
The Eternal Priesthood According To The Order of Melchizedek

A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
The Renewal of Vows service of the Diocese of Atlanta
Tuesday in Holy Week

Grace to you, and peace, you royal priesthood!

In our present Episcopal liturgy, we use the phrase, “eternal priesthood” every time we welcome the newly baptized! We say, “Confess the faith of Christ crucified, proclaim his resurrection, and share with us in his eternal priesthood!” So, right now, you—all of you!—are eternal priests, priests forever, according to the order of Melchizedek! I speak to all of you who are baptized today; you are part of an eternal priesthood of all believers.

I am glad we welcome sisters and brothers from the Lutheran tradition today. Welcome! Thank you! Martin Luther sure knew about the eternal priesthood, and the priesthood of all believers.

Years ago, when I was out in California for college (where I was both religious and spiritual!), I spent my last half year studying at Fuller Seminary, the great evangelical school. That was where I learned to love Martin Luther. My hero.

He wrote a critical little book, titled, “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” which objected to stifling authority, objected to centralized authority, objected to the restriction of communion. It became my text. I despised the Babylonian Captivity of the church, and I still do. My motto was Martin Luther’s “priesthood of all believers.”

I salute Luther; but, in his time, there was another guy named Henry the Eighth, who didn’t like Martin Luther so much. Henry was the young King of England. And, theologically, Henry the Eighth was staunchly Roman Catholic his whole life.

When my hero, Martin Luther, posted the famous 95 Theses on the Wittenburg Door in 1517, it was Henry the Eighth, way over in England, who wrote a retort, a defense, in fact, of the Roman Catholic tradition. It was titled, “Assertio Septem Sacramentum,” “I assert seven sacraments.” (That number was one of the sticking points.)

The pope at the time was so impressed that he gave to Henry one of the most famous titles in all of English history, maybe in most history. He named Henry the Eighth, “Defender of the Faith!” You’ve all heard that title before! It is now one of the English royalty titles forever attached to the crown. When one is the King or Queen of England, one is also titled, “Defender of the Faith, et cetera, et cetera.” (The “et ceteras” really are in there! Four or five pages of them.)

Henry the Eighth never left the theology of the Roman Church. So it is that I teach the faithful community here at the Cathedral Parish of St. Philip: “Henry the Eighth Did Not Start the Episcopal Church!” I ask them to repeat that phrase over and over again. “Henry the Eighth did not start the Episcopal Church!” (Of course, it is Jesus Christ who started the Episcopal Church!)

But it was Martin Luther who was a defender of the faith, not Henry the Eighth. It would be the later wearer of the English crown, Elizabeth – ah! the lovely Queen Elizabeth—who truly distinguished what I proudly call the Anglican tradition of Christianity. Over here at the Cathedral Parish of St. Philip, we are glad to be called

Anglican Catholics. Oh yes, I also love our neighbors across the street, the Roman Catholics. And I love the Lutherans. You might be called the "German Catholics."

Also across the street are the Baptists. I love them, too. They are the American Catholics! I remember what one of my Jewish rabbi friends used to say: "You know, in the American South, it doesn't matter what religious denomination you say you are a part of. You are really a Baptist. Here in the South, we have Baptist Baptists, we have Episcopal Baptists, we have Roman Baptists, and we have Lutheran Baptists. We even have Jewish Baptists!

But it's not just Baptists that we all are.

I am talking this morning about priests. We, all of us baptized chosen people of God, no matter what else we call ourselves, we –you!—are all priests.

The Epistle to the Hebrews has some tangled explanations of priesthood, but one part it gets right. To describe Jesus, the epistle quotes Psalm 110, "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek." Over and over again, Jesus is a priest, "according to the order of Melchizedek."

Now, let me get particular about this. Let me get particular for those of you who know your Bible. Over time, there came to be two types of priests in the Hebrew Scriptures. Read Ezra and Nehemiah if you have forgotten. There was a priesthood of Aaron, and there was a priesthood of the Levites. When you read the frequent phrase, "priests and Levites, priests and Levites," over and over again, the text is really describing two different types of priest. They are not the same.

The priests of Aaron represented the temple of Jerusalem, the centralized, commanding authority, full of fancy vestments and tedious laws. The Levites, oh, the wandering Levites – they were the local priests, from out in the country. They were of the people.

Here's the thing: Jesus is not a priest according to the order of Aaron. Jesus is a priest, forever, not according to the centralized authority. Jesus was a priest according to the order of Melchizedek!

Melchizedek! Where in the world does that priesthood come from? In Genesis, Melchizedek feeds Abram, and he blesses Abram. Abram is so enraptured, so blessed, that he gives Melchizedek a tenth of all he has. A tithe! Ten per cent!

The scripture clearly says Melchizedek was a priest! But, wow, there was certainly no established Hebrew priesthood yet. And there was certainly no Aaron. Melchizedek was the local priest, the sort of holy person, from out in the country, from out in the wilderness even, who would, I believe, later be called one of the Levitical priests, a Levite.

