

A mother went to wake her son for church one Sunday morning. When she knocked on his door, he said, "I'm not going!" "Why not?" asked his mother. "I'll give you two good reasons," he said. "One, they don't like me. Two, I don't like them." His mother replied, "I'll give you two good reasons why YOU WILL go to church. One, you're 47 years old. Two, you're the vicar!"

I rather hope we never get to that stage, although the idea of just being 47 years old is quite appealing.

I do sometimes wonder how people in churches around the time of the writing the New Testament actually got on. And perhaps more so, how the disciples actually got on. I'm going to come back to that reading from Mark's gospel later, because it does pretty much ask that question.

But first, I'd like us to consider that reading from Hebrews. This is one of those readings that seems to throw around a few phrases and it takes a bit of digging around to understand what it is saying.

First it talks about High Priests. Priests, and indeed high priests, were fundamental to Judaism because it was through the priest that you were able to interact with God. It was to the priest that the people brought their gifts and their sacrifices, and it was the priest who then presented them to God. Those gifts were the appropriate share of their crops and their earnings that they should bring to God, and those sacrifices were the way in which they atoned for their sins – received forgiveness for their sins. So the priest was vital to them.

So the Hebrews reading starts with, 'Every high priest is selected from among the people and is appointed to represent the people in matters related to God'. You couldn't just decide you were going to be a priest – you had to be appointed. And of course for more than 11/12ths of the people of Israel it was not a possibility. To be a priest you had to be a descendant of the first High Priest who God appointed which was Aaron, the brother of Moses.

Going back to the beginning of the Israelites we have Abraham, the father of the Israelites, the man who God promised to build a nation on. He had a son called Isaac who had a son called Jacob, who God later renamed as Israel. Jacob had 12 sons who became the heads of the 12 tribes of Israel, and Jacob's 3rd son was called Levi – his tribe being the Levites. And from the Levites came Moses and his brother Aaron. So, unless you were part of that particular part of that particular tribe of Israel, the Levites, you could not be a priest.

But then, of course, Jesus was from the tribe of Judah – so how could he be a High Priest?

In Genesis we have this somewhat strange story which happened to Abraham – before God changed his name from Abram to Abraham.

"After Abram returned from his victory over Kedorlaomer and all his allies, the king of Sodom went out to meet him in the valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley).

And Melchizedek, the king of Salem and a priest of God Most High, brought Abram some bread and wine. Melchizedek blessed Abram with this blessing:

"Blessed be Abram by God Most High,

Creator of heaven and earth.

And blessed be God Most High,

who has defeated your enemies for you."

Then Abram gave Melchizedek a tenth of all the goods he had recovered."

So God had appointed Melchizedek as a priest before Aaron, before Levites even existed. And what our Hebrews reading is telling us is that Jesus was priest for ever in the order of Melchizedek. So Jesus appears to be a priest breaking all the Jewish rules – which with Jesus seems pretty much par for the course. So how was his priesthood different from those descending from Aaron?

Well, our writer of Hebrews makes it clear that the priests he is talking about not only have to make sacrifices to atone for the sins of the people they are representing but also for their own sins – which of course Jesus didn't have to do. We do know that Jesus was tempted by the Devil to sin, but he did not succumb. So Jesus, who was a human alongside all the other people he lived with, knew what it must be like to sin, but didn't sin himself.

And there is another line in that Hebrews reading. "Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him." I must admit that when I read this I was puzzled for a while as to what it meant. It was that phrase, 'he learned obedience' that was confusing me, and I am grateful to one or two commentators for explaining it. My immediate reaction to that phrase was, 'so Jesus wasn't obedient to God, but learnt to become obedient through what he suffered.' But the idea of Jesus not being obedient seemed very wrong, and was surely close to Jesus sinning. However what this phrase actually means is that by watching others Jesus learned what obedience means to a human being. He learned what is required of a human being to move from being disobedient to being obedient – which he wouldn't have known as he had never been disobedient. And it showed me how Jesus' time on earth taught him things as well as all the things he taught us.

So what the Hebrews passage is telling us is that Jesus is a new type of High Priest, the person through whom we can approach God, whose priesthood is not temporary like the priesthood of the descendants of Aaron, but is eternal, and of course the High Priest through whom we can receive forgiveness for our sins whereas the forgiveness given by the priests of Aaron was just temporary.

And when we turn to our reading from Mark's gospel, we find Jesus, the High Priest, our way to God, marching towards Jerusalem and giving the disciples, and another group who were following them, a very detailed description of what will happen to him in Jerusalem. Even before he tells them this (because he is telling them this for the 3rd time so they must have known why they were heading for Jerusalem) we are told that the disciples were astonished and the other followers were afraid. And I'm not surprised. Wouldn't you be?

And then we get to the James and John incident. I mean, what were they thinking? All that Jesus had told them, and showed them about the Kingdom of God that they were all striving to move towards, and James and John want to be, to be fair not number one, but numbers two and three, above their disciple colleagues, when they arrive in glory.

But isn't Jesus wonderful? If you or I were in that position and someone said to you that they wanted to promote themselves in the organisation above everyone else, wouldn't you be more than a little cross with them? Is that really how they thought this place was going to work? But Jesus' response was so kind. "You don't know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with?". And even when they say they can, but really, did these disciples who so regularly misunderstood Jesus even understand the question, Jesus very gently says, Fine – but what you

ask is not up to me. Those spaces have already been allocated. Such a caring response. So gentle. So loving. So kind.

Erm. Les so from the other 10 disciples and there was a row – I rather suspect – because the other disciples, rather than questioning whether James and John were good enough, resented the fact that they had asked first. But whatever, there is a disagreement, and Jesus has to come and calm them all down. And the reading finishes with a reminder of why he is there at all.

“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

So where does this leave us? For me it gives an enhanced picture of what Jesus was actually like. Yes, we already knew he was without sin. We knew he was the son of God. But today we have learned how part of his time on earth was spent learning what it was like to be a human being on earth. I sometimes wonder what Jesus did for the 10, 15 years or so when he would have been considered to be a man rather than a child but stayed in the village of Nazareth, being a village carpenter, and this says to me that during this period he was learning – learning how to be an adult human being along with the rest of his village. I see Jesus as someone who always knew that he was the Son of God – because John at the beginning of his gospel tells us that Jesus was with his Father from the beginning of time, but he has only been on earth for a relatively short period of time.

We have learned how Jesus intercedes for us with his Father God – by being a High Priest himself – a very different sort of Priest to all the other priests that were around – a difference made clear by him being a priest of the order of Melchizedek – a man who was the first recorded priest, who was made priest by God himself. When we pray, we pray to God, through Jesus, with the power of the Holy Spirit. That Hebrews reading helps us to understand that.

But we have also seen how we must always remain servants – not try and jump above people, certainly where there is no reason. Jesus came to serve, and that is what we must do. And Jesus served anyone who wanted to be served, he would talk to anyone who wanted to listen, he would eat with anyone who wanted his company, there were simply no restrictions in his attempts to tell people about his father God. I wish I could live my life without the sort of barriers that it is so easy for us to put in place – but then, after all, we are only human. We can but try.

Amen.