
JESUS IS OUR COMPASSIONATE HIGH PRIEST**Sermon for the third mid-week Lenten Service, 2018****Hebrews 4:14-16**

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

The text for our sermon tonight is Hebrews 4:14-16: ¹⁴ **Therefore, since we have a great High Priest, who has gone through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us cling to what we confess!** ¹⁵ **For we do not have a High Priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses. However, we have One who has been tempted in every way like us. Yet He was without sin.** ¹⁶ **Therefore let us come boldly to the throne of grace to receive mercy and find grace to help us when we need it!**

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

Dear friends in Christ,

In tonight's reading of the Passion History we heard that Jesus was taken to the courtroom of Israel's high priest. As we look at the sham trials conducted by Annas and Caiaphas, we might get a wrong impression of the high priests of Israel. Pride, hypocrisy, disregard for the law, and abusive treatment of others - those are the characteristics displayed by the high priests in our reading, and judging from them alone, we might get the idea that all priests were like them and that the office of the high priest was one that was always occupied by evil men, and yet, that would be an unfair assessment of that high office. The office of the high priest was established by God and was held by men like Aaron and his son Eleazar and his grandson Phinehas. There were men like Zadok, who served faithfully during the reign of King David, and Jehoiada, who rescued young King Joash from being murdered by his wicked grandmother, Athaliah. But like so many other features of

life in Old Testament Israel, even these good and decent high priests pointed to someone greater than themselves. They were only shadows and pictures that served to point the people ahead to the true High Priest who would come into the world to offer the one perfect sacrifice that would atone for all sins of all time. Tonight, we see that great High Priest - the writer refers to Him as **Jesus, the Son of God**, and he tells us that Jesus is great because He is our compassionate High Priest, and as the God-man, He is able first to sympathise with us in our weakness and he is able to energise us with His power.

Hebrews was written by an unknown writer to Christians who were being persecuted for their faith. These Christians were Jewish by birth and had been raised in Judaism, with its temple rituals, sacrifices, and splendour. Called to faith in Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit through the Gospel, these believers openly professed their faith in Christ. Hemmed in by pagan Romans who honoured Roman emperors with the title “lord and god,” and fellow Jews who denounced Jesus as a blasphemer and a fraud, these Christians simply confessed, “Jesus is Lord.” Now, however, they were being tempted to give up that confession, deny that faith, renounce Jesus as Lord, and return to Judaism. So, in chapter 10 of Hebrews, the unknown writer urged his readers to “...*cling to the confession of our hope without wavering!*” (10:23).

They were being tempted just as we heard how Simon Peter was tempted in the courtyard of the high priest. We heard how in the face of questioning by servants of the high priest Caiaphas, Simon Peter denied his Saviour - he did not hold fast to his profession, but with oaths and curses he denied that he was a follower of Christ. As we heard, Simon denied that he even knew Jesus, shamefully referring to the Saviour only as “*the Man*,” (Matt. 26:72).

The Hebrew Christians in Rome and Simon Peter in the courtyard of

the high priest weren't the last followers of Christ to be sorely tempted to quit confessing their faith in Christ. We still face that same temptation, if not with an outright spoken denial, then with a lifestyle and behaviour that denies the very Saviour we confess, and what our writer wants us to know is that in Christ, we have a High Priest who's able **to sympathise with our weaknesses**.

In the verses following our reading, the writer talks about how the high priest in Israel was chosen from among his brothers. God chose human beings for that high office. God could have chosen an angel to carry out that important task of making atonement for the sins of the people, but He chose a human being, and there was good reason for this. Hebrews 5:1-2 states, ¹ *Every high priest is selected from human beings and is appointed to represent human beings in matters that are related to God, that he may offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.* ² *He is able to be gentle with ignorant and erring people, because he himself is subject to weakness.* God chose a human being to be high priest so that the high priest could understand people's weaknesses and not lose his temper and become easily provoked at the sins he saw in others. Our text for tonight says of Jesus, the Son of God, that **“we do not have a High Priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses. However, we have One who has been tempted in every way like us. Yet He was without sin.”**

When temptation comes alluring, just think:

Are you *tempted to turn away* from the calling God has given you in life, whether it's your calling to follow Jesus or to be a faithful spouse, parent, or child? Jesus knows how such temptations feel. Satan emptied his entire arsenal of temptations on Jesus in the wilderness, seeking to get Him to be unfaithful to His calling.

