

# Editorial article: *The Priesthood of Christ in Hebrews*

JOY TETLEY

Hebrews is arguably one of the most exciting and revolutionary books in the New Testament – not least in what it says about God, Jesus and priesthood. The theological implications of this document are nothing short of staggering; it is put together with an urgent passion which is both carefully argued and beautifully expressed; it has provided the Church with rich source material for liturgy and hymnody, not to mention a number of ‘purple passages’ dear to the heart of many Christians. Yet, as a whole, over the centuries it has suffered a surprising lack of attention. The Pauline corpus has attracted far more exploration and devotion. In fact, for many Christian folk, Hebrews remains virtually a ‘closed book’. There are no doubt various reasons for this, but one which is frequently articulated is that the language and thought of the epistle are too complex and remote for people far removed from the cultic and ritual concerns of first century Judaism. Some, indeed, find the sacrificial terminology positively repulsive! One leading Hebrews scholar (R. Williamson) has gone so far as to suggest that the epistle should be excluded from the New Testament canon or, at least, relegated to an appendix. ‘Where Hebrews is concerned’, he says, ‘we do a greater service to the unknown Christian who composed it by a realistic acceptance of its contemporary irrelevance than by . . . paying it hypocritical lip-service’.<sup>1</sup>

‘Contemporary irrelevance’? Surely nothing could be further from the truth. Rather, this document invites us to share a vision which is of crucial importance, ‘yesterday, today and for ever’. In particular, for ‘today’, what the author perceives about the priesthood of Jesus has a vital contribution to make to contemporary debate about the nature of priesthood – and one which, thus far, has been given much too little weight. It is interesting that the one book in the New Testament which explores the significance of Christ as Priest receives but scant attention in recent attempts to put ordained priesthood under the microscope. So, for example, the 1986 Report entitled ‘The Priesthood of the Ordained Ministry’ devotes 2 paragraphs out of 148 to the teaching of Hebrews.<sup>2</sup>

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1 R. Williamson, ‘Hebrews and Doctrine’ *Expository Times*, vol. 81 (1969-70).

2 Board for Mission and Unity, *The Priesthood of the Ordained Ministry*, GS694, London 1986, paras 46 and 47 (pp 24-6).

Why this reticence? Is not Christian priesthood (however defined) intimately linked with that of Christ? As R. C. Moberley put it, 'What Christ is, the Church, which is Christ's mystical body, must also be. . . . If Christ is priestly, the Church is priestly'<sup>1</sup>. More recently, Max Thurian has emphasized the same point: 'The Church, the body of Christ, is the sign and instrument of the unique priesthood of Christ, for the salvation of mankind'.<sup>2</sup> The link is crucial. To say the least, then, it is surely of considerable interest to explore as thoroughly as possible the understanding of Christ's priesthood as found in Hebrews. Such an exploration may indeed open up some surprising, not to say challenging, perspectives.

### The Author's Background and Context

Inevitably, any writing expresses in some degree the experience of the writer and the influence of his or her context. This is equally true of biblical writings. Thus, when we are seeking to understand the theological approach to priesthood taken by the author of Hebrews, it is of some importance to ask questions about his<sup>3</sup> character and background. The examination of such questions may help shed light on his vision.

What, then, does the text suggest about its author? First, that he was a person to whom worship meant a great deal. His writing is permeated by the language and ethos of worship: draw near, offer, contemplate, make intercession; priesthood, sacrifice, heavenly worship etc. The whole text is shot through with evocation of liturgical themes. The whole text invites a response of worshipful commitment and obedience. And its call to consider, reflect, contemplate and look into Jesus strongly suggests that our author was given to such active pondering and receptivity. It is perhaps no accident that one of the major influences Hebrews has had on the Church has been in the areas of liturgy, hymnody and worship.

Our author was also a person to whom God meant everything. His epistle is characterised by its theocentricity. God is the dominant subject throughout. And what a God! A God of paradox – 'a consuming fire', 'to whom vengeance belongs', and who must be worshipped with reverence and awe, a living God, into whose hands it is a fearful thing to fall; yet, at the same time, the source of tender mercy and grace, who can be approached with *parresia*, with confident boldness and complete freedom of speech. This God is a God of passion. This God is passionately concerned, in every sense of that phrase – and his passion expresses itself in many and various ways. But it has one supreme focus in him who is God's comprehensive self-expression, the one through whom the divine paradox can be most fruitfully experienced – Jesus.

