

“Christ as High Priest” a sermon based on Hebrews 5:5-10 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on Sunday 21 March 2021.

Many years ago I was reminded in a very challenging way of what it meant to be a representative in solidarity with people. Let me tell you the story. As with the government, so in the Presbyterian Church difficult issues are often given to commissions to decide what to do. So it was that I came to chair a commission that had to deal with a situation where a minister had called one of his elders a witch. What made the situation especially difficult was that the woman was Maori. So the minister was seen to be cursing not just the elder, but also her hapu and iwi, her people. Such is the sense of solidarity among people. But there is also a strong tradition of solidarity in the Church. The minister was a minister of the Presbyterian Church and so was seen to be speaking on behalf of the whole Church. So the whole church speaking through one person to one person who represented her people. A number of actions followed. One of the actions took place in the meeting of the national body of the Church, the General Assembly. The elder and her people sat in the front of the Assembly and at the Assembly the Moderator of the Church, who is the spokesperson for the Church, expressed a deep apology for what the church had done to her and to her hapu and iwi and sought forgiveness. As you can imagine it was a very poignant moment and deeply emotional.

Representation and solidarity. A strong element of Maori culture. A strong element of the Church. One reason the present Royal Commission hearings are so important for the Church is because of what the church's representatives have done. So there are times we are reminded that as Christians, we do not act for ourselves alone. We are part of a body, representatives of a body, whether we are ministers or elders or deacons or members or associates of whatever.

When the Letter to the Hebrews talks about the priest Melchizedek, it's telling us something about the nature of representation and solidarity. Melchizedek wasn't a Christian, or a Jew. He just turns up from nowhere in Genesis chapter 14 bearing bread and wine and blesses Abraham. Being a priest is fundamentally about representing your people before God, and then secondarily about representing God before your people.

Israelite faith was nearly unique in the ancient world in its belief in one almighty God who was not only the creator of heaven and earth but also the saviour of a particular people. Through a particular people God sought to reconcile the whole world to Godself. Because Israel as a whole represented all the peoples of the earth before God, it was described in Exodus 19 as a “priestly kingdom” – that’s to say, Israel was a collective priest. The Reformer Martin Luther spoke of the “priesthood of all believers” – not that every believer is a priest, but that together, believers corporately are a priestly mediator, just as Israel was a mediator between God and all people.

Israel had representative priests, from the family of Aaron, who offered sacrifice, burned incense, and in general mediated Israel to God and God to Israel. The early Christians regarded Jesus as the last of these priests, because his loving sacrifice had finally taken away sins once and for all, being a sacrifice of his sinless self, not of a flawed animal. The letter to the Hebrews portrays Jesus as the High Priest who stands before God on our behalf and stands before us on God’s behalf. By using the term High Priest, Hebrews is saying Jesus stands in the tradition of Israel, mediating the presence of God. But by referring to Melchizedek, who was around before there even was an Israel, Hebrews is saying Jesus is a mediator not just for the Jews but for all humankind.

When in baptism we are united with Christ, so we are united with Christ in his priesthood. Christ keeps open and busy the two-way channel between God and God’s people, into which we are invited. It isn’t about ritual and vestments. It’s about practising the presence of God and being a reconciling presence in the life of others. So as a body we are invited to grow in the practice of the presence of God. All of us can become people who develop the awe and tenderness and humility and wonder and gentleness that come from knowing that God is at work in us and in others in the same way God was at work in the life of Jesus Christ. And all of us can be a reconciling presence in the life of those around us. So we are part of a body in which is lived out reconciliation with God and reconciliation with one another.

The passage from Hebrews highlights aspects of the priesthood of Christ.

We’re told that Jesus didn’t put himself forward, but was appointed. We do not apply to be part of the priesthood of Christ. As we live out our baptism, we live out the priesthood of Christ. It isn’t about trying harder or working to achieve a certain degree of faith or devotion or holiness. God appoints. This is

our identity. It is about recognising that we are people who are one with the world, in solidarity with others, equal with others, and in solidarity with the world we bring that world before God, and we are called to be part of God's care for the world. In Christ, we are part of the constant flow there is between God and the world.

One way of living that priesthood is to pray for people we know or encounter, at work or at home or in our neighbourhood or wherever. I know someone who during a meeting in which they do not have to pay close attention will have a book and write down names, names of people in the congregation, names of people in the community, family names, people for whom they pray a blessing. I know parents who pray for their children every day, and they have been doing it for decades. Living out the priesthood of Christ.

Sam Wells says that the concept of priesthood is also how we can understand our relationship with creation. He suggests that the oft-used concept of us as stewards of creation is inadequate because it uses the language of property. He says, "Human beings are poised precisely in the role of mediator between God and creation: they are fully created, but, because Christ has taken human form, they are fully encompassed by God. Every time you step outside and gaze in wonder at the myriad of stars, you are being a priest, bringing to God the praise of creation. And every time you labour in the garden or care for an animal or lobby for sustainable energy you are being a priest, bringing God's care for creation into human form. Offering creation to God and showing God's care for creation is what priests do."

Hebrews also highlights how Jesus' priesthood was shaped out of his suffering. Jesus "offered up prayers...with loud cries and tears." Jesus brought to God his fears and struggles, his desperation. To share in that priesthood is to offer to God our tears and suffering and struggles and doubts. And not just ours, but the tears and suffering and struggles and doubts of the world. In that action we're the church interceding for the world. You can bring every aspect of your work or family or neighbourhood, be it good, bad or ugly, to God and pray for transformation.

Christ is one with us and one with God and so in solidarity with creation, enables the constant flow between God and creation, and we are invited to be part of that.

Some thoughts in this sermon are drawn from a sermon preached by Sam Wells at Duke University Chapel - [March 29 Priests Forever \(duke.edu\)](http://duke.edu)

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