

Hebrews 4:14-5:10

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[0:00] Let's read Hebrews chapter 4 verse 14. For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.

He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward since he himself is beset with weakness. Because of this he is bound to offer sacrifice for his own sins just as he does for those of the people.

And no one takes this honour for himself but only when called by God just as Aaron was. So also Christ didn't exalt himself to be made a high priest but was appointed by him who said to him you are my son.

Today I have begotten you. As he says also in another place you are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. In the days of his flesh Jesus offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to him who was able to save him from death.

And he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.

[1:38] Being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek. The word of God. And I want this morning to unpack the idea that Jesus is a great high priest for us.

Because that is actually what Good Friday is all about. As Jesus dies on the cross he is acting as a priest. Now at first that might seem like an odd thing to say because as we heard the reading earlier he doesn't look much like a priest does he?

He is not wearing priestly clothes. And he is not from the tribe of Levi. He did not spend much time in the temple during his ministry.

The few times the temple is mentioned it is normally kind of about the temple being destroyed. He looks much more like a prophet than a priest doesn't he? In the crucifixion account when then king is in the sign over his head.

But the writer to the Hebrews is very eager for us to understand Jesus in terms of priesthood. And I've got three points. So firstly the first one is you need a priest.

[2:46] Secondly God appointed Jesus as priest. And thirdly he does the job perfectly. So firstly you need a priest. As you woke up this morning you probably were thinking that were you?

I don't know what you were thinking. Maybe you thought I need a girlfriend. Or I need a husband or a wife. Maybe you thought I need a babysitter. Or I need a salesman to sell me something. Or I need some home help. Maybe you thought you needed a lawyer. I don't know. I want to suggest whoever you are you need the services of a priest. Far from being an irrelevance to life in the 21st century.

We desperately need a priest. Now priesthood sounds really old fashioned doesn't it? And distant. So we know we need IT technicians and fibre optic broadband.

We need builders and plumbers and doctors and nurses. But when was the last time you looked in Yellow Pages to get the services of a priest? The government doesn't actually sweat over the economy and over the NHS.

[3:54] But no one's lying in bed at night agonising about the future of priesthood in the UK. But we should be. Priesthood is as vital a job today as it has ever been.

So we need to start by getting rid of our mental images of priests. Get rid of the guys in nightdresses. Or women becoming priests in the C of E. Today priest tends to just mean a religious person doesn't it? A religious official.

But when the writer to the Hebrews uses the language of priest. He's got something very specific in mind. The Old Testament ideas. So have a look at verse 1. He gives us a definition. Every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of God.

So on behalf of men in relation to God. To offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. And there are three parts to this definition I want to unpack. So firstly, priests act on behalf of men.

That's the first basic idea we need to get clear on. At the heart of priesthood is the idea of representation. Priests don't act on their own behalf.

[5:03] They represent others. They're representatives. Now, we do get this idea in other jobs, don't we, occasionally. So professional footballers have their agents. And the job of an agent is to negotiate deals on behalf of their client.

That they represent the interests of their client. So they negotiate a good salary or time putting out contracts and deal with the media and so on. That they represent the player.

Or your MP does something similar, don't they? As they sit in Parliament and vote, they represent you. So if they vote to go to war or to change the speed limit, their actions implicate you.

They make a big difference to your life. You're involved. In the same way, priests, verse 1, act on behalf of men. They're our representatives.

So the point of a priest is that that man is wearing your shoes. He's doing whatever he's doing on your behalf.

[6:09] Second thing to see in the definition. The action of a priest has God as its object. Have a look. Every high priest is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God.

He acts in relation to God. So the object of a banker deals with is money, isn't it?

Or the object of a footballer deals with is football. Teachers deal with children. Doctors deal with the sick. But what do priests deal with? They deal with God.

If, I don't want to say it reverently, but it's as though the primary customer that a priest is dealing with is God himself.

God is the priest's customer, not the people. God is the audience watching the actions of the priest. He represents the people to God.

[7:14] Third thing. The priest's main action is offering. So every high priest is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God. Why?

To offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. Chapter 8 verse 3 says the same thing. Every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices.

That is the action a priest takes when he's acting as a priest. So MPs vote and teachers teach.

Priests offer. A priest who isn't offering anything isn't acting as a priest. He has to offer. He has to offer to God on behalf of men.

So they represent us to God by offering sacrifices. Now, as we kind of get that idea, it might sort of start to sound like this is like a lobbyist at Westminster or something. You know how big businesses pay people lots of money to try and pull strings in places of power.

[8:20] So is that what a priest does with God? Are they lobbyists in heaven trying to represent us to God, to win favours for us from a reluctant deity?

Is it a kind of form of bribe? Actually, in pagan religion, in false religion, that's often how it works. So the idea is you go to the priest and he'll do stuff. He'll work the system.