For our author, with his uncompromising theocentricity, was *clearly devoted to Jesus*. He uses the name Jesus, usually without qualification, over a

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1 R. C. Moberley, *Ministerial Priesthood*, London 1907 ed., p 251.

2 Max Thurian, *Priesthood and Ministry*, Oxford 1983, p 9.

3 Despite Harnack's attractive suggestion that the writer was Priscilla, I remain more or less convinced that the author was male!

dozen times, and it invariably comes in an emphatic position at the beginning or end of a phrase. So, for example, that familiar phrase contained in 12:2, which is usually translated 'looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith', reads literally, 'looking away into the pioneer and perfecter of our faith Jesus'. Our author had obviously been captivated by Jesus and enjoyed a living and active relationship with him. But where did that leave his God-centredness? Where did it leave that monotheism so fundamental to his faith as a Jew (and he was surely Jewish)? His ongoing experience of Jesus, and his reflection on that experience, pushed him out into deep theological waters – and out of those depths has come one of the most adventurous and creative writings of the New Testament. As we shall see, what he has to say is decidedly radical, and has far-reaching consequences for an understanding of the way God is and the way God works.

Our author, then, is a *bold and creative theologian*, whose theology is born of religious experience and reflection. He is not a detached academic. He starts with a faith which goes on to seek understanding. He is totally involved with his material for, in his view, it does not simply constitute an opportunity for an interesting intellectual exercise – it is a matter of life and death.

It is clear, too, that the writer is *very inclusive in his understanding of God*. As there are many aspects to divine communication (cf. 1:1), so there are many ways of apprehending the mystery who is Jesus. He is, amongst other things, God's wisdom, God's mouthpiece, God's word, God's servant, God's true Adam, God's eternal Son – and he is for *everyone*, of that the author has no doubt. Above all, for our author, Jesus is the enfleshment of God's priesthood. Perceiving Jesus as priest – as the expression of God's priesthood – is something unique to the author of Hebrews amongst New Testament writers. Only he explicitly expounds the significance of Jesus in these terms (though there were many basic ingredients around common to other writers). The writer surely came to his apprehension in the context of worship (Christian worship) – priesthood is, after all, a very liturgical image. For our author, it drew together so many ways of looking at Jesus – and implied astounding things about God. It was a vision he felt impelled to share.

Stylistically, our author's work is *carefully organized, carefully expressed and characterised by a carefully argued enthusiasm*. He doesn't let his enthusiasm run away with him or tie him in knots, as is sometimes the case with Paul! He must also have had a keenly poetic sensitivity. One has only to look at the epistle's opening chapter to appreciate that. Whatever raw materials the author was using, he has created there a theological poem of awesome beauty and intensity. It has a profound religio-aesthetic effect, whether or not one does a detailed theological analysis of its constituent parts.

*Our author is essentially a preacher*. He calls his work a 'word of exhortation' (*anekesthe tou logou tes parakleseos* 13:22), almost a technical term in the New Testament for a homily (cf. eg Acts 13:15). In fact, what we are doing

when we read Hebrews is listening to a sermon – about an hour long, short by the standards of the day! If you ever have opportunity, it's a very worthwhile exercise to read through the whole of Hebrews at one sitting, bearing in mind that it is a sermon. You may be surprised at the way it changes your perceptions.

As a preacher, our author *has a deep and urgent pastoral concern for his community*. He felt them to be in a dangerous spiritual condition – and he felt constrained to say so in no uncertain terms. He speaks what is in many ways a hard prophetic word to his community, yet that word is infused with the passion of real caring – a longing that his beloved brethren should grow into maturity and move on towards the joy that was set before them. He, like the God he worships, is passionately concerned – and, at times, that leads to strong language. Nonetheless, like the good pastor and preacher that he is, more often than not he uses the first person plural, thus including himself in his exhortations. He also starts where his people are, by using a good deal of material that would be familiar to them. Typically, however, he uses much of that material in a surprising way, thus demanding from his congregation a radical shift in perspective, a new way of seeing. As we shall observe, this facility is well illustrated by the way he tackles the priesthood of Jesus. In the methodology of his preaching, as well as in its content, our author has much to say to us.