Is it when *suffering comes into your life* that you are most tempted to turn away from Jesus? Your great High Priest knows what it's like.

Satan came to Jesus and tempted Him when He was suffering weakness after fasting 40 days in the wilderness.

Does temptation to turn away from Jesus and take what seems to be the easy way *come to you from friends* who seem to have your best interests at heart? Jesus knows how it feels. Matthew, in the 16th chapter of his gospel, tells how Jesus' own disciple and friend Simon Peter was the one who tried to get Him to turn away from the cross and take the easier way.

Does God's will for your life as a husband or wife, a parent or worker ever *seem like too heavy a burden to carry*? Do the obstacles ever seem too big, the cost too high, and the way just too rough? Jesus knows how it feels. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus pleaded with His Father until His sweat fell to the ground like great drops of blood to let the cup of punishment pass from Him.

Is it all the *stuff that looks so good* that the world will offer you if you only walk away from Jesus, that tests your resolve as a Christian? Then Jesus understands. He's been there. Satan offered Him all the riches of the world if Jesus would only turn His back on His heavenly Father and fall down at Satan's feet.

Is it the *contempt and scorn that the world heaps* on everything that you believe and hold sacred as a Christian that tempts you to turn away from Jesus? Then Jesus knows how it feels. They mocked His claim to be the Christ. They mocked His claim to be God's Son. They laughed at Him and spit on Him. He knows what it's like. He's been there for you.

Because Jesus is a human being - *a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering*, as Isaiah says¹ - so too, He is able to be gentle with ignorant and erring people, because He Himself is subject to weakness. Yet it is also true that our great High Priest is different from the high priests of

¹ Isaiah 53:3

Israel in that though He was tempted, He never sinned. Yet having faced those temptations and having learned obedience, He is able to deal gently with those who go astray.

Notice how gently the Saviour dealt with Simon Peter. He looked at him. He did not give him the cold shoulder and refuse to make eye contact. Jesus did not look away and hide His face from him. He didn't turn on His heel and walk away. Jesus didn't wash His hands of His cowardly friend. He looked at him. The look was a silent sermon in which the Saviour said to Simon, "*I know, I saw, I heard.*" Jesus doesn't ignore sin or act like it doesn't matter. Jesus let Peter know that as the all-knowing Son of God He knew His disciple's sin, but that look was a look of love as well. The Saviour who had said, "*Come to Me, all you who are working hard and carrying a heavy burden,*" (Matt. 11:28), was inviting His disciple to believe that this sin of denial, as horrible as it was, had been added to the burden Jesus was carrying to the cross and would be paid for there in full. And so it is when you are ignorant and go astray, when you refuse to acknowledge your Lord with your lips, or when by your lives you deny what your lips confess: your Saviour looks at you through His Law and shows you your sins. Jesus doesn't ignore a single sin or act as though sins don't matter - He knows they do, so He calls you to repentance. He tells you that He heard and knows - as Moses said in Psalm 90:8: "*You have set our iniquities before You, our secret sins in the light of Your presence.*" He does that not to rub your noses in your failures, but to show you your sins to make you long for His compassion and forgiveness, and He never drives away those who come to Him. He shows you your sin so that you will join King David in saying, "*I shall confess my rebellious acts to the LORD,*" (Psalm 32:5), and so that you share the joy King David experienced as he then wrote, "*and You forgave the iniquity of my sin.*"

Yes, the temptations to turn away from Jesus come from every direction in our day. But remember: We have a great High Priest, who,

having lived among us and faced our temptations, can **sympathise with our weaknesses**. But He's also a great High Priest who is able to strengthen us in our weakness.

