
Priests Forever

Hebrews 5.5-10

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on March 29, 2009 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

When I was in third grade, school was really only about one thing. That one thing was the soccer games we played at break time. One day the ball got kicked onto the school roof by mistake. My friends and I faced the horrifying prospect of around 45 minutes break time with no soccer ball to play with. Can you *imagine*? Something had to be done. Various forms of human ladder were devised to provide access to the roof. But who was to be the person who actually climbed up and got on the roof? Who d'you think? Me of course. Only one person was that stupid. I got up easily enough, and strode across the flat roof to the ball, and triumphantly tossed the ball down with a nonchalant air. Only then did it dawn on me that getting down was a very different matter. It was too far to jump, and the human ladder didn't look so appealing from the top down. I did the only sane and sensible thing there was to do. I burst into tears.

Only years later did I realize that this was my first experience of how it sometimes feels to be a priest. I had emerged out of a crowd and done something on behalf of the people. That's what priests do. A priest then returns to the people to communicate the consequences of what has been seen and done. I hadn't quite mastered that second part. But I was only 8.

When the Letter to the Hebrews talks about the priest Melchizedek, it's telling us that there's something generic about being a priest that goes beyond the precise ritual patterns of any one religion. Melchizedek wasn't a Christian, or a Jew. He just turns up from nowhere in Genesis chapter 14 bearing bread and wine and blesses Abraham. Being a priest is fundamentally about representing your people before God, and then secondarily about representing God before your people. Some version of priesthood exists in most cultures, whether Christian, Jewish or not, because peoples in all times and places have felt the need to be in touch with ultimate truth and have generally set aside specific individuals to help them do so.

But Israelite faith was pretty much unique in the ancient world in its belief in one almighty God who was not only the creator of heaven and earth but also the savior of a particular people, through whom he sought to reconcile the whole world to himself. Because Israel as a whole represented all the peoples of the earth before God, it was described in Exodus 19 as a "priestly kingdom" – that's to say, Israel was a collective priest. This is the origin of Martin Luther's famous notion of the "priesthood of all believers" – not that every believer is a priest, but that together, believers corporately are a priestly mediator, just as Israel was a mediator between God and the Gentile nations. Israel also had representative priests, from the family of Aaron, who offered sacrifice, burned incense, and in general mediated Israel to God and God to Israel.

The early Christians regarded Jesus as the last of these priests, because his sacrifice had finally taken away sins once and for all, being a sacrifice of his sinless self, not of a flawed animal. The letter to the Hebrews portrays Jesus as the High Priest who stands before God on our behalf and stands before us on God's behalf. By using the term High Priest, Hebrews is saying Jesus stands in the tradition of Israel, mediating the presence of God. But by referring to Melchizedek, who was around before there even was an Israel, Hebrews is saying Jesus is a mediator not just for the Jews but for all humankind.

Protestants and Catholics have tended to be divided on whether or not the church needs representative priests. Catholics tend to say the priest continues to mediate the reconciliation Christ has definitively achieved. Protestants tend to say, because Christ has fundamentally and permanently reconciled God and his people, no further mediation is required. So Catholics and most Anglicans continue to use the term "priest," while Protestants tend to say "pastor" (which means shepherd), "minister" (which means servant), or "public nuisance" (which means someone who's been to seminary and has been causing trouble ever since). But most Christians in practice believe the established ways in which we come before God and God makes himself known to us, such as baptism, Eucharist, and preaching, are so important that the church needs to set aside certain people to ensure they are done faithfully, carefully and well. And that's essentially what a priest is – someone who keeps open and busy the two-way channel between God and his people.

I remember sitting down with a close friend at university and telling her I was hoping to be a priest. I've never forgotten what she said. "If you're not a priest now, seminary and ordination won't make you one." Ouch. What she meant was, being a priest isn't being taken up into a cloudy netherworld of vestments, prayer books and angels. It's being practiced in the presence of God and being a reconciling presence in the life of others. In that sense, of course, all of us can be priests. I didn't say all of us *are* priests, but all of us *can* be priests. Because all of us can grow in the practice of the presence of God – all of us can become people who develop the awe and tenderness and humility and wonder and gentleness that come from knowing God is at work in us and in others the same way he was at work in the life of Jesus Christ. And all of us can be a reconciling presence in the life of those around us. Those are perhaps the most wonderful things in the world to be – a person in whom and by whom our reconciliation with God and our reconciliation with one another are discovered and mediated and experienced. This is the sense in which we're all called to be priests.

And today's reading from Hebrews gives us three clear indications as to what it means to be a priest. Hebrews is talking about Jesus, but I want us to hear these words as being addressed directly to us. The first thing we're told is that Jesus didn't put himself forward, but was appointed. Now we live in a competitive culture. We all know that if you sit around waiting for someone to notice you, you could be waiting longer than it'll take the Cubs to win another World Series. Being at Duke means being president of everything by the age of 21 and then thrusting your resumé under the nose of the whole wide world just in case anyone missed the depth of your accomplishments. But maybe being a priest isn't like that. Maybe being a priest means being practiced in the presence of God and being a reconciling presence in the life of others, whether anyone notices or not. After all, we know God notices, and if God notices, does it really matter about anyone else?

