

Sunday 18 October 2009

**Jesus our High Priest:
Some Reflections on Hebrews 4: 14-16**

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[Readings – refer to sermon text and preamble below]

Preamble – before the Readings:

Today's Gospel passage – focus on service to humanity, as opposed to jostling for position; but had similar reading a few months ago and preached on it, so not repeating.

Main focus: NT letter to the Hebrews, in which it is said that we can boldly approach God / boldly approach “the throne of grace”, seeing as Jesus is our High Priest and has identified with us. It's a theme often repeated, for instance, around Easter time, esp. on Good Friday.

A passage on which I won't focus, for lack of time, but which leads in very well, hence this preamble, is the reading from the OT book of the prophet Isaiah, also often read at Easter time. It looks at the figure Isaiah referred to as “The Suffering Servant of God” – one who was yet to come, yet somehow Isaiah was inspired by the Spirit of God to write about this “Servant” as if he were writing with hindsight about Jesus.

The familiar words tell us that HE took punishment for OUR sins, when we had all gone astray from God; HE was taken violently, though he had done no violence himself and had “no deceit in his mouth”. He carried our sorrows, took up our infirmities...and by HIS wounds, we are healed. (All familiar words, to those who know Handel's famous “Messiah” Oratorio.)

READINGS

Is 53: 4-12

Canticle 7 from the Prayer Book (verses from Romans 8:28ff)

Heb 4: 14-16

Mark 10: 35-45

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The letter to the Hebrews, whose author we are unsure of, is addressed to Christian people who were also steeped in the traditions of Judaism. It was written to assure them that Jesus is the true and final revelation of the God of Israel.

The letter strongly emphasises the humanity of Jesus, to remind us that we walk a similar road to the one that Jesus walked.

In the first chapters, the letter explains that Jesus is superior to the angels, though for a while he came below them to become one of us. Then the writer takes great care to tell us that Christ is greater than Moses and the other great figures in the faith, and to tell us that, as our High Priest, Christ has superseded all other priests. For those receiving this letter, the role of the High Priest in Jewish ritual was critical, especially as one who would represent the people to God and "stand in their place before God".

One of the challenges often thrown at people of faith is what we call "the problem of suffering". If God is loving and good, how come there is so much suffering in the world? For the majority of people though, believing or non-believing, it is not the philosophical question that bothers them. It is the practical experience question. It is the why-is-this-happening-to-me question, or why is this happening to us / to those around us / to our world.

We find ourselves asking, "why is this happening, and what does it mean, and how am I going to cope, and what can I do about it?"

When the question turns to God, which it usually does, it is still not usually the abstract level that puzzles us, rather it is the desire to encounter God and to have an explanation from God.

Job cries,

"Oh, that I knew where I might find him,  
that I might come even to his dwelling!  
I would lay my case before him,  
and fill my mouth with arguments.  
I would learn what he would answer me,  
and understand what he would say to me."

And the psalmist (Psalm 22) cries,

"God, my God, why have you abandoned me?  
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?  
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;  
and by night, but find no rest."

Many of us, in our various individual circumstances, have found ourselves similarly crying out, "God, why? Why is this happening to me? What did I do to deserve this? And why can't I find you to get an explanation?"

I wonder whether part of our problem is that we are asking God for something which we don't need, and which God never promised to give us and perhaps simply can't give us. It is commonly said that God gives meaning to our lives, but I wonder whether that is perhaps not really true in the ways we have often expected it to be true. (Elaborate...)

Where has God promised to give us meaning? I can find passages of scripture where it speaks of God calling us, of God giving us direction and purpose, and perhaps we could even describe these as adding up to God giving us meaningful tasks, but is that the same thing? Because when we are suffering, our cries more often seem to be for meaning in the sense of explanations.