*What then of the community he was originally addressing?* What sort of folk were they, and – to put it colloquially – where were they at?

It's likely that they were Jewish Christians – probably Hellenistic Jews of the Dispersion. Certainly they were folk who knew their Jewish Scriptures and traditions. Perhaps they were located in Rome in the mid-60's of the 1st century AD. The text suggests that they were facing the real danger of severe persecution and were consequently being tempted to fall back into the safety of some form of Judaism. It may well be that this group was given to an 'exaltation spirituality' – a triumphalist emphasis on the sovereign lordship of Christ and the exalted status of his followers. Opposition and the prospect of suffering shook this 'victorious approach' to the roots and brought in doubts and questionings. Was Jesus not a heavenly king after all? If he was, why didn't he intervene on behalf of his own and use his power? Was it rather that God was displeased with them for glorifying Jesus and neglecting the traditional means of approaching and worshipping the one and only Lord? Was their experience thus to be interpreted as divine retribution, akin to the way God had dealt with his erring people of old? Our preacher seeks to meet this situation by stressing that Jesus is indeed Lord and King – even more glorious than they had realised – the very self-expression of God himself. Yet, his divine majesty and glory is to be perceived at its truest in humiliation, testing and death. It is rejection of this *new* covenant revelation which is the real spiritual danger. How shall they escape if they neglect such a great salvation? The path into that saving glory has to be the path that Jesus trod.

*To sum up then.* Our author is a God-centred preacher, devoted to Jesus and very much 'into' worship, who is passionately concerned (like the God

he serves) about the situation of his community. His 'epistle' is, rather, a sermon, intended to be delivered as such, on his behalf, at a worship assembly of the community – an assembly perhaps given to celebrating the exalted kingship of Christ in a triumphalist way.

### The Unfolding of a Vision

Our author in worship and reflection had come to see Jesus as priest; more than that, as the incarnation of that priesthood which is at the heart of God – a priesthood which involved the glory of vulnerability and suffering, of continual reaching out in understanding and passionate longing. *We turn now to explore how the preacher sought to communicate his revolutionary vision.*

Two general points first:

- (a) He unfolds his vision little by little, allowing time for digestion. He knows that in the course of his sermon, he is going to give the congregation some hard things to swallow and, as he says at one point, they have become rather too used to milk instead of solid food (5:11-14).
- (b) He injects the various aspects of his vision into more familiar material. It doesn't all come as a total shock. He builds up slowly to his most shocking message!

*The first hint of Jesus as high priest comes in 1:3.* That hint is set in the midst of the preacher's amazing opening sentence, which takes up vv 1-4 in our English versions and which has God very definitely as its subject. The writer starts as he means to go on. So much is packed in integrated fashion into that awesome first statement. In its resounding phrases, the preacher sets his agenda. He highlights a number of ways of expressing the significance of Christ, most of which would already be known to his listeners: prophet (vv 1, 2), heir (v 2), sovereign Messianic king (v 3) and Son (v 2), God's wisdom (v 3), God's true Adam (v 3). Perhaps at v 3 he is quoting a hymn already used in worship (akin to those postulated at Col. 1:15-20 and Phil. 2:5-11). It is, after all, good preaching technique to refer to other elements in the service! But if he is quoting, he is also amending. God's Son, he says in v 3, made purification (or cleansing) of sins (*katharismos tou hamartion poiesamenos*). Moreover, God's Son bears the very stamp of God's nature – and not just as true Adam. He expresses exactly what God is like, and indeed, is expressly involved in what we might call God's 'extra-terrestrial activity' – bringing into being and sustaining creation. He also reflects the lordship of God and his constant desire to communicate. It is as God's self-expression, then, that the Son made purification for sins. For anyone with a Jewish background, that phrase would immediately have suggested priestly associations. Such cleansing was priestly business. Right at the outset of the sermon, folk are being challenged to think. In this first hint of Christ's priesthood, it is clearly implied that priestly activity is a characteristic of God himself, expressed in his Son. Thus that Son not only reflects the 'conventional' glory of God, he also declares that the great God

of heaven is he who reaches out to cleanse soiled humanity from the clinging dirt of sin. It is a movingly tender (almost maternal) picture and has vital things to say about the essential (if paradoxical) character of the living God.