And the next thing we're told about Christ's priesthood is that it was all about submission and obedience. Obedience means nothing when you entirely agree with the proposed plan of action. Obedience only counts when you're convinced you could make a much better job of saving the world if you didn't have to deal with Jesus, the church, the bible and the sacraments. But you hear God saying in return, "Tough: I save the world, not you, and *this* is how." None of us finds obedience easy – not one single one of us. You can imagine Jesus waking up one morning and saying, "I think we've got this incarnation thing completely wrong – why don't we hand out iPods and ice cream and do free massages and get everyone to listen to soothing music – then there'll be world peace and we won't need Gethsemane and Golgotha." And then a voice would come from the cloud, like in today's gospel reading, and say "This is the deal: you go to Jerusalem, and you live with the consequences. Period." In a similar way being a priest means accepting the ways God has chosen to redeem the world, even if we ourselves think we have better ideas. "*Thy* will be done." It's often the hardest prayer to say.

And the third thing we're told is, Jesus' priesthood was chiseled out of his suffering. Hebrews says Jesus "offered up prayers...with loud cries and tears." Is that how you pray? Is that how you *would* pray, if you really let yourself bring to God what was really on your heart? We bury our fears, our regrets, and our self-pity, because we suspect that if we opened our hearts to them we'd be flooded out in no time. The reason most people don't cry more is they fear if they started they'd never stop. There are tears in things, and to be a priest is to open your heart not only to see your own tears but to share the tears of others, to face the bleakness and tragedy of much of human life sustained only by one fragile consolation – that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ. A parent soon realizes that a child's tears are a longing to be comforted. In just the same way a priest realizes that the tears of friend or stranger are a prayer, a sigh too deep for words, and to be a priest is to be able to stay with those tears and that suffering knowing only that God will not finally leave us alone.

So these are the ways in which our priesthood imitates the priesthood of Jesus. We don't *choose* to be priests – God appoints us. We don't choose *how* to be priests – we discover our priesthood in obedience. And being a priest doesn't spare us from suffering – in fact our priesthood brings us closer to the cries and tears that are the suppressed heart of so many prayers.

I want to finish with the question of *where* we are called to be priests. I remember the day I moved into an apartment of my own for the first time. I was 22. I met an elderly priest at an area meeting a few days later, and he asked me about where I was living. "Does the apartment have a table?" he asked. When I said yes it did, in the living room, he said, "Make it an altar." "Make it an altar" – in other words, every time I came into the

apartment and put something on the table I was giving it to God, and every time I left the apartment and took something off the table I was taking it to the world in service. Every meal I ate off that table was a Eucharist, because of that old man's words. Every time I put my wallet down at the end of the day it was like handing over a collection plate. "Make it an altar." Priesthood begins at home.

Of course the obvious location to be a priest is to be the one in worship who speaks to God in the prayers and who speaks for God in the sermon and the words of forgiveness and the benediction. But I want you to think about a couple of other contexts in which we are called to be priests that aren't necessarily about being ordained and set apart. One is the relationship between church and world. Just as Exodus describes Israel as a priest for the nations, so the first letter of Peter describes the church as a priest for the world. If that sounds a bit grand, think about the experience of being the only Christian in your place of work, your accommodation block, your street, your extended family. Whether or not anyone else knows or cares, *you're* the one praying for each of your friends or colleagues, *you're* the one holding each life before God in joy or exasperation, and in a moment of crisis, *you're* the one to whom people look to with eyes that plead, "Say one for me." You're a priest in that moment. Right there. You're the church interceding for the world. Right there. And those moments show you how you can bring every aspect of your work or family or neighborhood, be it good, bad or ugly, to the altar of God and pray for its transformation and transfiguration. That's what priests do. That's what you can do.

And last of all is the relationship between humanity and the rest of creation. Human beings are often called stewards of God's creation, but I feel that's an inadequate metaphor, because it's all about the language of property and nothing about the language of worship. I believe the right word is priest. Human beings are poised precisely in the role of mediator between God and creation: they are fully created, but, because Christ has taken human form, they are fully encompassed by God. Every time you step outside and gaze in wonder at the myriad of stars, you are being a priest, bringing to God the praise of creation. And every time you labor in the garden or care for an animal or lobby for sustainable energy you are being a priest, bringing God's care for creation into human form. Offering creation to God and showing God's care for creation is what priests do. It's what you can do.

And suddenly we realize what this priest business is really all about. It never was fundamentally about fancy dress and complicated professional training and pious titles like "Reverend" and "Your Grace." It was really about the point where creation and salvation meet. Melchizedek is telling us there would always have been a place for priests, even if there'd been no fall, because priests bring our deepest selves to God. Christ is telling us that priesthood is a key to the way God saves us, because priests bring God to us in ways we can comprehend. Creation makes us priests, because it moves us to rejoice in God. Salvation makes us priests, because it shows us God rejoices once again in us. Christ is a priest, once and for all. But the good news is this: his priesthood has saved us, and, because of him, we shall be priests for ever.