

CHRIST OUR HIGH PRIEST
Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, 2021
Hebrews 2:17-18

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

As we continue our series on the Doctrine of Jesus, today, we dwell on Christ as our High Priest. Therefore, our text for today is Hebrews 2:17-18: **Therefore, He was obliged to be made like His brothers in every way, that He might become a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.** ¹⁸ **For, because He Himself suffered when He was tempted, He can help others who are being tempted.**

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

Dear friends in Christ,

What is happening in the world today? This is not the same world many of us grew up in. Life seemed so much more relaxed and free and safe than today. Now we find that many of our freedoms are under constant attack, and see more and more morals thrown out the window. The Gospel is under attack. Where once churches were full, now they stand almost empty. Many are sadly turning away from Jesus, and the free salvation He offers. Worse still, and as history also bears out, *whole nations* continue in their attempt to destroy the Christian religion. Remember these words from Jesus? *“If they have persecuted Me, they will also persecute you”* (John 15:20). Praise God then, that all their attempts are doomed to failure since the gates of Hades itself will never overpower the Gospel.¹ Things continue to get worse, but we are not of this world.

Then there are all the religions outside of Christianity that appear to have many followers, worshipping false gods. Take a look at the many heathen temples around us. Almost every town has a Kingdom Hall or a mosque. No doubt there are also all sorts of other gatherings of people of different faiths, who while sincere in their worship, it is all to no avail. Unless one worships the one true God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, they are doomed to hell.

Into such a world of false beliefs and practices comes the marvellous message of Christianity of a great, all-sufficient High Priest. No one can afford to regard this message, which pertains to our deepest needs, with indifference.

The entire Epistle to the Hebrews is largely devoted to the discussion of the high-priesthood of Christ, who is a High Priest **“in things pertaining to God.”** That is the emphatic statement of our text. In the midst of His nation, when Christ walked this earth, He was not considered a High Priest, but a Rabbi, a Teacher. Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews, a member of the Sanhedrin, acknowledged that Jesus was a Rabbi who had *“come from God”* (John 3:2), yet He was much more, vastly more! In the invisible world, Jesus served as High Priest while men were ignorant of the great work He was performing.

In the brief passage before us today, the Person of our High Priest, is spoken of. Our writer says, **“He was obliged to be made like His brothers in every way.”** This means that, in order to carry out His work, Christ had to become a real man. This of course, is to say that originally, *He was not like His brothers.* The first two chapters of Hebrews spells this out for us. When we read those chapters, we learn of the holy, majestic mystery of Christ’s deity and existence from eternity. So it is that our High Priest stands before us as *both divine and human.*

Our High Priest is divine. Aaron had been a great high priest, in close touch with God, the chief adviser and helper of his brother Moses, the first one of the Israelites to appear before the Lord in the prescribed high-priestly robes. He had illustrious successors², but all their grandeur dwindles into insignificance aside of the majesty of the New Testament High Priest, who is their Lord and Master, God Himself.

The object of the writer in our text, however, is chiefly to emphasise *the humanity of Christ*, namely, why the exalted Son of God became a human being? The answer is that *it was inevitable if His purpose as High Priest was to be*

¹ Matthew 16:18

² Eleazar, Phinehas, Abiathar, Zadok, Jehoiada

It is one of the glories of the gracious counsel of God that He provides for us the kind of High Priest that we need. In chapter 7 of Hebrews, the importance of the deity of our High Priest is abundantly asserted. The writer says, “*For such a High Priest is what we needed, who is holy, blameless, spotless, separated from sinners and has been made higher than the heavens*” (Hebrews 7:26). There had been plenty of human high priests given, but what was needed was a **Stronger One**, who would be able to accomplish the gigantic task which had to be performed if the human race was not to be hurled into everlasting death. A High Priest was needed who was *holy, blameless, spotless, separated from sinners and has been made higher than the heavens*, who would be equal to every phase of His work.

Yet this High Priest had to be a human being at the same time. A few verses before our text it is asserted that Christ had become man in order that He might die for us.³ In our text, the matter is viewed from another side. “**He was obliged to be made like His brothers in every way, that He might become a merciful and faithful High Priest,**” helping “**others who are being tempted.**” The holy writer here utters most profound thoughts. He views the life of Christ on earth with its manifold sorrows, pains, temptations, and the final agony of the cross and says that it is a High Priest of just such experiences that we need, experiences which assure us that He is merciful, a High Priest who not only can feel *for* us but also *with* us, who has tears for each sorrow, a heart for every plea, who fully understands the strife through which we are passing, because He has travelled the same path Himself, having been the target of the arrows of the unseen foe and having tasted the bitterness of death, *yet without sin*.⁴ His experiences assure us that He will be faithful and loyal to His constituents, not turning from them when He perceives their weaknesses and many stumbling’s. We all have sorrows and doubts and fears, so what a comfort to know that when the cross becomes heavy and temptations are numerous, we have a High Priest who sympathises with us and who will not forsake us in the midst of our troubles.

