

# 29<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Year

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The New Testament uses many images to describe Jesus' role: Messiah; King; Lord; teacher; shepherd; healer; miracle worker. Clearly the image of 'Lord' and King appealed to the disciples. It implied they would have special places of power and prestige in his Kingdom. Each of these images gives us only a partial glimpse of who Jesus is. We need all of them for a well-rounded picture not only of who Jesus is, but also of our place in the scheme of things. Today's readings bring before us a different set of images: suffering servant; high priest.

Why does the Letter to the Hebrews call Jesus a priest? For the Jews, priesthood was hereditary. You did not become a priest. If you were a male descendent of Aaron, that very fact made you a priest. Unlike the rabbis, you did not need any special knowledge or skills, but you alone could carry out the sacrifices the law required. Even today, there are blessings that only a man named Cohen can give, and not a rabbi. One of the buildings up for the annual RIBA prize this year was a Jewish cemetery chapel. The official explained that they had to incorporate a separate room for anyone named 'Cohen' as they could not be in the same room as a coffin. For the same reason as a tree canopy counted as roof-cover trees could not be planted close to graves.

Jesus was not descended from the priestly line of Aaron, but the royal line of David. He is a priest because he is the Son of God. The role of a priest is to be a bridge between the human and divine, to bring our needs, our praise, and our thanksgiving to God, and to be a channel of God's blessings to us. In the Old Testament, this meant offering sacrifices of food, or incense, or the lives of animals to God. These fulfilled the commandments given to Moses, but they were of limited value.

Jesus is a priest because he is Son of God, and because he is also Son of Mary. Jesus is fully human. He shares our human weaknesses in every respect except sin. He is put to the test, as we are, but because his will is in complete harmony with the Father, he does not sin. Because he is also Son of God, fully divine, Jesus spans the gap between the human and the divine. "Atonement" means 'at-one-ment'. God and human beings are reconciled, made one in Christ. By his obedience, he has made amends for all our faults and sins.

He does not need to offer the imperfect sacrifices of the Old Testament, because, by giving his life on the cross, he has offered the one perfect sacrifice. In this way he brings to completion the mystery that began when he took on human flesh in the womb of Mary. Now the human and the divine are joined together in eternity. Jesus has risen from the dead, and returned to the Father. Sacrifices are no longer necessary. Jesus is there at the Father's right hand to intercede for us. He is the supreme high priest. His precious blood, shed on the altar of the Cross, washes away the sins of the entire world, from the beginning of time, until the last day. This why, when we pray through Christ our Lord, our prayers are pleasing to the Father. Our Father looks on us and sees us made clean and new in his Son, bright with the radiance of his light.

At the Last Supper Jesus said to the apostles, "Do this in memory of me." Through the outward signs of bread and wine, he enables us to be present at the Sacrifice on Calvary. Gathered in this church we are lifted outside of time and space into the presence of the Father. Christ uses the lips of the human priest to say "This is MY body...this is MY blood." The Mass is truly a sacrifice, not because it has independent value, like the sacrifices of the Old Testament, but because it has NO independent value. What we offer, in truth, is not bread and wine, but the sacrifice of Christ offered once upon the Cross. The Mass is Christ's prayer of thanksgiving to the Father in which we are privileged to share. Through Christ we bring to the Father all our anxieties and suffering, our hopes and joys. Nothing can be more wonderful, or more humbling, than for a priest to know that, despite his failings Our Lord has chosen him to serve in this way as Our Lord's instrument in uniting each one of you to the Father through the prayer and sacrifice of Christ.