

Year B, Proper 25

October 28, 2018

✠ In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. AMEN

501 years ago, this Wednesday, Martin Luther famously, or infamously, nailed his statement of protest against Roman Catholic abuses to the door of All Saints' Church in Wittenberg, Germany. For our brothers and sisters in the Lutheran and Presbyterian and other Reformed churches, this event on this date in 1517 marks the birth of the great Reformation on the European continent.

Martin Luther protested, in part, the corruption of the Roman Catholic priesthood, and his protest instilled a distrust in the priesthood that continues, for our Reformed brothers and sisters, to this day. So, on this Reformation Sunday, it is ironic that our reading from Hebrews talks about temple priests and priestly work, even naming Jesus, our Lord and Savior, as a different type of priest – a high-priest, declared by God to be a priest forever.

Hebrews is an unusual sort of scripture; one which I don't think we really appreciate enough. Go home and read it. The author of Hebrews, who is unknown by the way, is writing to an audience which is also not known to us, in a form that is up for debate... so the book is an enigma. Some scholars believe Hebrews to be a sermon, others believe it is a letter. Whatever its original form, Hebrews seems to be an argument persuading Jewish converts to Christianity that Jesus is the divinely appointed Great High Priest who saves us from our sins.

We're somewhat comfortable with that "*Jesus as high-priest*" kind of language – our Prayer Book has that language in a few places, most conspicuously in the conclusion of Eucharistic Prayer C, which we don't say all that often here, where we ask that God will "Accept

[our] prayers and praises ... through Jesus Christ our great High Priest...”.¹ But, for a first *century* Jew that language would be foreign. Jesus was not of the correct lineage to be a priest – priests all descended from the tribe of Levi. Jesus wasn’t taught the role of priest as one who performed blood sacrifices in the temple to atone for one’s sins. Jesus was a simple carpenter...and an itinerate preacher, apparently one of many itinerate preachers in that day. How can a lowly carpenter fill the same role as the High priest in the temple? He can’t be a priest...let alone the High Priest.

The author of Hebrews makes the case that priests are...well...human beings. Human beings with all the foibles and gaffs and mistakes and ugliness and biases and prejudices... all the weaknesses... that make us human. But it was the role of the temple priest...a mere fallible mortal... to be present and ready to offer sacrifices not only for their own sins, but for the sins of all the people of Israel. The author of Hebrews makes the case that Jesus, who offered up *himself* as a sacrifice for our sins, was also a man, but a man *without sin* – holy, blameless, undefiled, and exalted above the heavens – making him a far superior, a far more perfect priest than any one on earth.

Mere humans serving as temple priests were required to offer a sin sacrifice of animals day after day, week after week, year after year – literally a constant cycle of slaughter to be assured of God’s grace and forgiveness. But not so with Jesus. Jesus, the perfect man, the one without sin, the incorruptible, eternal high-priest, offers one sacrifice only. Jesus sacrifices himself, once on the cross, to obtain forgiveness for every sin that ever was, ever is and ever will be committed. And it is in sacrificing himself that Jesus makes *us*, sinful lot that we are,

¹ Book of Common Prayer, page 372

acceptable in God's eyes, and – listen to this – there is nothing we can do, nothing we can ever do, that takes away that sacrifice... for Jesus is the same yesterday and today and forever.²

The author of Hebrews doesn't leave everything on Jesus, though. We have work to do. He closes his sermon (or his letter) in Chapter 13 with the command that we, you and I, followers of Christ, are to always show hospitality to strangers and to remember those who are in prison. We are to be honorable, free from the love of money and content with what we have. And, perhaps most importantly in this time where civil discourse has broken down, and where a difference of opinion is perceived to be an insult, our unknown author reminds us that, as Christians we are to never “neglect to do good, and to share what we have for,” writes the author, “such sacrifices are pleasing to God.”³

If you take away nothing else this morning I hope you take away this: Jesus was more than just a humble man... more than just a gifted teacher and preacher... more than just a worker of miraculous healings who once walked this earth. Jesus, the human face of our loving God, is very much alive today and is ever present in our midst. He is our strength in weakness and temptation, our strong rock in tragedy and grief. He is our tower of strength when we suffer. He is our hope when we have no hope. Jesus, our Great High Priest, is the promise of life everlasting.

AMEN

Ad maiorem Dei gloriam

² Hebrews 13:8

³ Hebrews 13:2, 3, 5, 16.