So, a reminder to all of us! The priests of Aaron, and the Levitical priests are not the same priests!

Where did Aaron come from? Well, scripture seems ambivalent about where Aaron came from. We hear, at one point, that Aaron was the brother of Moses?

Well, maybe, that was the polite way of explaining it. Remember the other story. The other story is that Aaron was the antagonist of Moses. Sure, maybe Aaron spoke more eloquently than Moses, but Aaron was also the antagonist. When Moses was up on a wilderness mountain gathering the shekinah glory of God, Aaron was down there making a golden calf for all the sycophants.

Who gave Aaron his priestly influence? It is my belief that Babylon did, the culture of seized authority, the culture of imperious power. Babylonian captivity.

On the other hand, who gave Moses his priestly influence? I think his father-in-law did. Remember where Moses found his wife. It was out in the wilderness, out in Midian. Scripture says quite clearly that the wife of Moses was a daughter of a priest, a priest of Midian. The Midianites were country people, wilderness people.

Kind of like Melchizedek, really, who fascinates Abram not with the glitter of gilded power, but with the reality of true humanity.

Jesus is that kind of priest. And, in case you are wondering by now, so are we. That is the point of today's sermon. I am thankful for Levite priests.

Don't be an Aaronic priest, a priest of Aaron. Be a Levitical priest, a Levite priest. Levites were from the

countryside, from the wilderness, from the local shrines, from all the people.

Martin Luther was right. Baptized into this mystery, we belong to a priesthood of all believers. We are all priests, no matter what else we call ourselves. Do we prefer the title of: deacon, or presbyter, or bishop? Or pastor, or minister? Or lay person? Or how about lawyer or mother, or father or banker, or teacher or business person, or agent or social worker?

The world accords us with titles. The world likes to title us. So does Babylon. Do not be held captive by those titles.

Abram was blessed, and loved, by a local priest named Melchizedek. And Abram took that blessing and believed it. Just after that, in one of the great passages of scripture, Genesis says that "Abram believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness."

Ah, righteousness! I have sure heard that word a lot. We have all heard many a boring sermon that keeps repeating the word, "righteousness." But, as I read the Bible, here is how I have come to understand the spiritual meaning of righteousness. I have come to read that word, "righteousness," as really meaning "relationship." The key to being right with God is to be in relationship. A righteous person is a person who is in relationship. "Abram believed God and it was reckoned to him as relationship."

The centralized priesthood demands things, like the slaughter of specific animals, like their killing, really. The centralized priesthood, the Babylonian priesthood, makes people suffer, too.

There is another priesthood, the priesthood of Jesus, that is just the opposite. Jesus as priest does the suffering himself. He suffers for others. Even after the temple, the reason people kept the Levitical priesthood around is because the local people trusted the local Levite community. The local priests, the local holy people, had lived and suffered with their people.

When I talk to people exploring priesthood, or newly ordained people, a rather basic question emerges. Many of you might already be asking the question this morning. What, actually, do you mean by the word, "priest?" What is a "priest?" Is a priest simply someone who drones the words at the altar and mechanically performs the ritual actions?

No, a priest is this: A priest is someone who bears the burdens of people. A priest is someone who absorbs pain. It doesn't matter where you are doing it: at the altar of your local church, in the living room of your house, in the town council meeting, in your business staff meeting, in a homeless shelter, in a prison. If you have the gift of absorbing the pain of others, you are exercising priesthood.

You don't have to be a great preacher, a great teacher, a great administrator, or even a great pastor. You can be liberal and you can be conservative. If people know you are absorbing pain, you are a priest. If people know you are touching their pain and suffering, you are a priest.

You are priests when you sit in jail with a prisoner, when you cry with a husband at the untimely death of his wife, when you lament after a hospital is bombed in Palestine. You have all done these sorts of things. You have shared suffering and pain. You are priests.

Finally, there is no such thing as a priest without a community. This is another reason why Martin Luther was opposed to private masses, when a priest performed the prayers by himself (usually HIMself!). You can't celebrate Holy Communion by yourself. By definition, an effective priest is wholly in community.

Holy Community is a place of relationship; and, remember relationship is righteousness. Well, the word, "Melchizedek," means, literally, "king of righteousness." "King of relationship!" A "priest forever," according to the order of Melchizedek, is a priest in holy relationship, holy righteousness, holy community.

Yes, a priest handles holy things, holy items. In the Christian community, we call those holy items, "people." A priest handles holy people, with care and suffering. A priest handles the Body of Christ, with care and suffering; and thus the priest blesses us, over and over again.

Thank you, today, thanks to all of you! For being a royal priesthood, an eternal priesthood.

Grace to you, and peace, you "royal priesthood!" You kings and queens of righteousness! You are queens and kings of relationship. Bearing the burdens of people. Absorbing pain.

You bless the world! Thank you! You are saving the world. Your blessing is saving the world! Thank you.

AMEN.

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