political debate, justifiable criticism, anger at government policy – how easy it slips across into hatred and violence. He was a man of faith, so all I can do is believe that he will rest in peace and rise in glory, all I can do is hope and pray that that faith somehow brings strength and peace to his family, all you can do is weep with them. Can we also weep with the leadership and congregation of Belfairs Methodist Church – can you imagine trying to worship there this morning? May God give them the strength and consolation that they need.

Christians know the price that Christ paid, and seek to follow him. It isn't easy, it's not supposed to be easy – but we do it in God's strength.

This morning's post-communion prayer

God our Father,
 whose Son, the light unfailing,
 has come from heaven to deliver the world from the darkness of ignorance:
 let these holy mysteries open the eyes of our understanding
 that we may know the way of life,
 and walk in it without stumbling;
 through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Well, there's a lot of stumbling, and some of us struggle with the walking. But we journey together, in the way of life. Amen.