

29th Sunday, Ordinary Time

October 21, 2018

Today's readings come together to form a beautiful picture. In the first reading from Isaiah (53:10-11) we hear of the Suffering Servant who came to justify many. Psalm 33 speaks of God's mercy and love. Jesus came to be that love incarnate and to fulfill that mercy. The second reading from Hebrews tells of the mercy that is delivered by the high priest. The Gospel passage is a foretaste of the mercy in Christ's sacrifice, who "came not to be served but to serve."

Taking an in-depth look at the second reading, a couple of questions come to mind. Who is this high priest? For that matter, what is a high priest?

First, I want to address the second question, "What is a high priest?" High priests came on the scene during the Egyptian Bondage, when God chose the tribe of Levi to serve him. The office of high priest normally passed from father to son, through a familial connection. He could trace his lineage to Aaron, Moses' older brother, the first high priest. He had to be a man without physical defects and holy at all times. Jewish law describes in detail the ceremony of consecration before he could assume the office. His duties included sacrifices to be made on behalf of the people. He alone was allowed to go behind the veil into the Holy of Holies once a year to make atonement for his sins and the sins of the people with the blood of the sacrifice.

This brings us to the first question, "Who is this high priest?" Jesus is the eternal high priest "after the order of Melchizedek." Jesus is the perfect and complete fulfillment of the priesthood because, not only is He the high priest but He is the sacrifice offered by the high priest.

In verse 14, we see three facts. One, Jesus is alive. This is the basis for His eternal priesthood. Two, He left heaven and returned to be with God in heaven. As we have discussed, only the high priest could enter behind the veil into the presence of God. As the eternal high priest, Jesus has passed through the veil of death and sits at the right hand of God. Finally, He is the Son of God. This gives his sacrifice infinite worth. Our debt has been paid. We must hold fast to our confession that Jesus is our high priest, interceding with the Father on our behalf.

Verse 15 continues: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but one who has singularly been tested in every way, yet without sin." The Gospels of Matthew and Luke tell us of Jesus' temptation by Satan in the wilderness. C. S. Lewis is quoted as saying, "Christ, because he was the only man who never yielded to temptation, is also the only man who knows to the full what temptation means." How easy it is to give in to temptation. Jesus knows and understands the temptations we face. He alone fought these battles and defeated them at every turn.

Finally, is any person in this room more powerful than a locomotive; can anyone leap tall buildings with a single bound; is any of you faster than a speeding bullet? No, I thought not. We all need help. It is because we have an eternal high priest seated at the right hand of the Father, whose sacrifice is taken into the presence of God, and is sympathetic to the trials we face, we know that we can "draw near" to the throne of God through our living high priest, the Son of God, who now sits in the Holy of Holies to intercede for us.