We want to believe that our suffering means something. We want to know how it can be explained. We expect that either our suffering has some greater purpose in achieving something of great value, or that at least the suffering was deserved, was a just punishment for something we've done, so that we can move on. For as unpleasant as that might be, at least it will make some kind of sense and give us something we can do about it.

In Kansas, USA, there is a church congregation who have bought into this sort of expectation with very nasty results. They are so sure that every instance of suffering must be explainable in terms of divine punishment, that they have taken it upon themselves to provide the explanation in the most callous and heartless of ways.

For instance, they picketed funerals of military personnel killed in Iraq, to announce that the reason God is having US soldiers killed overseas is that the USA has gone soft on moral issues. And when those Amish girls were horrifically killed in the recent school shooting, they were planning to turn up in Pennsylvania to picket those funerals too to promote their same hate-filled message. What a bizarre contrast to the Amish community themselves, who turned up to the funeral of the gunman to pray for him and his family and make clear their desire to extend forgiveness and reconciliation.

Now, most of us do not resort to such obscene gestures in our search for meaning in times of suffering. Most of us are not arrogant enough to presume to know what God is thinking, and we are more likely to turn on ourselves than to savage others, but our expectation that there must be answers and explanations is still much the same. We seem unable or unwilling to contemplate that there might not be an explanation or a meaning, that things might just happen.

And yet, we do not find God meeting our demands for explanations of human suffering. By the end of the story of Job, he is satisfied, but he hasn't received an answer to his questions. The reader is given a glimpse into the dispute between God and his accuser, called "satan", and how Job's suffering is related to that, but Job is never given that explanation, and there is no suggestion that it is typical. Even if it explained Job's circumstances, ours may still have no such explanation or meaning.

That is not to say there is NO meaning with God. On the contrary, relationship with God brings SIGNIFICANT meaning and purpose to our lives. It does so, both in the big scheme of things – knowing to whom we relate and ultimately belong and to whom we owe allegiance – and also in giving meaning to the details of our lives. But we are not promised that every aspect of life that is difficult or produces suffering, will come with a label attached, supplying particular reasons and meaning to that specific issue.

What is promised us is not explanations, but solidarity. As our reading from the letter to the Hebrews said, Jesus is a high priest who is able to sympathise with what we go through, because he has been through such sufferings himself. Therefore, it says, we can approach God boldly, knowing that we will receive grace to help us in our time of need. It does not say that we will receive explanations. It does not say that we will find meaning in our suffering. And when it says we will receive grace to help in time of need, it does not say that the suffering will end.

I wish it did. Sometimes – simplistic theological explanations are offered that tie everything up neatly, but in time, we come to see that they don't satisfy reason or experience.

These verses about Jesus as our great High Priest begin by saying that should "hold firmly to the faith we profess", that is to say that we should "hang in there with Jesus" and not give up. Why?

Because whatever we might be going through and however much it might tempt us to give it all away, Jesus has been through as much and more and survived to tell the story. And what's more, he is now our High Priest - that is to say that he is the one who will represent us to God.

In summary, the point being made is that God will accept what Jesus says and that Jesus can relate to our predicaments fully because he's been through them himself, so we can be sure that he'll speak in our favour and God will generously shower us with grace and mercy.

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I end with a paraphrase of that passage:

... Stand firm in the faith we've already put our hands up to. After all, the one who will present us to God and speak on our behalf — our great high priest — is Jesus, and as God's own Son we can be sure he has God's ear. We can also be sure that he can relate to the realities we have to live with, because he has already been through everything we have to go through — weakness, doubts and torments — and all without selling out to sin. What more could we want in a high priest?!

So let's not be timid. Whenever we're in need of help, let's walk right up to the throne of God and ask, for our God is extravagantly welcoming and generous — only too happy to wipe our debts and help us out.

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*[I am indebted to comments from Nathan Nettleton, pastor of a Baptist Church in Melbourne, Australia, which follows a communion liturgy and lectionary readings similar to ours, and posts his reflections on the Internet.]*