You come to church and you use the priest to work the system to get the divine blessing. But look at what verse 4 says. No one takes this honour for himself, but only when called by God, just as Aaron was.

It's vital to remember that the very role of priest isn't a human invention, but a divine one. God invented priesthood.

God wrote the job description. And God oversees the appointment process. So priests aren't lobbyists that we pick to kind of represent us to God.

[9:32] They are appointed by God for the very purpose of representing us to himself. They have the job of dealing with sin.

God himself sets up priesthood not to keep us back, but so that we can access him. God himself sets up priesthood not to keep us back, but so that we can access him.

The presence of God to be mediated to us. We need to approach God through a priest acting on our behalf.

So I wonder what you make of that definition. It's very easy to misunderstand someone's job description, isn't it? If someone tells me that they're a user interface designer, I have no idea what they're talking about.

I want to say the same to you this morning. That priesthood isn't what you think it is. The job of a priest isn't to maintain architecture around England.

[11:00] It's not to hold your hand at birth and funerals and weddings. The job of a priest is to represent you to God so you can approach him.

God is not okay with you as you are. Without a priest you can't draw near to him and experience his favour.

Ever since the flaming sword was placed at the entrance to the Garden of Eden to keep Adam and Eve out, we have needed the service of a priest.

Just as you can't walk into Buckingham Palace, neither can you draw near to God without a priest. So that's the first thing, you need a priest. Secondly, God appoints Jesus as priest.

So in verse 1-4 the writer has given us a general description of priests. And then in verse 5-10 the writer applies this idea to Jesus.

[11:58] So the author is kind of inviting us to put Jesus into the category of priest. Try reading his life through the grid of priesthood.

So take the book of Leviticus and sort of like an acetate, put it over his life and see what happens. Take all the priestly instructions and apply them to him.

And the author is saying, this isn't just his idea that he's cooked up. As he's read his Bible, verse 5 and 6, as he's read Psalm 2 and Psalm 110, which is what he quotes, he says the Old Testament itself encourages us to make this connection.

So both of these psalms are describing the exaltation of God's Messiah. These quotes are describing Christ's resurrection and ascension.

And they tell us that when Jesus rose from the dead, God was appointing him as high priest. So when God says, today I have begotten you, it's like the job offer after the interview, saying congratulations we've appointed you.

[13:22] It's as though God is hiring Jesus. He is accepting Jesus' services as priest. He gives him this job to do to act on behalf of men in relation to God.

When there's a recruitment process, people often want to know, who's got the job? We're waiting to hear for it to be revealed. Well the writer is telling us, the priest, the great priest that God has appointed is Jesus.

And the cross is what gives him, is what qualifies him to do that. It is his qualifications for this role.

And grasping this will transform your understanding of Jesus' life, and particularly his crucifixion.

Lots of people are confused, aren't they, about what Jesus came to do. So when they look at Jesus' life, they see someone who suffered for speaking the truth, someone who was a fine example.

They maybe see a prophet who has some great powerful things to say. Others maybe see a king of certain sorts, a very powerful, influential cultural force.

[14:35] It's the kind of thing Oprah Winfrey might say. But the writer to the Hebrews is saying, at bottom, we must see Christ's work as the work of a priest.

The thing that Jesus came to do was to act as a representative on behalf of men in relation to God to offer sacrifice.

That is the foundation of Christ's work. And his job as a prophet is to unpack that, and spell out his job to us. His job as king is the fruit of his job as priest.

But when you start to look at Christ's life as priest, you start to see its true glory. So, have a look at verse 7. See, what is going on in Gethsemane? That's what's being talked about there, isn't it?

When Christ's sweat became like great drops of blood, we're told Jesus offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears.

[15:40] You see, the writer here wants us to understand that prayer in Gethsemane as priestly. He puts it between two statements about priesthood, verse 6 and verse 10.

He says, Jesus offered up prayers. So, we mustn't think, when Jesus said, not my will, but yours be done, we mustn't think that he's resigning to his fate.

We mustn't see that as Jesus' passivity. No, he's not saying, your will be done to me.

He's saying, your will be done by me. With that prayer, he is sharpening his resolve. He's sharpening the knife with which he will sacrifice himself.

You see, when you see Jesus as a priest, you see his death is an action on his part. It is not just a suffering or something that he experiences.

[16:56] It is something that he does. He is not just acted upon. He acts. His death is a priestly action.

See, this Good Friday, many people can see that Jesus suffers. Few can see that he offered. Many people can see a lamb, but cannot see that he is also the priest offering up the lamb.

They can see a victim, but they cannot see a priest. So, we've got to understand, haven't we?

There is no coercion at Calvary at all.

