

## JESUS IS OUR GREAT HIGH PRIEST

Sermon for Ash Wednesday, 2018

Hebrews 1:1-3

Grace and peace to you all from our risen Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

The text for our sermon tonight is Hebrews 1:1-3: **<sup>1</sup> God has long ago spoken at many times and in many ways to our fathers by the prophets, <sup>2</sup> but He has in these last days spoken to us by His Son. He has made Him the Heir of all things, and through Him He has also made the universe. <sup>3</sup> The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being. He maintains all things by His powerful Word. After He had made purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

The writer of Hebrews makes it clear when he writes, "*We have a great High Priest,*" (4:14). This is a great truth, and this truth will serve us as the focus for our midweek Lenten services this year. As we study texts from the book of Hebrews, God-willing, this will lead us to a deeper appreciation for the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ as we follow Him through His great passion. Tonight, we will see that Jesus truly is our great High Priest who is qualified, by Whom we're purified, and with Whom we will be glorified.

Hebrews begins abruptly. In all the New Testament, no epistle comes more quickly to the point. Without introduction or greeting, the author launches into his subject. While there is much we don't know about the

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first readers of Hebrews, from the author's encouragement, we can determine that they were Christians of Jewish background who were suffering for their faith. These Jewish believers were sorely tempted by persecution to turn back to the old ways of Judaism that they had left behind when the Holy Spirit called them to faith in Christ. No doubt, in their troubles they became nostalgic for the familiar old forms of Judaism that they knew so well from growing up with the religious rituals of the temple in Jerusalem, and so were now looking back to what they had left behind to follow Jesus. The message of the inspired author of Hebrews to these wavering believers was simply this: *You have something better in Jesus* - He is better than everything the people of Israel had in the past, as glorious as it all was.

With the first two verses of his word of encouragement, the author begins to carry out his theme that Jesus is better - beginning with the Old Testament prophets. He says, “<sup>1</sup> **God has long ago spoken at many times and in many ways to our fathers by the prophets,** <sup>2</sup> **but He has in these last days spoken to us by His Son.**” The writer directs his readers back to the Old Testament, to their Jewish ancestors in Israel, and reminds them that God spoke to “[their] **fathers by the prophets** - from Moses down to Malachi. Great men to be sure, but mere men used by God to deliver the promises of a great Saviour from sin to come. These men delivered the Gospel message over many years in many ways - Old Testament prophecy was like a puzzle to which each of the prophets contributed a piece or two. As you put the pieces of the prophetic puzzle together, the picture produced is Jesus of Nazareth - His birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection.

So the author of Hebrews urges his readers: Consider what you have in Christ. Your fathers believed the prophets - they were men of God. How much more should we stand firm in our faith because “**He has in these last days spoken to us by His Son**”? Jesus is the true and eternal Son

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of God. Listen as the writer of Hebrews presents Christ's credentials, His qualifications: **"He has made Him the Heir of all things, and through Him He has also made the universe."** <sup>3</sup> **The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being. He maintains all things by His powerful Word."** Notice that the author heaps up expressions to magnify the greatness of Christ in language that has been adopted by our Christian creeds, especially the Nicene Creed: *"God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God... by whom all things were made"* and the Athanasian Creed: *"What the Father is, so is the Son."* The writer's point is clear to his wavering readers: ***Do not turn a deaf ear to God as He speaks to you through His own Son. Christ is fully qualified to speak to you of heavenly things - listen to Him!***

But the writer of Hebrews does not present Christ's impressive credentials only to demonstrate that Christ is a prophet and teacher who deserves our attention. No, above all, it is to show that Christ truly is the great High Priest. The author speaks of Christ's high priestly work when he adds to the list of Christ's credentials these words: **"After He had made purification for sins."** The first readers of Hebrews, raised during the time of the Old Testament Scriptures, knew that it was the work of the high priest to provide purification for sins. When the Lord gave instructions for the great Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16, He explained the result of the elaborate rituals the high priest performed that day: *"On this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the LORD, you will be clean from all your sins,"* (16:30). It is this work of Jesus as High Priest that is the special focus of Hebrews (chapters 4-10).

The high priest was an important person; you could tell that just by looking at the way he dressed. An entire chapter of the Bible (Exodus 28) is devoted to describing what the high priest was to wear as he

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performed his duties and how those garments were to be made. But not just anybody could wear that outfit. A man had to be qualified to serve as high priest. Leviticus 21 lists those qualifications. He had to, for example, be of the tribe of Levi and the family of Aaron and had to be without physical deformity or defect. He had to be careful to marry the right kind of woman. We are accustomed to clergy being very much involved with funerals, but such was not the case in Israel. Contact with dead bodies, except those of close relatives, was completely forbidden to the priests. Tough qualifications to be sure - but consider Christ! Jesus is God's Son, the heir to and the Creator and preserver of all things, **the radiance of God's glory** and the **exact representation of His being**. As the author of Hebrews presents the facts about who Jesus is, he is explaining what qualifies Christ to be called the Great High Priest - He is the Son of God! However, Jesus is our Great High Priest not only because He is well-qualified for the title, but because we're purified by Him.