In the first chapter of this letter, the writer says that *after Jesus had made purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high*, (1:3b). Now the writer tells us that Jesus has ascended into heaven and urges his readers to draw near boldly and confidently to God's throne of grace so that we may **come boldly to the throne of grace to receive mercy and find grace to help us when we need it!**

Yes, our great High Priest is also a mighty King, exalted above the heavens, but that doesn't mean He can no longer **sympathise with our weaknesses**. He's been there and faced temptation; He knows the struggle and the suffering. But through more than sympathising, this exalted High Priest can help.

Go boldly to Him, the writer says, go **boldly to the throne of grace to receive mercy and find grace to help us when we need it!** This is what you need to remember when you face the temptation to turn away from Christ and deny your Saviour. You need to go to your great High Priest for help and strength. The One who has been there is able to energise you with His strength. This was the very thing Simon Peter forgot to do. What had Jesus said to him in the garden? "*Pray that you may not enter into temptation*" - that you will not be overtaken and fall into sin. Watch and pray. Simon didn't do that. Instead, he fell asleep with the rest of the disciples. It was only by God's grace that he was restored to faith and apostleship. Based on personal experience, he wrote in his first letter to watch out because "*your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour,*" (1 Peter 5:8), and he also said, "*Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you,*" (5:7). Pray, Jesus said. Pray as He taught us: "*Do not lead us into temptation*" (Matt. 6:13). As you pray those words,

remember Luther's matchless explanation in the Small Catechism: "*God surely tempts no one to sin, but we pray in this petition that God would guard and keep us, so that the devil, the world, and our flesh may not deceive us or lead us into false belief, despair, and other great and shameful sins; and though we are tempted by them, we pray that we may overcome and win the victory.*"

When you are tempted to keep quiet and you're reluctant to confess your Saviour before the world, pray as King David did in Psalm 51:15: "*O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare Your praise!*" Surrounded as you are by impurity and immorality, pray as King David did: "*Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit inside me!*" (51:10). When you feel the weakness of your flesh, pray the words of Psalm 50:15, "*Call on Me in a day of trouble! I shall deliver you, and you shall glorify Me.*" When life's fears and anxieties make you feel like you are flailing in the deep waters, gasping for air and fearful of drowning, pray as the writer of Psalm 130:1-2 did: "*Out of the depths I have cried to You, O LORD. ² LORD, hear my voice! Let Your ears be attentive to the sound of my pleas for mercy!*" Surely you know what Isaiah promises to those who storm the throne of grace seeking strength. He says so beautifully, "³⁰ *Even young people will become tired and weary, and young men will indeed stumble; ³¹ but those who wait on the LORD will receive new strength. They will cause their feathers to grow like eagles. They will run and not become weary. They will walk and not grow tired,*" (Isaiah 40:30-31).

But it is not only by the power of prayer that our great High Priest strengthens you in your weakness. It is also with the power of His Word. "*Resist the devil,*" St. James urges, "*and he will flee from you,*" (James 4:7). That's how it was when our Saviour was tempted by Satan in the wilderness. Each time, our Saviour met the tempter with passages from Scripture. "*It is written,*" He said. He has given His Word with which to meet and defeat Satan when Satan tempts you to sin. St. Paul

urges the soldiers of Christ as they dress for battle to “*take... the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God,*” (Eph. 6:17). Draw on the power of your Great High Priest in your spiritual weakness.

Yes, the readers of Hebrews were tempted to deny their Lord and defect from the faith, like Simon Peter in the courtyard of Caiaphas’ palace, and so are we. That’s when we need to remember our Great High Priest, for He is a compassionate High Priest. **Let us come boldly to the throne of grace to receive mercy and find grace to help us when we need it!** For Jesus Christ our great High Priest is our compassionate High Priest - able to sympathise with us in our weakness, yet able to strengthen us in our weakness. Amen.

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