Every second of what he is doing is voluntarily experienced. Every second, Jesus is deliberately and decisively and actively pouring out his soul to death, offering himself up.

that the divine son, someone said, takes his body and his soul and pulls them apart. The cross is the most energetic moment in Jesus' whole life.

[18:18] It is the sprint finish at the end of a long marathon. At the moment of his death, it is like he is like a powerful athlete. He's not kind of limping across the finish line.

He is leaping across it. Because there, he is not just being sacrificed, he is sacrificing himself. So, friends, if on Easter Sunday, for you, it is the moment of victory and Good Friday is the tragedy, you've deeply misunderstood it.

See, Easter Sunday, if you like, is like the medal ceremony at the Olympics. It's when the victory is visible. It's when you get the medal and the flag goes up, the pole and the national anthem plays.

But the crucial action happens as Christ gives his life. The priest does as he's been directed by his father and offers himself up as the victim in the place of a vast number of sinners.

So that's the second thing. Jesus is appointed as priest. Thirdly, Jesus does the job perfectly.

People can do jobs in different ways, can't they? I'm sure you've had workmen come and do shoddy work in your house sometimes.

[19:36] Or you've experienced poor service. Or maybe a doctor's misdiagnosis knows something. Or a secretary's been sloppy. Well, what quality of work does Jesus do? How good is he at representing us to God?

Is this a priest that we can recommend to others? Look at verse 9. Being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.

That phrase, being made perfect, doesn't mean that he becomes morally perfect, because Christ is always perfect. It describes the fact that he is completely fitted to be the priest required.

He is perfectly equipped to represent us. Having done exactly as the father asked of him and offered the perfect sacrifice, he is now able to offer that sacrifice up to God in prayer forever.

Because of his obedient death, in verse 8, he's perfectly placed to represent us. And so he can be, this morning, the source of eternal salvation.

[20:56] Jesus can now offer that perfect finished work to the father on behalf of others. That there is perfect agreement between the father and the son about what's going on.

Jesus hasn't come up with this idea behind the father's back. It is the task the father has assigned for him. And so he provides eternal salvation to those he represents.

There's no threat to this salvation. It is absolute and final. At the end of the letter, the writer will mention the blood of the eternal covenant.

Jesus now simply has to show the palms of his hands to the father. And he can have anything he wishes. And I think, to finish, it's very easy for us to deny this perfection, isn't it?

It's very easy to lose sight of this perfection, the perfect job that our high priest has done. And if you've seen the film *The Mission*, which is all about a Catholic, some Catholic priests going to try and reach a South American tribe with Christianity.

[22:11] One of the key scenes in the film, I think, is actually one of the most tragic. So there's a guy called Rodrigo Mendoza, who's this strong, kind of muscly guy, who, but one day, an act of rage kills his brother.

And a priest finds him in the cell and he's distraught. And he says, there's no redemption for me. But the priest tells him, there is redemption if you do penance.

And then what kind of happens? It's probably the best moment in the film. This guy, Rodrigo Mendoza, single-handedly pulls this huge sort of bag of metal stuff up this huge mountain range to go and reach these remote tribes.

And he has to stretch every muscle to do it. And he kind of makes some progress and then he slides back down again. But he perseveres and he gets to the top of this mountain, eventually. And he climbs up this sheer, waterfall face. And it's all very well shot. And finally, he reaches the tribe. And as soon as he gets there, one of the priests cuts the bag of huge heavy metal and it rolls down the hill.

[23:26] And he breaks down, he weeps for joy. And it's meant to be a moment of redemption. It's supposed to make us be amazed, but it's actually tragic, I think.

It is so wrong. It encapsulates what's wrong with Roman Catholic theology. because Christ has done it all. He's the perfect priest who's offered the perfect sacrifice.

So there's nothing for you or I to add to it or to top it up with. There's no more offering that you have to do in order to get the redemption.

So Christian, you might maybe not be tempted to pull around bags of metal wherever you go, but we can be tempted to add to the work of Christ in other ways, can't we? There are all kinds of things that show we deny the perfection of Christ's ministry and a lack of boldness in prayer would be one of them.

That's what chapter 4 verse 14 is about. Confidence in prayer. Understanding this produces. Or maybe a lack of openness in identifying ourselves with Jesus.

[24:35] Chapter 4 verse 14. If you're here when you're not a Christian, I'd want to assure you there's nothing you've done, there's no sin or crime you could reveal to me which Christ's work as priest is not sufficient to deal with.

He is a perfect priest who can deal with your sin completely and restore you to God. So this good Friday, let's remember, we're not celebrating a victim who makes a great comeback three days later.

We're celebrating a great high priest who offered himself up to God to pay for our sins and he offers his priestly services of eternal salvation to everyone who will receive him today.

He truly has the most important job in the world. Let's pray.