

The Ministry of Priest

Exodus 19:2-8

Romans 5:1-8

Matthew 9:35-10:8

There are three kinds of priest known to the Christian Church (not the good, the bad and the ugly!):

- Jesus the High Priest
- The Priesthood of all believers
- The ministry of priest

Jesus the High Priest

If we go back to the time of Jesus we find that concept of priesthood was well known to all religions. Indeed it is still true that in our own time Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, even atheists may be pretty vague about bishops and deacons but they are all familiar with the idea of a priest.

In the time of Jesus the role of a priest would have been pretty much the same no matter whether he was Jewish or pagan: it was to offer sacrifice. To worship was to offer sacrifice. It did not necessarily involve killing, for grain and incense could be sacrificed. For example, Luke's gospel describes the conception of John the Baptist beginning with a typical day in the life of his father, Zechariah, a priest:

Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense.

Luke 1:8

Sacrificing to the gods is still with us. Even our modern secular society is full of shrines: little roadside collections by a lamppost where someone was killed; huge displays at the site of a national disaster such as Grenfell Tower. We may not call it sacrificing to the gods but it is at heart the same instinct.

In the early history of the Jewish nation sacrifices were offered at many shrines but in the last few hundred years before Jesus sacrifice had been centred on Jerusalem and quite specifically on the temple.

The most famous sacrifice was, of course, that of the Passover lamb in the springtime. Now this was the exact time that Jesus died on the cross and Christians were pretty quick to realize that in some way Jesus' death was a sacrifice. In fact it was the ultimate sacrifice. John's gospel tells us that very early on in Jesus's ministry he comes across John the Baptist. John says, rather enigmatically to his own disciples:

Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!

John 1:29

I do not know what they would have made of that at the time. But looking back after the death of Jesus his disciples were quite clear. Christians identified Jesus as the ultimate sacrifice. And they were certain that since Jesus had made the ultimate sacrifice then there were no more sacrifices to be made. And this was such an unusual decision that early Christians were known as atheists because they did not offer sacrifice.

But if Jesus is the sacrifice, it is also Jesus who offers the sacrifice. He is both victim and priest. The writer to the Hebrews knew this:

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.

Hebrews 4: 14

By offering himself on the cross Jesus had broken down all barriers between human beings and God. That is why the curtain in the temple was torn in two. That is why Paul writes to Timothy:

For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all.

1 Tim 2:5

Priesthood of all believers

This, then the High Priesthood of Jesus, is the most fundamental kind of priesthood in the Christian faith.

But biblical writers still found the idea of priesthood useful in other ways. So, St Peter wrote to the early Christians some encouraging words:

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

1 Peter 2:4

This is very clearly no reinstating the old Jewish or even pagan priesthood. We know this, first of all because Peter refers to spiritual sacrifices. This is not about bulls, pigeons, grain or incense.

Second he says that these spiritual sacrifices are offered through Jesus Christ. We make our sacrifices not in our own right but because we are the body of Christ. The sacrifice we offer is acceptable only because Jesus has made the ultimate sacrifice. Whatever sacrifice we offer to God is made because Jesus has died on the cross, not despite it.

And Peter is not alone for John, the author Revelation writes:

To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Revelation 1:6

But they were not inventing a new concept at all. For in the Book Exodus we heard a few minutes ago that Moses records God saying exactly the same of the people of Israel:

Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom

and a holy nation.

Exodus 19:5

The church as a priesthood is two senses. First that it offers worship which was exactly what the Jewish priesthood did. And second that it acts as a bridge, a door, a means of communication between God and humanity. Our job as the church is to represent Christ to the world; and to represent the world to Christ. To make sure that the door is always open.

Ministry of Priest

The word 'priest' is never used in the New Testament of any individual Christian minister. We hear about *επισκοποι*, literally 'overseers', now called bishops; we hear of *διακονοι*, literally 'servants', now known as deacons; and we hear of *πρεσβυτεροι*, literally 'elders', and sometimes known as presbyters; but more usually called priests. Why has this name been adopted by one order of ministry in the church? Why 'priest' rather than the more biblical 'presbyter'?

I think the answer is that the role of the priest is to embody the high priesthood of Christ and the priesthood of all believers. The key role of a presbyter is to celebrate the Eucharist. In the Eucharist we recall how Jesus died for us as the Passover Lamb. And not only do we remember it but we offer our own sacrifice of praise in the context of recalling Christ's sacrifice. This is expressed in the Eucharistic Prayer where, in a few minutes, Fr Robert will read these words:

As we recall the one, perfect sacrifice of our redemption, Father, by your Holy Spirit let these gifts of your creation be to us the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ; form us into the likeness of Christ and make us a perfect offering in your sight.

Common Worship, Order One, Prayer F

But not only does the Eucharist recall the high priesthood of Jesus but it also reminds us of the priesthood of all believers. Our response to receiving Christ in the Eucharist is to take him out into the world by loving and caring for the world.

The role of the presbyter is to preside at this recalling of Christ's high

priesthood and to encourage the church to be a kingdom of priests. As the church acts as a door or a bridge between God and the world, so the ministry of priest acts as a door or a bridge between Christ and his church.

This is the ministry which Fr Robert begins today. It is a great privilege. It is a great joy. It is also a very modest ministry. Of all the three priesthoods known to the church it is the least important. Without the High Priesthood of Jesus and without the Priesthood of the whole church, the ministry of priest has no purpose. We are here to serve Christ and to serve the church.

In fact the ministry of priest makes no sense without Christ and no sense without the church. John the Baptist said of Jesus:

He must increase, but I must decrease.

John 3:30

That would be a good motto for every priest.

N Clews
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