Besides dwelling on the qualifications of our High Priest, the holy writer points out that Jesus entered upon this high office for the very purpose of doing the work of which we stood most in need.

In Israel, in the days of the Old Covenant, a high priest had various duties to fulfil. His chief work, however, was to mediate between God and the people so that the wrath of the Almighty would not exterminate the sinful nation. Our text uses the word “**propitiation.**” The high priest stood before God as the representative of his people. He took their place. God had made him their proxy. Through him, the right relations between God and the nation were to be restored. Thinking of the work of an Old Testament high priest, we have to remember of course that whatever he could do had no value in itself, but that it pointed forward to the work which was to be accomplished by One whose Person and every deed are far beyond any value that human intellect can compute. Jesus removes the stain of sin, bringing human beings into a right relationship with the Father.

In reading about the office of a high priest in Old Testament times, we are struck by the divine order that the priest had to be physically without blemish.⁵ How beautifully this prefigures the perfect sinlessness of Christ, who, though assailed by temptations, remains sinless, and who through His *active obedience* perfectly fulfils the Law.⁶ See what this means. The Representative, the Substitute, of mankind, renders the perfect obedience which divine justice demands. There could be no peace between the Almighty God and the human race as long as this obedience was not rendered. In Christ all the demands of God’s holy Law are met and fulfilled; as He prays, as He learns and teaches the holy Word, as He obeys His parents, as He does good to His suffering fellowmen, even His enemies and so forth, He acts as our High Priest, fulfilling the Law in our stead.

Principally, what the Old Testament high priest had to do with sin, and his function, if we describe it in the words of our text, was “**to make propitiation for the sins of the people.**” In other words, to obtain God’s pardon for wayward Israel. He sacrificed animals on which, as it were, the sins of his countrymen had been laid. Our God is a righteous God, whose justice cannot be trifled with. His perfection cannot condone iniquity. Where wrong is committed, it has to be punished. On the basis of this sacrifice, God forgave Israel. The offering had validity merely in as far as it foreshadowed the great offering which our High Priest, Jesus Christ, made. That Christ, as our High Priest offers a

³ Hebrews 2:14

⁴ Hebrews 4:15

⁵ Leviticus 21:16-24

⁶ Matthew 3:15

sacrifice, is not surprising. The amazing thing is that *He offers Himself*. On the altar of the cross, He takes our place, permits all our sins to be imputed to Him, and suffers the penalty we have deserved. In this way, He wipes out the sentence of condemnation which divine justice had pronounced upon us. The cry on the cross “*It is finished*” had this echo in the judgment-hall of God: “Mankind is free; all its sins are paid for.” In this way, the **propitiation** spoken of in our text was fully accomplished. We call this His *passive obedience*. Truly, He is a wonderful High Priest!

Are we aware that we are here speaking of the central truth of the Christian religion, a fact which leads the apostle Paul to say that his message merely proclaims, “*a crucified Christ*” (1 Cor. 1:23)? All who are weary and heavy-laden, come, and here in our great High Priest, find the peace and rest which your heart is yearning for!

What we spoke of thus far has occurred in the past, but Christ is *still active* as our High Priest. Hear these words: “**He can help others.**” That means us. This activity, too, was foreshadowed in the work of the Old Testament high priests. Appearing before God, they prayed for their people.⁷ The New Testament repeatedly points to Christ as praying for us even now, after His great sacrifice. The Apostle Paul writes to the Romans, “*Christ Jesus, who died and, more than that, has been raised, is the One who is even at the right hand of God, who is also interceding for us*” (Romans 8:34). From Christ’s heavenly office “as the Mediator, Atoning Sacrifice, High Priest, and Intercessor” before God, “He has promised that He will hear our prayer” (Augsburg Confession XXI 2-3).

What a comfort to know that He who has fulfilled the Law for us and who has given His life to wipe out our sins is still lovingly thinking of us and continuously praying to God for our welfare! He is merciful and faithful even now, some 2000 years after His sacrifice was offered. It is undeniable that Christ is the great High Priest of mankind. In the Scriptures the truth that He has borne the sins of all human beings is proclaimed with unmistakable clearness. Whoever is now lost is not lost because he is without a High Priest or because his sins have not been atoned for, but because he refuses to believe this Christ is his Substitute and Helper. May we all belong to the number of those who gratefully worship Jesus as their divine High Priest, and pray that we continue to trust and praise Him in all truth! Amen.