*The second hint of the Son's priesthood comes at 1:8, 9.* Here the preacher quotes Ps. 45:6, 7, the only New Testament writer to do so. Again it would evoke familiar notions: the royal messianic King, the anointed righteous one, perhaps even, in view of the psalm's context, the Bridegroom. But here is no 'ordinary' Messiah. Here is one whom God himself can address as God – one who is eternally divine. I am convinced that this is the reading of the opening phrase of the psalm's quotation which would have been in the mind of our author. He has already presented the Son not only as heir of all things and agent and sustainer of creation but also as radiance of God's glory and express image of God's being. Taken together, those descriptions add up to an impressive testimony to the Son's divine credentials – and it is surely not such an unthinkable step from here to explicit divine nomenclature. This is particularly so if the initial context is one of adoration (cf. Thomas' worshipping response to the risen Christ at Jn. 20:28, 'My Lord and my God'). Certain apprehensions may be expressed more readily in worship than in formal doctrine and this may well be the background to our author's use of Ps. 45:6. Theology often has to catch up with experience!

This psalm quotation, then, underlines the preacher's conviction of the divine significance of the Son. It also serves as an underlying preparation for something very difficult he wants to say about the Son's priesthood – that it is after the order of Melchizedek. Melchizedek, he will remind his listeners in chapter 7, means 'king of righteousness'. The figure in the psalm quotation has a righteous sceptre as the sceptre of his kingdom and loved righteousness. So, near the beginning of his exhortation, the preacher has slipped in something that is subtly suggestive of the mysterious Melchizedek – an alerting of the sub-conscious to what is to come later – a preparation for a bomb-shell.

*At 2:11 comes the third hint of the Son's priesthood, ho hagiazon – 'he who sanctifies'.* Again, the language is suggestive of priesthood, though not exclusive to it. The one who makes holy, the one who consecrates. It's clear from the Old Testament that this is an activity which belongs properly to God. It can be delegated, certainly, most especially to the priests, but it is fundamentally the holy God who makes holy, who sanctifies.

*At 2:17 we come at last to the first explicit mention of Jesus as priest.* Before we focus on it, it is worthwhile glancing at what has gone before – the context in which these three hints are planted. Chapter 1 has set out in awesome terms the eternal and divine significance of the Son. He is indeed the exalted one, greater even than the angels. But chapter 2 has introduced a different perspective. At vv. 5ff, our author quotes Ps. 8, setting out the glorious vocation of humanity: dominion over creation, a status of glory and honour. Surely for Christians living in the new creation, this should be a

reality. Yet it manifestly isn't – particularly for this community facing hardship and persecution. What is the way through? It is in 'seeing Jesus' (v 9); opening the eyes of the spirit to one who *is* – yes – crowned with glory and honour, but so crowned 'because of the suffering of death'. It is in suffering and death that Jesus is to be perceived as king of creation. That is a hard message to take, so our author continues in the rest of the chapter to hammer it home. *Jesus*, the one who bears the very stamp of *God's* nature, the one in whom God expresses himself, embraces all the frailty and vulnerability of the human condition and takes all that the power of evil can throw at him. By so doing, he identifies with us at the deepest level. He is right in there with us *and* he can bring us mighty help. Therein is his glory and honour. It is *this* king Jesus, made like his brothers and sisters in every respect, who is a merciful and faithful high priest.

Notice that he is *high* priest. It was the high priest who in the Jewish cultus had the terrifying responsibility of entering the holy of holies once a year to make atonement for the sins of the people. That is an image our preacher is going to make much of later. Now he is content just to highlight the picture. But he wants to get across at this point that Jesus the high priest is *merciful* and *faithful*. Those are qualities which Jewish listeners would associate not so much with the high priest as with God himself. The adjectives are never used in the Old Testament in relation to the high priest. They *are* frequently used of God. God's mercy and faithfulness are inherent in the priesthood he expresses in Jesus. *His faithfulness* means that he can be utterly depended upon – he will never fail or forsake his people whatever the circumstances. *His mercy?* Now that's an interesting word. Not the setting aside of wrath and punishment: something much more positive – a quality of exquisite tenderness. One writer<sup>1</sup> has described it in terms of a mother bending over the cradle her child.

