

Proper 25, Year B

St Mark's, Tampa

25 October 2009

✠ I speak to you in the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Within Anglicanism there are both Catholics and evangelicals. And it is a rough but reliable general rule that evangelicals focus on the work of Christ in the Atonement, and Catholics focus on the person of Christ in the Incarnation. Now obviously you can't really separate the two, because the atoning work of Christ cannot be understood apart from who Christ is, and the person of Christ cannot be appreciated apart from what he came to do – but still, as a rough and ready guide, it's quite reasonable to say that evangelicals are especially drawn to the work of Christ in the Atonement, while Catholics are especially drawn to the person of Christ in the Incarnation.

It is no great news to anyone that I am a Catholic Anglican, and there is nothing in the faith that speaks to me more deeply, that moves me more irresistibly, than pondering the amazing truth that “the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.” But there is enough evangelical in me that I can find the tears flowing in my eyes “when I survey the wondrous Cross.”

I say all this to explain why I'm preaching today on the Priesthood of Christ. There is no place in all of Christian theology where the work of Christ and the person of Christ, the Atonement and the Incarnation, are more closely united than in the doctrine of the Priesthood of Christ. So if you're a Catholic with a fair bit of evangelical thrown in, there is nothing in Christian theology that will get your juices flowing any more than thinking about the Priesthood of Christ. And the great theologian of the Priesthood of Christ is the writer to the Hebrews, which means you can pretty much count on me to preach on Hebrews whenever the lectionary gives me the chance.

But I have another reason for focusing today on the Priesthood of Christ. You will remember that Fr Ryan preached about Christ as priest last Sunday, along with Christ as Lord and as teacher. In speaking about the priesthood of Christ, he followed the writer to the Hebrews in contrasting the temple priesthood, which was priesthood after the order of Aaron, with Christ's priesthood, which is priesthood

after the order of Melchizedek. The temple priesthood had to offer sacrifices again and again and again, but Christ offered his sacrifice once for all. And then Fr Ryan added a humorous aside, just a throwaway remark, which as I recall he only said at the 10:15 service: "And so we don't need priests any more."

Now wait a second. When a priest says we don't need priests any more, something's up. Now of course he was sort of kidding, but it's a serious question: if indeed Christ's priesthood is perfect, once for all, non-repeatable – if indeed nothing can be added to it, and nothing taken away – then what exactly are priests for?

Well, let's look at Christ's Priesthood first, and then we'll see what we should think about the Christian priesthood.

The letter to the Hebrews tells us four things about the Priesthood of Christ – and because I'm invoking my evangelical heritage I'm going to get all alliterative on you. The Priesthood of Christ is *perfect*, it is *permanent*, it is *prayerful*, and it is *personal*.

The Priesthood of Christ is a *perfect* priesthood. The sacrifice that Christ offers is a perfect sacrifice, not only because Christ is perfect, but because that sacrifice is *complete*. From today's epistle: "the law appoints as high priests those who are subject to weakness, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever." Jesus held nothing back – nothing of his humanity, and nothing of his divinity – but offered it all up for us and for our salvation. There was no weakness, no limitation, no reservation, no deficiency, in the sacrifice that he offered, because that sacrifice was himself.

And so the Priesthood of Christ is a *perfect* priesthood – but it is also a *permanent* priesthood. We heard last week in the Letter to the Hebrews, "You are a priest for ever, according to the order of Melchizedek." And today: "The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office; but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues for ever. Consequently he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him." *For all time* – our Priest is not going to retire, or get defrocked; his sacrifice is never going to get stale; his blood is never going to lose its power. He does not go in and out of the Holy of Holies, like the High Priests of old; as the next verse after today's reading says, he "is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven." "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace," because that is where our High Priest is and will always be.

The Priesthood of Christ is *perfect* priesthood, and it is a *permanent* priesthood – but it is also a *prayerful* priesthood. What does our High Priest *do*, now that he has completed his perfect sacrifice and taken his permanent seat at the Father’s right hand? The writer to the Hebrews continues: “he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, *since he always lives to make intercession for them.*” Isn’t it a great comfort to know that other people are praying for you? But to know that *Jesus* is praying for you! When it feels as though your prayers bump up against the ceiling and go no higher – when you don’t have the energy, or the faith, or the words to offer – there is a perfect priest, a permanent priest, a prayerful priest, “seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven,” who lives to make intercession for you:

Jesus, hail! enthroned in glory,
there for ever to abide;
all the heavenly hosts adore thee,
seated at the Father’s side.
There for sinners thou art pleading:
there thou dost our place prepare;
ever for us interceding,
till in glory we appear.

The Priesthood of Christ is a *perfect* priesthood, it is a *permanent* priesthood, it is a *prayerful* priesthood: and it is, finally, a *personal* priesthood. The temple priests offered up the blood of animals, but Christ offers himself: his body, his blood, his life. And this is why I say that the doctrine of the Priesthood of Christ brings together the Person of Christ and the Work of Christ: what Christ *does* is to offer up everything he *is*. His priesthood is a *personal* priesthood.

Nowhere do we see this more clearly than we do in the Eucharist. I have already quoted one hymn, but I have to quote another – by an Anglican writer, I am glad to note:

thou within the veil hast entered,
robed in flesh, our great High Priest:
thou on earth both Priest and Victim
in the Eucharistic feast.

So it is in the Eucharist that we see most clearly the priesthood of Christ, the *personal* priesthood, in which Christ, the perfect priest, offers himself, the perfect victim. And that points us to the answer to the question that Fr Ryan raised indirectly last Sunday, and that I raised directly a few minutes ago. If indeed Christ's priesthood is perfect, once for all, non-repeatable – if indeed nothing can be added to it, and nothing taken away – then what exactly are priests for? Well, just as it is in the Eucharist that we see most clearly what Christ's priesthood is all about, it is in the Eucharist that we see most clearly what the Christian priesthood is all about. The priest does not add to Christ's sacrifice – for nothing can be added to it – the priest does not repeat Christ's sacrifice – for Christ has already made “by his one oblation of himself once offered, a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction” – but the priest does re-present Christ's sacrifice.

We need that. We need the reminder. We need to feed at the Lord's table, to be nourished again and again by the sacrifice that has been made once for all. We cannot see where Christ “within the veil has entered, robed in flesh, our great High Priest”; but through the ministry of the priesthood we can return again and again to the place where Christ is “on earth both Priest and Victim in the Eucharistic feast.”

If for nothing other than that – if only because the once-for-all sacrifice needs to be made present again and again – we need priests. But that is not the only reason – more like the reason that gives shape and substance to all the other reasons. My favorite Anglican theologian of the twentieth century, Austin Farrer, said that priests are “walking sacraments.” In believing in sacraments, we believe that God has chosen to work through the things he has created, that God does not ask of us merely to entertain abstract beliefs or to marinate our minds in noble sentiments, but that he incarnates his grace, puts flesh and bones on it, gives it substance, by using his creatures as instruments. The priest is a walking sacrament because God works in the priest to re-present Christ's sacrifice in the sacrament of the altar, to embody Christ's forgiveness in the sacrament of reconciliation, to give an earthly habitation and an audible voice to the intercessions that the High Priest is always making “at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven.”

Notice that I didn't say the priest does any of this. *Christ* does it. If you run across priests getting uppity about being walking sacraments, it wouldn't hurt to remind them of that. “Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast, save in the cross of Christ, my God,” on which the perfect offering was made by the one and only High Priest, to whom, with the Father and Holy Spirit, be ascribed, as is most justly due, all might, dominion, majesty, and glory, world without end. Amen.