

Jesus my great High Priest offered his blood and died
My guilty conscience seeks no sacrifice beside
His powerful blood did once atone,
And now he pleads before the throne

Now I approach the throne, and I have confidence
Jesus, my great High Priest offered his blood and died
For me.

These words from the old Lutheran hymn written by
Isaac Watts reminds me of watching Billy Graham
crusades when I was a child. I can still hear the song,
“Just as I am without one plea but that thy blood was
shed for me.... oh Lamb of God, I come.” And there was
a time in my life when the idea that Jesus died on the
cross for me was a comforting belief – it meant that, in
all my human frailty and sin, there was daily hope to
start afresh, that God had thrown all my sin, because of
Jesus’ sacrifice, into the sea of forgetfulness.

The problem, however, with this particular Christian
interpretation of **Jesus as High Priest**, is that it takes
both **Jesus** and **High Priest** out of the first century Jewish
context from which it arose. And I would like to suggest

that when we take that context seriously, Jesus as our High Priest, is more of a challenge than a comfort.

According to the **Jewish** writer of the letter to the **Hebrews**, Jesus is the **High Priest** according to the **order of Melchizedek**. The High Priest was the chief religious official of Judaism. He had the overall charge of Temple finances and administration, was the political head of the nation, and once a year on Yom Kippur, entered the inner sanctum of the temple, to sprinkle sacrificial animal blood to expiate his own sins and those of the people of Israel. The **office** of High Priest was first conferred on Aaron by his brother Moses and it was a hereditary position for life. Jesus, being from the tribe of Judah is not eligible to be a priest, let alone the High Priest. This is where **Melchizedek** comes in.

Melchizedek is mentioned only twice in the Hebrew Bible. In the Book of Genesis, Melchizedek the **Canaanite**, and King of Salem, and priest of a god named

“Most High” encountered Abraham on the road when he was on his way home from battle and offered him some bread and wine and a blessing. In response, Abraham bowed down to him by offering him a tenth of his spoils of war (his tithe), signalling, according to the Letter to the Hebrews, Abraham’s subordinate status.

Melchizedek then appears once more in Psalm 110.

There King David, from the tribe of Judah (also not eligible by birth to be a priest) is referred to as “high priest in the order of Melchizedek.

This mysterious and marginal character in the Hebrew Bible, became the centre figure by which certain groups of Jews could challenge the traditional priesthood – with a bit of creative interpretation that is. In first century Jewish Qumran texts, Melchizedek is their Warrior-High Priest of the Heavenly Temple, the Messiah who redeems the Qumran priests from their iniquities. In the Second Book of Enoch, another Jewish writing, he is described as conceived of the virgin, Sofonim, the wife

of Nir, the brother of Noah, marked with the badge of priesthood, and then taken into heaven by the archangel Michael. To say someone is a High Priest according to Melchizedek, then, is simply to say that he is a priest without a Levite family background, and that, in fact, he is superior to the Levite priests, the descendants of Abraham, because he does not die, but lives forever, in that story, in the Garden of Eden. Jesus, like Melchizedek, according to the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews, was also born of a virgin, and now, also lives forever. This is how Jesus becomes qualified to be High Priest in the Letter to the Hebrews.

The writer goes further: Unlike the human priests and High priest, Jesus not only enters the inner sanctum of the Temple, but he is *always* in the inner sanctum, and the sacrifice of his own flesh and blood is a once-and-for-all time sacrifice. Given that he is forever alive, he is also able to constantly intercede for his followers. He lives in the true Heavenly Temple and his life is the New

Covenant. Being both human and divine, he is the Priest who can empathize with weakness and frailty because he has known the same humanity.

The theology of the hymn of Isaac Watts is similar because it is based on this description of Jesus. But the question is, **why** did the writer of the letter describe Jesus as the High Priest (a theme that is not pursued in the rest of the New Testament)? The first century Temple was the most sacred religious site of Judaism, but it was also a place of extreme corruption. Living off the tithes of the people, according to the Josephus the Jewish historian, the wealth of its treasury was known across the land, and criticized it for its opulence. The High Priest and families lived like royalty because they were the ruling aristocracy. It was common knowledge that they accepted bribes in their role as litigators of court cases, and condemned people to death for questioning their authority. Prophets and Jewish truth-

tellers referred to them as “thieves” and “false stewards.”