Loving tenderness, steadfast faithfulness, entering into the experience of his people, extreme and *real* vulnerability out of which comes real power to help – these are fundamental to the priesthood God shows forth in Jesus. It is a priesthood that lays bare God's heart, that exposes his passion.

No wonder that in 3:1 our author urges his community to 'contemplate' (*katanoesate*) Jesus as high priest. The word means to concentrate attention on, often in a spiritual as well as an intellectual sense. So it is here. The people are to be attentive to Jesus as he focusses the reality of God's nature – and to reflect carefully on what he reveals.

It is interesting that in his exhortations this is one of the few points at which our author uses the *second* person plural instead of the first. He is trying to get his listeners on to a track he himself is already travelling down.

*The next mention of Jesus as high priest comes at 4:14-15.* After introducing Jesus as the priesthood of God incarnate, our author lets the picture sink in for a while, as he draws out the themes of faithfulness, persevering

1 G. ffrench-Beytagh, *A Glimpse of Glory*, London 1986, pp 48-9.

obedience and spiritual pilgrimage in relation to the people of God: all themes closely related to his central message and vital to where his community was. Now he returns to the one who provides the incentive and the empowering for persevering pilgrimage: a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God. Packed into that latter phrase are all the astounding theological implications of chapters 1 and 2. In looking to this high priest we are not looking to someone other than God. In looking to this high priest we see and experience something of the power of divine humility and understanding. That is set out very clearly here in chapter 4. The section from v 11 to v 16 marks the culmination of an exposition (stretching from 3:1 to 4:10) in which the motifs of creation and redemption have been skilfully woven together. The 'sabbath rest' into which Christians are urged to be eager to enter (4:11) is an experience denied to the Israelites in the wilderness because of their disobedience and lack of trust (3:18, 19; 4:11). This kind of sin was at the heart of Adam's failure, that fallen Adam who tried to hide himself from God but whose nakedness was exposed by the divine voice (Gen. 3:8-12. cf Heb. 4:11-13). The figure of 'old Adam' is surely implicit at this point in our author's exposition, as he warns against disobedience, drawing attention to the all-penetrating word of God and the unavoidable nakedness of all humanity before the God from whom no one can hide. It is a fearsome prospect, yet the writer, having challenged his community, continues immediately with words of encouragement. They cannot hide – but they have nothing to fear. They should rather boldly 'draw near' to the throne of grace because there representing them is a high priest who can identify with their weaknesses, one who in every respect has been tested as they are yet who has not fallen into sin (4:15, 16). This representative new Adam and high priest, the source of their confidence and salvation, is none other than Jesus the Son of God, the one who bears the very stamp of God's nature.

Because the high priesthood of Jesus is in this paragraph so directly linked with his sonship (and with the character of God) they are arguably to be understood as 'co-inherent'. Jesus the Son of God is also (at the same time) 'great high priest'. What does this imply about the nature of Jesus' priesthood? Surely, that, like sonship, it expresses the *hypostasis* (being) of God (cf 1:13). Indeed, it involves all that is suggested in 1:1-4 about the significance of his sonship. So the priesthood of Jesus has a prophetic dimension. It is associated with creation, with the glory and wisdom and sovereignty of God, as well as with the cleansing of sin. It is also linked through the Adam allusion with God's best purposes for humanity. It is a view of high priesthood which stretches existing boundaries of understanding far beyond their limits.

*That is underlined by what is said about the priesthood of Jesus in 5:1-10.* The context is a discussion comparing 'every high priest' (5:1-4) with Jesus the high priest (5:5-10). It is a carefully structured discussion (almost a mini-sermon!), three points about 'every high priest' being related to Jesus in reverse order, thus giving a pattern of a b c b a. The use of *archiereus* in vv 1

and 10 forms an effective *inclusio* though, as a result of the intervening discussion, the word has a rather different sense at the end than at the beginning. Despite the similarities, Jesus is *not* to be categorized with 'every high priest'.

The three points have to do with salvation from sin, compassionate weakness and divine vocation. All of these aspects of priestly ministry, argues the preacher, Jesus demonstrates to perfection. He is certainly called by God – and in a unique sense. As eternal Son of God his vocation is to express fully God's longing that all humanity should share the divine glory. Because of who he is, Jesus the high priest can also offer a salvation which is totally and eternally effective. No Jewish high priest, though called by God, could achieve such results.

