

Melchizedek Again, by Tim Hall

The Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year B. 18 March 2018

[RCL:] Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 51:1-13; Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33

Usually, I try to prepare my homilies to sample at least a bit from each of our Lectionary readings. But for this week's homily I wasn't drawn that way.

First, I considered our reading from Jeremiah, which takes place but two chapters after the advice we had heard from Jeremiah in our first "Dinner and a Movie" Lenten study, where in chapter 29 Jeremiah tells the Hebrew exiles living in Babylon to keep on with their lives, to raise their families, and to pray for and seek the welfare of the city, "for in its welfare you will find your welfare." I thought we could continue the discussion on living in exile, of being "In the world, but not of the world." But then, I thought, let's let Evan Koons keep doing that for us in his "For the Life of the World" series.

Next, I thought perhaps my focus should be on the Psalm, which is one of my absolute favorites, especially verses 11, 12, and 13. We pray this Psalm every Ash Wednesday. And did you know these verses are part of the Daily Devotions for Individuals and Families available in our Book of Common Prayer? Have a look with me... it's on page 137 under the heading "In the Morning". The order of the verses is a bit different, starting with verse 16 and then continuing with 11, 12, and 13. But I love the way it flows. This is a wonderful devotion you can use to start your day. And with regular use it can be committed to memory.

But when I saw the name Melchizedek in our reading from Hebrews this morning, I felt like digging a bit deeper. You see, it dawned on me that Melchizedek seems to come around pretty frequently in our lectionary... at least once a year, anyway; often enough that we all have a pretty good idea how to pronounce it, I think. At least we do better on his name than some of his contemporaries, (for example, reading from Genesis 14:1-3, shortly before Melchizedek make his appearance, names like):

[In the days of] King Amraphel of Shinar, King Arioch of Ellasar, King Chedorlaomer of Elam, and King Tidal of Goiim, these kings made war with King Bera of Sodom, King Birsha of Gomorrah, King Shinab of Admah, King Shemeber of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar). All these joined forces in the Valley of Siddim (that is, the Dead Sea)."

Well, I found that Melchizedek appears 11 times in the bible. I thought this might be a fairly significant amount, of course not approaching Jacob or Jesus or Moses, etc. But this didn't even make it into the top 50, behind names like Mordecai, Gad, and Hadassah, which were all mentioned 10 times as often. Benoni is mentioned 163 times! Benoni! Honestly, has anyone here ever heard of Benoni?

So why does it seem that we read about Melchizedek more than some of these others, especially since of his 11 mentions in the Bible, fully 8 of them come in the Book of Hebrews, two of which we read this morning?

Well, to answer this question, first we need to put the story of Melchizedek in context, and here this talk becomes more history than homily...

As I said previously, Melchizedek makes his appearance in the bible in Chapter 14 of Genesis. This is fairly early in the Abraham epic, even before God changed Abraham's name. He and Sarai, along with Abram's nephew Lot, have been on their journey from Ur for a number of years, a pilgrimage that took them to Egypt because of a drought and famine in Canaan. Before entering Egypt, in order to protect himself, Abram tells beautiful Sarai to call him her brother, rather than husband, because Pharaoh, who notices her beauty and takes her into his household, would have him killed otherwise. This all works out well for Abram, who receives much livestock and many slaves from Pharaoh. But upon learning of the deception, Abram's whole family is banished from Egypt

They travel back toward Bethel and the Jordan where they realize that the land is not verdant enough to support the herds of both Abram and Lot, so they split up, with Lot heading toward Sodom and Abram going into Canaan. This brings us to the hostilities going on between the many different potentates that I touched on earlier. Not so different from the Middle East of today, I'm sorry to say. In the battle, Sodom is defeated and Lot, with all his family and goods, is taken captive.

Word gets out to Abram about what has transpired, he sets out with 318 trained men, defeats the enemy Chedorlaomer, frees Lot and his family, and returns to Sodom with all the goods and people. It is here that we meet Melchizedek. Reading from Genesis, chapter 14, verses 17-20:

¹⁷ After Abram returned from defeating Kedorlaomer and the kings allied with him, the king of Sodom came out to meet him in the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley).

¹⁸ Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, ¹⁹ and he blessed Abram, saying,

“Blessed be Abram by God Most High,
Creator of heaven and earth.

²⁰ And praise be to God Most High,
who delivered your enemies into your hand.”

Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything.

Now, a little background on Salem...

