

The Rev. Dr. David K. McIntosh
October 24, 2021- 22nd Sunday After Pentecost (Proper 25-2B)
Given at St. Mark's Church, Bridgewater, CT

Jeremiah 31: 7-9; Psalm 126; **Hebrews 7:23-28; Mark 10:46-52**

“Jesus holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever.” †

Given that we just held our Diocesan Convention (the meeting of all members of the ECCT— priests, clergy, and laity) this weekend, and given that I have been working hard to fulfill many 'last minute' priestly duties in the parish, and given that in 2 weeks I will be no longer be serving as your priest... I thought I would try to reflect on the letter to the Hebrews and say a bit about priesthood.

Last week's passage from chapter 5 of this letter described what that classic understanding of 'priest' is: someone “chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness; and because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people.” Remember this if you will...

Now the priests described in the Torah were of the line of Levi, descendants from Aaron... and Paul also references a priest-king mentioned in the Greek versions (Septuagint) of the Psalms, Melchizedek. And they were the ones who offered sacrifice on behalf of the people. It's important to note that there were *many* priests in the history of Israel and the Jewish people, because each one would eventually die or move away, and leave an ongoing need for someone to serve as an intermediary between God and humans... According to Jewish custom, their work never ended, their work took place daily, there was a need for constant sacrifice, as new sin required new offerings! In many ways, work as a priest in the Episcopal Church seems endless as well... there's always someone to pray for, there's always a service to do, there's always a need to help others.

I've spent a lot of time this week reflecting on priesthood, and who priests are called to be (at least from my own understanding). A priest is a mediator between the people and God— an advocate on the part of the people. Now, let me be clear, priests are not the only advocates, and no one needs to have a priest to relate to God in a personal way (I think the reformation settled that). And yet somehow, priests are often helpful. Priests are called from among us to emphasize God's ways, God's teachings, and to ask on behalf of the people for God's forgiveness, and direction in all our lives. They are here to heal the rift and repair the separation between God and God's people.

An interesting fact about priests is that we are all flawed... full of imperfections and in many ways in need of more healing than those we try to help. One of my mentors, Henri Nouwen (a priest and writer who taught at Yale, and whom I met during studies in Rome) address this in a specific way. In his book, *The Wounded Healer*, he pointed out that only those who face their own wounded condition, their own weaknesses can be

available for healing. That's true of priests, and also of doctors, and therapists, and moms and dads, and friends— anybody who tries to give advice! It's only when we are honest with ourselves about our own condition, that we can begin to move toward wholeness, and only after that, can be help others to heal. So often I need to remind myself that my gifts do not come from my titles (Dr or Fr) or my many degrees. I am not effective at what I do because of any *position* I hold in this world, my gifts and my effectiveness come from God.

I must confess to you all, I've never wanted to be a full-time priest, I've never wanted to be 'in charge' of a parish. Those who run churches and administrate are bishops and deacons, not priests. My hope and call has always been to gather God's people together in the midst of societal division, and celebrate Jesus in the sacraments. My goal has always been to teach others about the love of Jesus and not get caught up in policy and procedure. And, as I have tried to live into this call during this frustrating pandemic, I have come to realize why self-care is so important.

With this in mind, consider the amazing truth we just heard. Jesus is our great high priest, the model of wholeness. In contrast to the transient and imperfect human priests, Jesus is a perpetual priest. He lives forever and needs no descendants; he is perfect and loving. He is a one-person priesthood. He lives forever, he remains alive, and thus will always intercede on our behalf to God. Thus, he is the one great high priest that makes the priesthood of old unnecessary. He is the model— he came “not to be served but to serve, and to give his life... for many.” Because of his great gift of becoming human and then sacrificing himself on our behalf, sins are forgiven. All sins. And because of his incarnation and love for us, we all share in his priesthood... the priesthood of all believers. We are all called to servanthood and to his priesthood. Now that we have experienced Jesus, there is no need for 'special' priests, because 'he continues forever!' ... or, is there still some need?

We are all of us called to serve the least among us, as St. Francis of Assisi prayed:

*Oh God, grant that we may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. (BCP, p. 833) †*