The remaining point under discussion is of great interest. 5:2 is, in fact, an extraordinary statement, for nowhere in the Old Testament are pastoral sympathy and gentle care presented as a feature of priesthood. The writer's views here seems to be greatly coloured by his experience of Christ, who 'in the days of his flesh . . . offered up prayers and supplication with loud cries and tears to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear' (v 7). Here is a graphic illustration of that complete identification with the human condition already underlined by the preacher when speaking of Jesus, Son of God and high priest. 'Loud cries and tears' – and on his own behalf. Here is the divine pattern for that bold honesty (*parresia*) with which we are urged to draw near to the throne of grace. The Son of God knew weakness, fear and anguish from the inside and he did not hesitate to express in prayer just how he felt. He did not want to face the suffering of death. He was appalled at the prospect and he cried out in anguish. He can therefore minister to us with the sympathy born of personal experience.

'He was heard for his *godly fear*'. The same word is used at 12:28 where Christians are urged to offer to God acceptable worship with *reverence* and awe. What a liberating understanding of reverence – coming before God just as you are and telling it just how it is. In relation to God, our priesthood in Christ sets us free to be who we really are – and thus to help liberate those around us.

He was *heard* – he was saved – but not *from* death – rather *out of* death. Living out God's priestly life in the midst of fallen humanity is incredibly costly – but out of it all comes experience of the joy of God (cf 12:2).

At 5:6, as if the preacher hadn't given his folk enough to take in, he drops that bombshell for which he has been preparing the ground ever since the outset of his sermon. God, he proclaims, declared his Son to be a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek. That designation is repeated at 5:10 and then, at 5:11, the preacher warns his listeners that they are going to find this part of his exposition hard to digest. He is so concerned about this that he feels he must subject them to some further urgent exhortation before picking up the Melchizedek theme at 6:20.

Perceiving Jesus in priestly terms must have presented our author with at least one initial problem. Jesus, the Davidic Messiah, was of the tribe of

Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests (7:14). Yet seeing Christ as priest drew out and drew together so much of the writer's understanding of the person and work of Jesus. Reflecting on the familiar affirmation of Christ's kingship in Ps. 110:1 very likely provided him with the way through his dilemma. As he rehearsed to himself the rest of the psalm, verse 4 (a verse not referred to anywhere else in the New Testament) perhaps struck him in a new and creative way. Here indeed was a pointer to the validity of proclaiming Jesus as priest. Here too was an image which encouraged him to pursue that bold interpretation of the significance of Christ's priesthood, to which worship and experience were leading him. Reference to Gen. 14 confirmed the possibilities. Melchizedek was clearly the mysterious scriptural type of a high priest who was not only messianic but also eternal Son of God.

Such may have been our author's route to Christ's priesthood after the order of Melchizedek. The use of this idea has far-reaching implications, both for Christology and for the fundamental question of the nature of God. For Jewish listeners it really was quite revolutionary – and perhaps the principles lying behind it are not entirely without their relevance today.

Melchizedek, our author says in 7:3, has been made like the Son of God. Notice that it is *that* way round. Melchizedek has been made like the Son of God, not the Son of God like Melchizedek. Melchizedek can point to something of the character of the Son's priesthood but he can't fully define or express it. God's priesthood as expressed in Jesus breaks out of all attempts to categorize or confine it. It still does. In what respects, then, can Melchizedek *point* to the nature of Christ's priesthood?

We are told at the beginning of chapter 7 that he is a king as well as a priest and that he is king of righteousness and king of peace: good messianic credentials with priesthood added. But *are* his credentials so good? This mysterious figure, it turns out, is not even a member of the chosen race. He is an outsider. Yet, says the preacher, arguing from Gen. 14, Abraham, the great patriarch, pays him tribute – and by extension, so do all Abraham's descendents. God does make some surprising choices! What is more, in terms of priesthood, Melchizedek does not have the correct genealogy (indeed, the silence of Scripture suggests to the preacher that he doesn't have *any* genealogy!). Certainly he cannot claim Levitical descent. As far as the old covenant rules are concerned, he is not entitled to be a priest. Yet God used him to *bless* 'him who had the promises', to bless the great Abraham. Even more surprising!