Not only were they corrupt, but they had little sympathy for people who could not afford to pay the 10th of their produce. According to one story, they destroyed a farmer’s property when he didn’t pay his tithe. While many widows were very poor, the widows of the priests received a handsome life-long pension. For these reasons, they were hated by ‘ordinary’ people, and Jesus like others referred to the Temple as a ‘den of thieves.’ It sounds a bit like how some people might describe the government of Canada or Australia – lining their own pockets while others are homeless, without adequate health care, and without food security.

Not only was the temple hierarchy corrupt, but the purity laws, as they were being practised by the priests, were unjust. For instance, people were classified on a scale of purity with priests and Levites at the top, then

Israelites, then converts, then freed slaves, then temple slaves then bastards (according to family background) then eunuchs, then men with damaged testicles, then men without a penis. People with disabled and wounded bodies were ranked last – they were considered unclean, and therefore unholy, and unwelcome in the Temple.

Jesus challenged both the corruption of the Temple and the injustice of the purity laws, and railed in anger and judgement against those who misused their power and economic resources, while expressing his deep and radical compassion for those harmed by the system.

Christians have often told stories about Jesus' healing *power* when he healed the sick and cast out demons.

But the real power in these actions, in my mind, was that he **embraced** the people considered vermin and unclean in his society, and did so **publicly** for all to see.

He was the man who touched, held, socialized with, and blessed the lepers, the deranged, and crippled. He stood with those the Temple considered "other." He was

also the **activist** who knocked over the tables of the money changers and the chairs of those selling doves because they ripped people off – and within a week of this incident, Jesus was murdered.

Jesus received the title of High Priest because he practised a more authentic Judaism, and he called out the Temple for not living up to its own religious ideals. He didn't die, at God's behest, to save me from my sin, he was murdered by the Temple priesthood and the Roman authorities who supported them because the Temple hierarchy didn't want the people to be influenced by his ongoing critique, or his actions of radical compassion. Jesus didn't ensure their continued power and line their pockets. They murdered a faithful Jew, a prophetic Jew, a Jew named son of God. This was his sinlessness – he was committed to an authentic practice of his religion even to the point of death. Like Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was executed for being involved in a plot to get rid of Hitler, and

Bishop Oscar Romero who was murdered while sharing the eucharist because he condemned the military state from the pulpit.

I said, if we took this story in context, it would be more of a challenge than a comfort. If Jesus is truly our High Priest, then we must, like him, make **calling out the corruption** of those with power, **and the practice of radical compassion for all who are harmed**, the central practice of our Christian life, both in our churches and in our neighbourhoods. Our temples, both religious and governmental, are not so different than the Temple in which Jesus overthrew the tables. There are churches with immense wealth in cities where people are hungry. Members of parliament receive daily allowances and a hefty pension for life, corporations don't pay tax, but people on social assistance are constantly considered to be the parasites of the system. Asylum seekers are treated like criminals, indigenous people lack the necessary health services, and people with different

sexual orientations and gender identities are still discriminated against. Sounds a lot like the first century in which Jesus lived.

The world doesn't need a Personal Saviour. It doesn't need the constant rehearsal of Jesus' divinity. What is needed is **us you and me** – not talking **about** Jesus, but **doing what Jesus the counter-cultural High Priest did – speaking up against injustice and loving people harmed by the system.** Some of us will be better at one than the other, but together as the Church, if we all do our part, Jesus' death will have made a difference, and his justice and his compassion will live on forever. But if we don't – because we are overcome by hopelessness or fatigue or the immensity of the injustice and people's sorrow (and it is so easy to be overcome this way) Jesus' death will be for naught. Jesus knew the burden of calling out the powers that be, he knew the risk, he paid the price for his obedience, and even though his death was imminent, he still practised radical compassion. May we

find the strength we need in his example, continue to practise that kind of love for each other – and link our elbows, so together, we the Church will be a very loud and persuasive voice for justice and radical compassion in Australia (and in my country too). So be it! Amen.