<http://www.generationword.com/jerusalem101/16-salem-jebus.html>

When Abram entered the land of Canaan around 2000 BC the city of Jerusalem was called Salem. Melchizedek's city was called Salem, or Shalem, which is also the name of the God whose worship was centered in the city. The full name of this God was “God Most High, Creator of Heaven and Earth” since he was the God of creation.

The name of the city Jerusalem was originally “Yerushalem”. We already know that “shalem” comes from the name of the God worshipped in the city by Melchizedek. (The Jews taught that Melchizedek was Noah’s son Shem, who, according to biblical records, was still alive at this time.) The word “yeru” means “foundation stone” or “cornerstone.” The name Jerusalem, then, means “the foundation stone of Shalem” and refers to the original cornerstone laid by the Creator of the Universe when he built the earth.

Melchizedek was the king of this city, which was located on the southern part of the Eastern Hill between the Kidron Valley and the Central Valley. Melchizedek met Abraham in the Valley of Shaveh, that is the King’s Valley, where he blesses the patriarch whose descendent, David, will one day make that city his capital. Melchizedek was also a priest of God Most High, who was Abraham’s God as well.

So, how is this all related to 8 references to Melchizedek in Hebrews? To date, the author of Hebrews remains anonymous, which is amazing in this day of context, historical, and textual analysis. But we do know that this letter was written sometime in the first century, probably by someone who had not witnessed the living, dying, and resurrected Jesus, but by someone who had received first-hand accounts from eye witnesses. And we think it was probably written for a congregation of early Christians that was on the verge of slipping back into the old Judaic ways.

For early Christians who considered Christ to be the latest and greatest high priest, such as the author of Hebrews, Melchizedek provided the perfect precedent. According to Hebrews, Jesus is the ideal example of all things biblical. To borrow a line from Annie Get Your Gun, the theme of Hebrews seems to be “anything Jews can do, Christ can do better.” Jews have angels, but Jesus is superior to all angels. Jews have prophets, but Jesus surpasses even Moses. Jesus represents a better covenant, a better tabernacle, a better sacrifice, and yes, a better high priest than Judaism provides.

Identifying Jesus as the ultimate high priest is fraught with problems, however. Jesus was thought by Christians to have descended from David, a Judahite. Not being a Levite, how could Jesus be the ideal and eternal high priest for the God of Israel?

Enter Melchizedek. The author of Hebrews latches on to the mysterious king of Salem and acclaims him as the founder of an classic and timeless priesthood fulfilled by Jesus. Reading later in Hebrews, 12 verses from chapters 6 and 7:

19 We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, 20 where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.

7 This “King Melchizedek of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham as he was returning from defeating the kings and blessed him”; 2 and to him Abraham apportioned “one-tenth of everything.” His name, in the first place, means “king of righteousness”; next he is also king of Salem, that is, “king of peace.” 3 Without father,

without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever. 4 See how great he is! Even Abraham the patriarch gave him a tenth of the spoils. 5 And those descendants of Levi who receive the priestly office have a commandment in the law to collect tithes from the people, that is, from their kindred, though these also are descended from Abraham. 6 But this man, who does not belong to their ancestry, collected tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had received the promises. 7 It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior. 8 In the one case, tithes are received by those who are mortal; in the other, by one of whom it is testified that he lives. 9 One might even say that Levi himself, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, 10 for he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him.

Melchizedek thus inaugurated a priesthood superior to the one later awarded to the Levites. Levitical priests are mortal, while Melchizedek, seeing as neither his parents nor his death are recorded, must be immortal. Abraham recognized the superiority of Melchizedek's priesthood when he paid him a tithe and received a blessing as his subordinate. The coup de grace is the claim that Levi, inasmuch as he was in Abraham's loins, also offered a tithe to Melchizedek.

The Levitical priesthood, which offers inferior sacrifices by mortal priests, is thereby defrocked by the author of Hebrews. Jesus, the eternal priest "after the order of Melchizedek," offers the perfect once-and-for-all sacrifice, himself.

So there you have it, the reason why Melchizedek takes such an important place in our Christian theology. And, by the way, his name was used many more times in this homily than in the Bible. Twenty-seven times, I think!

In conclusion... Just as Melchizedek blessed Abram and offered bread and wine to the God Most High, so Jesus blesses us and offers himself, his own body and blood, as the bread and wine to the God Most High. It is through his sacrifice that we are blessed. Just as he reached out his arms in love so that all might come within his saving embrace, so we too, by his example, must do the same. Our lives are a gift, the world is a gift, and if we are to serve Jesus, we must follow him. For where he is, there will we, his servants, be also.