

## Melchizedek (Hebrews 5:1-10)

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*10:00am Holy Communion – 20<sup>th</sup> October 2024*

### **Hebrews 5:1-10**

Every high priest 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. And one does not presume to take this honour, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was.

So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him,

‘You are my Son,

today I have begotten you’;

as he says also in another place,

‘You are a priest for ever,

according to the order of Melchizedek.’

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

## <Prayer>

During a slightly calmer month of August, I found I had a bit of time to read through some of the files I have about my ancestry. *Bessant* is not a common name, and so it's quite easy to track back into history. The name originates from the eastern empire of *Byzantium*, or as someone concerned with making money! A *bezant* was a high-value coinage used across Europe for trading. Bessants were also minters – literally striking new coins. Going back perhaps 250 years, my own ancestors were mostly farmers in south Dorset, many of whom were sharply involved in the early trades union movement – striking of another kind. So, that's me, I'm all confused, I'm supposed to be a militant socialist who makes money in Europe.

**Nevertheless, and more essential, I think of my origins as spiritual. My image and identity are hidden in the past with Almighty God, who is my Heavenly Father.**

I wonder if I can ask you to recall the earlier chapters of the book of Genesis, right at the front of the Old Testament? Here are the initial stories around Adam and Eve and their family. You know how it goes: God creates the Heavens and the Earth, including people, then quickly accounts for their disobedient nature in The Fall (that's serpents and apples). Straight away we then have the incident of Cain killing his brother Abel, which is a murderous story of rivalry and jealousy. This is the theme of how the people of Cain's line would then go on to multiply and spread in their families, with all the original marks of sinful humanity within them.

Although the story of Genesis accounts for this as a bad start, we also see God's purpose as He intervenes to create a better line through another son called Seth. At the end of Genesis 4: *“Adam lay with Eve again, and she gave birth to a son and named him Seth, saying, “God has granted me another child in place of Abel. Seth also had a son, and he named him Enosh”*. This ascendancy through Seth would be remembered well, confirmed by the wonderful memory: *‘At that time people began to call on the name of the Lord.’*

**That last verse is a good thing.** Yes, original sinfulness is built into humanity (as we all know ourselves), but in greater measure still is the image of God in which we are made, and the natural need within us to look above and beyond ourselves towards our origins, meaning and purpose. That relationship with God continues well with the story of faithful Noah and his son Shem, then through the generations to Abraham. Most of the book of Genesis covers this formative time. Much later, in fact centuries later, we will eventually get to Moses and the great exodus to the Promised Land, the giving of the Law, and the setup of the whole system of worship.

The reason I have gone back into all of this history is to outline the beginnings of a major theme throughout scripture and the Christian faith. **The story is that Almighty God is our Father - a God (the only God) is rooted in relationship with us because we shared His image, right from the start. We are common with Him, with have affinity with Him, and we need Him.** Ultimately that truth would find its greatest expression in the incarnation of Jesus Christ who was both God and man, he is priest and king.

**It is natural for people to want to know God and seek him, because the mere satisfactions of biological life and productivity alone, are not sufficient to give us the meaning and purpose we need.** I might even go as far as to say that to *not* believe in God is to be *not* full human. It's also painfully true that most people will select their god from the things they see or want. Part of what I'm supposed to be doing here, as a priest, is to be in some sense a facilitator, a point of expression, a director, of our common need to gather before God – to call upon the name of the Lord. We think of the priestly function as a *thin place* where the boundaries of Heaven and Earth come very close.

Let me tell you a few things about the Book of Hebrews (set for us today).

All of those Genesis origins, looking way back across God's purpose, is the ancestry of the people to whom the author writes. **The theme of Hebrews asserts the absolute supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus Christ as revealer and mediator of God's grace. At every point in the letter, Christ is presented as *better* than everything that has gone before.** Better than the angels, better than the prophets, better than all other priests, laws, authorities and kings. That speaks to our life and world today. How many other things are held as best by people, yet are in reality worthless? Read Hebrews through yourself and pick up on that 'better' theme as the key to it all.

**Since the point of human creation there has always been the need for priestly mediators and revealers, all which had been people called by God and inspired for that purpose.** Remember, the first High Priest appointed by God was Aaron, brother of Moses, but that was under the whole Mosaic Law, given through Moses, intended for their nation living in the Promised Land. Yet an order of priests existed way before that, known in Hebrews as the Order of Melchizedek.

Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. [They do] not presume to take this honour, but take it only when called by God, just as Aaron was.

The author wants to argue that Jesus Christ is this appointment also, not just to refresh the current and broken religious system, but to go back to the beginning and say Christ is a priest for creation – original, exemplar, primary and better than all others. Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you”; as he says also in another place, “You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.”

So who was this Melchizedek? Well, we don’t know much about him but quickly to say that he was a priest and king who worshipped the creator – the same God as Abraham. As the story goes (Genesis 14), Abraham and his tribe had been in conflict, literally in battle, against other city tribes who had been at war with each other. Abraham’s brother Lot, and all his family, had been captured and were likely to be made slaves. Abraham went out with all his men and defeated these other kings. Upon his return we have this written:

Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, and he blessed Abram, saying, “Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And praise be to God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand. Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything.”

It is as if Abraham is recognised by Melchizedek as a man under God’s covenant, in God’s image, by another who is equally a servant and worshipper of the Most High God. Melchizedek’s blessing is taken by Abraham as a sign of God’s favour, and for this reason he dedicates a

tenth of all he has to the ministrations of Melchizedek's priesthood, and therefore to God. So, it would prove to be across all scripture. **Power and favour are held in this life as fleeting, we live in a world not of our own making. It is necessary to give thanks and make dedication to the knowledge that we are mortal and perishing.**

This is the way that God creates and deals with nature and people directly. Priesthood exists for us to touch upon God in thanksgiving, humility and sacrifice. **Christ Jesus, the best priest of all, meets us in the tumult of life and sometimes conflict, with our need to meet with Father God and dedicate to Him.** God's grace is brought to us by Christ's nature as a person in perfection, yet in service. As the greatest amongst men (much better than Melchizedek or Aaron), He is the best way for us to reach God with what we bring and wish to receive by prayer. Mere priests, such as me, are just trying to keep to that truth.

In these next weeks we shall approach All Saints Sunday (that is next week) and All *Souls* Sunday (that is the following week) and thereafter The Kingdom Season, which takes us through November.

All Saints is like our ancestry of priestly humanity from the past. Those who have showed us Christ in their lives, often in glorious and exemplary ways. Then we look into our own souls, limited and perishing, giving thanks for those we have love but no longer see. That reminds us of our own future. Then we look into the season of God's Kingdom towards the perfect priest and king who reassures our future, before it all begins again in Advent.

**It's all a journey through life, from the past, in this time now, and beyond into the future. Christ is the best priest and king, because he was there at the beginning and will be unto the end. Amen**