

Lent V (17 March 2024)

“CHRIST being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building; neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us.”

+In the Name of...

If a non-Christian asked you to describe Christ in one word or phrase, what would you choose? As a musician, I naturally gravitate to how He is described in the great hymnody of the Church: Would you call Jesus your friend, as in “What a friend we have in Jesus!” Perhaps you are a bit more adventurous and you would call Him your lover, as in “Jesus, Lover of my soul.” Or if you want to be sure that all your bases are covered you might try remembering all those terms from Handel’s “For Unto Us a Child is Born” in the Messiah, which are, of course Biblical: “wonderful counsellor, Almighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of

Peace.” Jesus might have been discouraged by His publicist from putting all of that on His business card. Undoubtedly your mind came up with these descriptions and others, none of them likely wrong, but indicative of each of our individual walks with God. But I would hazard to guess, that few if any of us, came up with “High priest” as our first description of Jesus. It is, of course, entirely appropriate theologically, but also architecturally for this congregation. Fr. Geiser’s painting immediately above the High Altar is not Christ the King, even though it is often mistaken as such, but is Christ the High Priest. Christ the King usually has his arms extended up toward Heaven, made famous by the painting at the University of Notre Dame referred to as “Touchdown Jesus”. You will notice that in our mural, Jesus the Great High Priest is wearing a chasuble, the vestment worn by a priest when celebrating the Holy Mass. The design of the chasuble is based on the garment Jesus was wearing prior to His crucifixion, for which the Roman soldiers cast lots.

The Jewish religion had a priesthood, whose members offered the sacrifices in the Temple in Jerusalem. Those priests were chosen based on their ancestry; if one was not of the right lineage, one could not become a priest. One had to be of the Tribe of Levi. When the Temple was destroyed, there was no longer a need within Judaism for the priesthood. Christ established a new covenant, and with that came a renewed priesthood, based on that of Melchizedek. Even today when a priest is ordained in our tradition, the Bishop says to him, “Thou art a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek” because Jesus was identified as a priest in the epistle to the Hebrews. Thus, the Church continues that priesthood.

But with a new covenant came a new priesthood. There had been many covenants between God and the Jewish people, but each one had gradually fallen by the wayside. A covenant is like what today we would call a contract: it describes the relationship between two parties, what both sides agree to do and what will

happen if either party fails to do so. Lawyers will tell you that consideration is necessary to have a valid contract: that is, both sides have to agree to do something. The covenants in Scripture illustrate God's redemptive plan for mankind. They point to the Messiah whom the Jews would come to expect. If you will permit me yet another rabbit trail, our English word "federal" comes from the Latin word "foedus" meaning covenant. That might be a newsflash for some of our politicians in Washington, that we have a covenant together: there are expectations of us as citizens, but expectations of them as our leaders as well!

You know most of the Covenants from the Old Testament, even if you have not thought of them as such:

God made a covenant with Adam and Eve, the parents of humanity. They were not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and in exchange they would have descendants enough to populate the earth. Like our contracts today, some are less vague

than others: do not eat from this tree is pretty specific, yet Adam and Eve were unable to follow it.

God made a covenant with Noah after the waters of the Great Flood subsided: He promised not to flood the earth again, that is, to preserve humanity. In exchange, humanity was to follow God's laws, restraining themselves from evil and violence. You may recall that mankind's wickedness was the reason God chose to flood the earth in the first place. The rainbow is the sign of that covenant.

Later God makes a covenant with Abraham. Like Adam and Eve, He promises descendants, but also land and a universal blessing. In return, the males must receive the circumcision, which is also the sign of this covenant. This covenant gives us the concept of a Promised Land and the understanding of a difference between Jews and gentiles.

Between the Abrahamic covenant and the Mosaic Covenant, the Jews would go to Egypt during a famine where they would

eventually be made slaves and then led back toward the Promised Land. (There is no promise that the one with whom the covenant is made will live to see it carried out.) Moses received the Ten Commandment on Mt. Sinai. After a little mishap involving an ill-fated golden calf, the Israelites receive a second set of the Ten Commandments, which they were required to keep along with the rest of the Law. In return, God would make them His chosen people. The sign of this covenant is the Passover, the meal God commanded the Israelites to keep after the Angel of Death passed over their houses before they left Egypt.

After finally making it to the Promised Land, the Israelites had mixed success keeping up their part of the covenant. Eventually they would beg for a king to rule over them like other nations. God was displeased with this request but heeded His people. King Saul was not willing to follow the Lord's instructions, so God chose David to be the next king, and promised that a descendant of David would always rule Israel. David's son was

required to build a temple in Jerusalem, a permanent home on earth for God.

The Davidic Covenant set us up for the New Covenant, the last one with Jesus Christ. He fulfills all the promises of the old Covenants. Christ instituted this New Covenant at the last Supper the night before He died. This covenant is different in that it is unconditional: this covenant will not fall away or be replaced. It will continue on with Christ as our High Priest, regardless of whether we keep our part of the covenant: namely being baptized, receiving the Body and Blood of Christ at the Holy Mass, and following God's directives as taught by Holy Mother Church.

There will not be another covenant and there will not be another priesthood. Priests today stand at the altars of churches all across Christendom in order to help fulfill that Covenant. St. Patrick was a priest in his day. Under Christ, the New Covenant was expanded to include not just the Jewish people, but anyone who chose to follow Him. We were and are grafted into the family

of God by adoption and grace. Patrick was not Irish by birth, but travelled to Ireland in order to evangelize there after having been kidnapped, taken there against his will, being converted himself, and then escaping back to England. I cannot say that I would have been in a hurry to return to the land of my captors!

But such are the ways of the Lord. Christ can inspire us in ways no earthly priest can. As our epistle says, He is a more perfect tabernacle unlike any made by humans before or since. These last two weeks of Lent, when the Church instructs us to focus specifically on Christ's Passion, let that Passion envelop you and guide you in keeping our part of the New Covenant.

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