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

PRAYER FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Almighty God, Your ears are always open to the prayers of Your people, and You promise Your saving help in every time of need. Therefore we lift up our hearts to You.

We thank and praise You that You have enabled us to understand Your Word, and for the blessings of faith, love, and trust in You. Most of all, we thank and praise You for the coming of Your Son, and for His deliverance from our sin, from the condemnation of the Law, from our death, from the devil, and from hell. We give You humble thanks for all Your other gifts. You have bestowed Your Spirit on us through Jesus, Your holy Anointed One. Through Your Spirit give us a deeper knowledge of Your will, and a deeper faith in Your salvation. Continue to renew us by the Spirit also. Give us deeper love for all people. Keep us conscious of Your desire that we should spread the Good News about Jesus. Give us opportunities to tell the good news of the Gospel, and the courage to tell it; and strengthen us by the presence of Jesus, who has promised to be with us always in this task. Make us more aware of people’s needs, that, in meeting them, they may see that we are credible witnesses of Him; and bless what we say.

We pray also for all our families. Bless each home with Your presence and the Spirit of Christ, that children may grow in favour with God and man, and that parents, by love and proper example, may maintain their homes in godliness. Grant that both children and parents may be eager to worship You, and may delight in serving Your Son in their daily lives.

Provide and maintain good government for us and for all people; give all in our nation high moral values and responsible citizenship.

Comfort and bless all among us who are afflicted in any way, that they may find release from their burdens and trials, and learn to know Your gracious will, and how to submit to it.

May we all, in the unity of the faith, and in the knowledge of Your Son, continually praise Your name and fulfil Your saving purposes in the world. We ask all these things in Jesus’ name. Amen.

⁷ Leviticus 16 & 21

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

¹⁵ “The LORD, your God, will raise up for you a Prophet like me from among you, from your fellow-Israelites. You shall listen to Him! ¹⁶ This is exactly what you asked from the LORD, your God, at Horeb, on the day of the assembly, when you said, ‘Let me not hear the voice of the LORD, my God, any longer or see this great fire any longer, that I may not die!’

¹⁷ “The LORD told me, ‘What they have said is good.

¹⁸ I shall raise up for them a Prophet like you, from among their fellow-Israelites. I shall put My Words in His mouth and He will tell them everything that I command Him. ¹⁹ I Myself shall call to account any person who does not listen to My Words, which He speaks in My name. ²⁰ However, that prophet who acts insolently by speaking anything in My name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, shall die!’

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

¹ Now concerning the meat sacrificed to idols: We know that all of us have some knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. ² The person who thinks that he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. ³ However, if anyone loves God, God knows him. ⁴ Therefore, about eating meat that has been sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing in the world and that there is no other God but one. ⁵ For, even if there are so-called “gods,” either in heaven or on earth (as there are many “gods” and many “lords”), ⁶ yet for us there is only one God, the Father, from whom all things come, and we exist for Him; and there is only one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things come, and we exist through Him.

⁷ However, not everyone knows this. Some are still now so accustomed to an idol that they think about the meat that they eat as something that has been sacrificed to an idol and, since their consciences are

weak, they are defiled. ⁸ Food will not commend us to God. We lose nothing if we do not eat and gain nothing if we do eat. ⁹ However, beware that somehow this liberty of yours does not become the thing that causes weak people to stumble! ¹⁰ For, if anyone who is weak sees you, who have this knowledge, sitting at a meal in a temple of an idol, will not his conscience be encouraged to eat the meat that has been sacrificed to idols? ¹¹ For the weak person is being destroyed by your knowledge, your fellow-Christian, for whom Christ died. ¹² However, when you sin against your fellow-Christians in this way and wound their weak consciences, you sin against Christ. ¹³ Therefore, if food causes my fellow-Christian to stumble, I shall certainly never eat meat, that I may not cause my fellow-Christian to stumble.

Mark 1:21-28

²¹ They went to Capernaum. On the next Sabbath, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. ²² The people were amazed at His teaching. For He was teaching them as one who had authority and not as the scribes taught. ²³ Just then there was a man in their synagogue with an unclean spirit and he cried out, ²⁴ “What do we have in common with You, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are, the Holy One of God!”

²⁵ Jesus spoke sharply to him: “Be quiet and come out of him!”

²⁶ The unclean spirit shook the man violently and with a loud shriek came out of him. ²⁷ The people were all so amazed that they debated with one another: “What is this? This is a new teaching, with authority! He even gives orders to the unclean spirits and they obey Him.”

²⁸ The news about Him spread quickly everywhere through the surrounding region of Galilee.