

Reflection for Lent 5 by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

As you look at today's second reading you may well be asking yourself who is this Melchizedek that is mentioned, and what is the writer of the letter to the Hebrews trying to say by including him?

To answer these questions, we need to begin by reminding ourselves that whenever we try to understand scripture, although it is God's word, it was also written by individuals who lived over 1900 years ago in a society and culture very different to our own and, as a result, we need to spend time and energy trying to understand their context and way of thinking to grasp what is going on. That is true of the letter to the Hebrews, written to a group of first century Jewish Christians with a good understanding of Judaism; the writer knows and assumes this.

There, immediately, lies the problem for us! Our life, our culture, our way of thinking is very different. Imagine walking into a new working environment, which has its own subculture, language, and acronyms. Before being able to fully contribute you must grasp this culture and language. And it is the same, at times, with scripture.

Which brings us to Melchizedek. Who is he and how are we meant to understand the relationship between him and Christ, which the letter's author is suggesting? To find an answer we need to go back into the Old Testament, where Melchizedek is mentioned twice; the first occasion being in Genesis 14:18-20, an encounter between Melchizedek & Abraham.

"And King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High. He blessed him and said, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!" And Abram gave him one tenth of everything."

4000 years ago, in the time of Abraham (Abram), kingly and priestly duties were often performed by the same individual. The name Melchizedek means "My King is righteousness" or "king of righteousness" and Salem is a shortened form of Jerusalem. So, we can describe him as the king/priest in Jerusalem well before King David ever made the city his capital. Melchizedek may even have been the city's original founder.

So what the writer of the letter to the Hebrews is pointing out, by referring to Melchizedek, is that by blessing Abraham, the great father figure, he was showing himself to be superior to Abraham. This was a blessing being given by the most important figure to the junior figure, and from that comes the notion that his priesthood was superior to the Levitical priesthood which came ultimately from Abraham.

Secondly, Melchizedek's priesthood did not have its origins in the law given to Moses, but rather was a direct result of who he was. His office was a combined one of Priest and King - the religious and the secular combined in one person.

Thirdly, knowing that his readers will have inferred this, the writer can then go on and show how Christ is like Melchizedek - Priest and King by virtue of who he is.

But, rather than dwelling on the finer details of this theological argument, let us pick up the last of these points from a practical perspective - Christ as both our King & Priest - the two roles combined. He is Lord of all, and he is the one who has offered himself once for all for us and now intercedes for us.

It is all too easy for us to separate our lives into compartments or boxes. Our life of faith separate from our everyday life. Or, to put it another way, the religious world kept away from the secular in such a way that they never interact as they should, one feeding off and informing the other.

The image presented to us here in Hebrews is the opposite - the functions of king and of priest combined into one individual. If we are to truly walk in the footsteps of Christ, looking to become more Christlike, then we have to struggle, with God's help, to bridge that gap. As Melchizedek cared for both the physical and the spiritual needs of Abraham, so must we have lives that embrace both the spiritual and the world in which we live.

Christ was touched by the spiritual needs of the people of his day, but also concerned for the sick, the poor and marginalised; prepared so often to reach out to them that he put himself at risk of insult and ridicule. So must we.

Think of the example of Jesus as he eats at Levi's house - the house of a tax collector. He is criticised by the religious leaders for associating with sinners and his response is these famous words, which are unequivocal. "People who are well do not need a doctor, but only those who are sick. I have not come to call respectable people to repent, but outcasts."

For Jesus there was no distinction between the world of the religious and the secular; each interacts with the other and they cannot be separated.

Often, though, it is one thing to look outwards with concern and compassion, moved by a situation: it is quite another to turn that look inwards. Do the ethics that flow from our faith really touch those dark corners of our lives that maybe we would like to keep to ourselves?

When I was at theological college one of my fellow ordinands had been a property developer, and his life had been deliberately divided into boxes - work separated from faith. As that separation was challenged, he became increasingly uncomfortable with some of the things he was being asked to do at work. In the end he had to decide between his faith and his job - he moved on to another job. The secular and religious they are, or should be, one.

Melchizedek was a king and a priest.

Christ is our King & our great high priest.

We too are called to be priests serving our God - and that may mean asking painful questions.

Some closing words from the letter to the Hebrews

"So we who have found safety with him are greatly encouraged to hold firmly to the hope placed before us. We have this hope as an anchor for our lives. It is safe and sure, and goes through the curtain of the heavenly temple into the inner sanctuary. On our behalf Jesus has gone in there before us, and has become a high priest for ever, in the priestly order of Melchizedek." (GNB)