As you observe Jesus celebrating the Last Supper with His disciples, you might wonder whether He actually qualifies for the title great High Priest. After all, you see the One described in such glowing terms by the writer of Hebrews on His hands and knees washing the feet of His disciples, purifying them from the day's accumulated dust and dirt. But before you dismiss the One with the basin and towel as unworthy of being called the great High Priest, recall the great Day of Atonement. As the high priest in Israel prepared to perform the rituals by which cleansing would be made for Israel's sin, he removed the splendid garments he usually wore and put on simple linen garments.<sup>1</sup> Ordinarily, the high priest wore fancy garments that made him look like a king, but

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<sup>1</sup> Leviticus 16

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on the day he made purification for sin, the high priest looked more like a slave than a king.

In the same way, as our Lord Jesus the great High Priest prepared to provide His one great purification for sin, He laid aside the garments of His glory. We hear in the reading of the Passion History that Jesus, as He gathered with His disciples in the upper room to celebrate the Passover, “*rose from the meal, laid aside His outer garments, took a towel, and tied it around His waist,*” (John 13:4). Now, it is true that Jesus did not walk about during His earthly ministry dressed in fine, expensive clothing. It was not fine clothing that our Lord laid aside as He poured water in a basin and began to wash the feet of His disciples. No, He laid aside much more. St. Paul describes Christ Jesus as “*being in the form of God,*” worthy of appearing and behaving like the One He truly was - God Himself in our human flesh. Yet, Paul continues, “*He did not consider His equality with God as a prize to exploit.* <sup>7</sup> *Instead, He emptied Himself, [and] took on the form of a slave,*” (Phil. 2:6-7). Jesus laid aside the full and constant use of His divine power and glory to serve us.

So we see the Son of God down on the floor washing the feet of His disciples, but there is more here than meets the eye. In the act of washing His disciples’ feet, we have a foreshadowing of another purification that Jesus would provide in just a few hours by His death on the cross. We see that in Jesus’ words to Simon Peter, who objected when the Lord wanted to wash his feet. “*If I do not wash you,*” Jesus said, “*you have no part with Me,*” (John 13:8). Clearly Jesus wasn’t talking only about washing feet; He was talking about needing to be washed clean of sin. To provide that purification, Jesus would stoop far lower than to the floor to wash feet with water and dry them with a towel. To provide purification from sin, Jesus would stoop to dying in

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shame on Calvary's cross, and by His death there, He would provide purification for the sins of the world - yours and mine.

We need to be purified from our sins. The only one qualified to purify us from our sins is Jesus Christ our great High Priest. He is the One who not only bowed down to wash the feet of His disciples in the upper room, but He stooped to carry a cross and to be pierced on it for our transgressions and crushed under it for our iniquities. By the blood that flowed there, by the blood of God's one and only Son - **the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being**, the One who has **also made the universe** and who **maintains all things by His powerful Word** - by the blood of Jesus applied to our hearts and mouths and hands and feet by faith, we are cleansed from every sin. Instead of objecting to His purifying work as Simon Peter did, let us plead as King David did for God - for Jesus' sake - to "*wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and declare me clean from my sin!*" (Psalm 51:2). "*Wash me,*" we say with King David, "*and I shall be whiter than snow!*" (Ps 51:7). Yes, Jesus is our Great High Priest; He is qualified to be our High Priest; He has purified us as our High Priest; and He is a great High Priest with whom we will be glorified.

The hymn of praise to Christ with which Hebrews begins, closes with the author mentioning Christ's glorification. He says that after the Son had provided purification for sins, "**He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.**" We know the significance of the exaltation and glorification of Christ. It assures us that His work of providing purification for sins was completed successfully. On the day of Pentecost, St. Peter spoke of the risen and exalted Saviour and said, "*Therefore all the people of Israel should know for certain that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, Lord, and Christ!*" (Acts 2:36). He meant that by exalting Christ, God confirmed Him to truly be the great High Priest who completed the work of purifying every sinner

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from every sin. It was this coming glory that inspired the Saviour as He suffered to purify us from sin. Later in Hebrews, we read that it was “*for the joy set before Him*” that Jesus “*endured the cross, despising its shame,*” (12:2).

But here is the wonder of our Lord’s exaltation - it was not for Him alone. Jesus made it clear that the glory that awaited Him beyond the cross and grave was not for Him alone when He prayed in his High Priestly Prayer in John 17: “*Father, I desire that those also whom You have given to Me may be with Me where I am, so that they may see My glory, which You have given to Me, because You have loved Me before the foundation of the world,*” (vs. 24). Jesus said He wanted all believers to share that glory.

We have been purified from our sins by the blood of Jesus, therefore, we can be assured that we will be glorified with Him in due time. In the meantime, let us continue to serve our Saviour by remembering His sacrifice and His promise made to us. Rejoice in Jesus Christ, our great High Priest. He is qualified to be our great High Priest; He has purified us as our great High Priest, and we will be glorified with our great High Priest. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.