So what does this suggest about the priesthood of the Son of God? It suggests that when God expressed his priestly nature in Jesus, he did a radically new thing. God set aside God-given tradition. God broke his own rules. Jesus did not have the correct genealogy. He was not entitled by the rules – God's rules – to be a priest ('it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests', 7:14). Moreover, the Son's irregular priesthood was foreshadowed by an

outsider who was on the edge of the old covenant story. God, implies the preacher, is challenging his people to look at priesthood in a new way – not in the light of tradition, however illuminating that may once have been, but in the light of the amazing revelation of Jesus.

And the preacher has not finished yet. At 7:27, he makes explicit something that has been heavily implicit throughout: *Jesus 'offered up himself'*. God in Jesus is not only the priestly offerer; he is also the offering. The Priest is himself the Victim. This could not be said of any other High Priest, not even of Aaron or Melchizedek.

This staggering image our author explores in chapters 8 to 10 in terms of the Jewish sacrificial cultus and, in particular, the ritual of the Day of Atonement. But he does it in a way that radically re-defines sacrifice – just as he has already radically re-defined priesthood. His re-definition is encapsulated in the first part of chapter 10.

'Lo, I have come to do thy will, O God': sacrifice as a life totally committed and surrendered to God. That was already an element in Jewish consciousness and had been for some time. Our author perceives that in Jesus it has been demonstrated to perfection, in a way that decisively does away with the need of animal sacrifices – in a way that has opened up for ever that *new* covenant relationship with God prophesied by Jeremiah. And the totally committed life of Jesus shows us the heart of God himself. Remember chapter 1: the Son bears the very stamp of God's nature. *It is God in Jesus who has brought about the new covenant, by giving himself over to suffering and death – and decisively overcoming their power.*

*And what are the benefits of this new covenant, so painfully created? No less than the liberating power of forgiveness which opens the way to an intimate 'knowing' of God – to a sharing in his very life.*

And that, as chapter 13 makes clear, means going outside the camp to suffer abuse with him, as well as revelling in the glories of heavenly Jerusalem. As far as our preacher is concerned, the road to glory is quite clearly through passion.

*What, then, are the issues raised by this vision of Jesus as great high priest, so carefully and powerfully expounded in the Epistle to the Hebrews? They are many, but we could perhaps summarize two of the most significant as follows:*

1. Hebrews highlights God's tendency to do new and surprising things; to challenge our deep-seated assumptions; to break with his own tradition; to take the past into the future in a way that both builds on and redefines it. Tradition is not God! We are graphically pointed, therefore, to the need for openness and attentiveness to this God: openness to change – radical, costly change, combined with a willingness to move on and see things in new perspectives.

How does this imperative challenge *us now*? What place does it leave for *Christian* tradition?

2. God has spoken to us fully and finally in one who is Son, in Jesus. All that Jesus is bears the very stamp of God's nature. The priesthood of God is the heart of his life. It expresses his costly and passionate commitment to

reach out, to communicate, to challenge, to identify, to suffer, to liberate, to fulfil, to give his all in merciful and profoundly cleansing forgiveness. His commitment and faithfulness are total.

We draw near that we may *all* share in – participate in – this divine priestly vocation. ‘Types and shadows have their endings’. There is no further need for a specialist sacrificial and dynastic priesthood. We are all taken up into the priestly sacrifice of God in action.

What place, then, for Christian ordained priesthood? If a valid option, how should it be understood in the light of the teaching of Hebrews?

It would not be ‘fitting’ to end without underlining the fact that for the author of Hebrews, worship and contemplation of a beloved and alarming God are primary. His theological reflection and urgent preaching stem powerfully from this source. What, then, has such an approach to say to us, in our debating and in the exercise of our Christian life and ministry?

**The Revd Dr Joy Tetley** is Director of Post-Ordination Training in the Diocese of Rochester.

### **Editorial note**

We apologise for giving the misleading impression that the article ‘Development and Reception: a Key to Disputes about the Ordination of Women’ by Colin Cranston was given as a paper at the Conference on ‘Communion and Episcopacy’ at Ripon College, Cuddesdon.

**Michael Sansom**