

ADORATION OF THE CROSS THE PRIESTHOOD

**March 18, 2012
3rd Sunday of Lent
Revision E**

GOSPEL: Mark 8:34-9:1
EPISTLE: Hebrews 4:14-5:6

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The Sunday of the Adoration of the Cross during Lent is similar to the Exaltation of the Cross (not necessarily a Sunday) in September. The Exaltation of the Cross commemorates St. Helen’s finding of the actual cross Jesus died on. St. Helen had traveled to the Holy Land to search for the true cross. During excavations, she found three crosses. To decide which, if any, was the true cross, St. Helen ordered that the body of a dead man being carried by a nearby funeral procession be laid on top of each of the three crosses in secession. When it was laid on the true cross, the dead man was restored to life, causing tremendous celebration among the Emperor’s delegation (of which St. Helen was the leader).

The Exaltation of the Cross also focuses in on the details of Christ’s death on the cross (John 19:6-35). The Sundays before and after the Exaltation of the Cross deal with the implications of this event.

The Sunday of the Adoration of the Cross also deals with the implications of Christ’s death on the cross in the sense of looking forward to it as an historical event and as a vision for living the Christian life, which should be the focus for everyone in their Christian life. The aspects of the Cross addressed here are:

1. “Peace on Earth” vs. a Sword
2. Christ’s Example of Prayer When Facing the Cross
3. The Call to Perfection
4. Double-Minded Man
5. Controlling the Passions: Lust Versus Covetousness

In the West, today's Gospel is used frequently, both from Mark (2nd Sunday of Lent), from Matthew (17th Sunday after Trinity) and from Luke (7th Sunday after Trinity).

Gospel: Mark 8:34-9:1 (Matthew 16:21-28, Luke 9:22-27)

The setting of the Gospel lesson is a question the Lord asked His disciples about a year before His crucifixion, "Who do men say that I am"? They answered that some said He was John the Baptist; others said He was Elijah; others said He was one of the prophets. Then He pressed them for an answer, "But who do you say that I am?" (Mark 8:27-29). Peter then answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God" (Matthew 16:13-16). Hearing this, Jesus first told them not to tell anyone of their conclusion; then He began to teach them that He must suffer many things, be rejected by the elders, chief priests and scribes, be killed and rise again after three days (Mark 8:30-31).

Peter had just been called "blessed" by the Lord for having had Jesus' real identity revealed to him (Matthew 16:17). On the other hand, the Twelve in the boat had acknowledged Jesus as the Son of God after He walked on the water and calmed the storm (Matthew 14:33). Nathanael had earlier acknowledged Jesus as the Son of God when Jesus revealed that He saw (and heard) Nathanael praying under the fig tree (John 1:49). Yet the Twelve and Nathanael weren't called blessed but Peter was.

John Chrysostom stated¹ that the reason for this is that Peter's statement came as a revelation from the Father, while in the other cases, it was a human opinion in response to miraculous events. The Lord had asked the Twelve not to reveal His true identity yet in order that others might have the opportunity to hear from the Father also. This is a very important step in peoples' lives: hearing from the Father on a regular basis.

Chrysostom pointed out² another aspect: most people could not handle knowing that Christ was the Son of God, and therefore He asked the Twelve not to disclose this until after the Resurrection.

"If (the Apostles) who had enjoyed the benefit of many miracles, and had had part in so many unutterable mysteries were offended by the mere hearing of (the Cross); consider what it was likely the common sort should feel, being first told that He is the Son of God, then seeing Him crucified and spit on. They would have no knowledge of the secret of those mysteries or participation in the gift of the Holy Spirit. For if to His disciples He said: 'I have many things to say to you, but you cannot hear them now' (John 16:12); much more would the rest of the people have utterly failed, had the chief of these mysteries been revealed to them before the proper time. Accordingly, He forbid them to tell Who He is".

Nine days later, (Luke 9:28, 37) Jesus again mentioned that He was about to be betrayed and crucified (Luke 9:44). But His disciples "did not understand this saying and it was hidden from them so that they did not perceive it; and they were afraid to ask Him about this saying" (Luke 9:45). The mystery of the Cross and the Resurrection was hidden from them just as it was

¹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LIV, 1-2.

² John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LIV, 4.

hidden from the rulers of this age (1 Corinthians 2:7-8).

Just after Jesus called Peter blessed, He also had to rebuke Peter (Mark 8:33). Peter had rebuked Jesus for saying that He must suffer and be crucified (Mark 8:31-32). In rebuking Peter, Jesus stated, “Get behind Me, Satan! For you are not mindful of the things of God, but of the things of men”! How quickly we can go from hearing from God to hearing from Satan! Sometimes it is difficult to comprehend that the Cross in our lives represents the things of God.

John Chrysostom stated³ that Peter spoke from human and earthly reasoning, accounting it disgraceful for the Lord to suffer. For Christ not to suffer was the Devil’s viewpoint on dignity and honor, not the Lord’s viewpoint. Similarly when Jesus washed His disciples’ feet, Peter objected at the lack of dignity shown by the Lord (John 13:5-9). Jesus refocused Peter’s perception by saying, “If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me”. The Lord’s message was that the Cross in our lives means that we need to be willing to suffer for His Name’s sake and to be willing to serve one another.

When Jesus spoke of taking up His cross, this was not the first time He did so. Jesus spoke to people throughout His public ministry of taking up their cross. For example, Table 1 records four distinct occasions where He said this.

To us this is an interesting observation, but to people at the time who didn’t know Jesus was going to be crucified, it must have been a bit mysterious for Jesus to speak to them of taking up their cross: They might say, “Why? What’s the big deal about a cross?” The cross, was just a means of execution, like an electric chair today. Would it make sense if someone today spoke of taking up his electric chair, or taking up his lethal injection?

It turns out that the cross is more than just a piece of wood and it has grown to stand for more than just a means of execution. From 1 Corinthians 1:18, there is a Word (*logos*) of the Cross, where the Word (*logos*) is the same as the Word that became flesh (John 1:14). This Word is the power of God to those who are being saved. On the other hand, the Cross is foolishness to those who are perishing. Therefore, Table 2 outlines some works of the Cross and some offenses of the Cross:

Table 1
Occasions When Jesus Spoke of Taking Up Our Cross

Occasion	Date AD	Time Before Cross	Reference
At the Sending Out of the Twelve Two by Two	Fall 28	18 months	Matthew 10:38
A Week Before the Transfiguration (Today’s Gospel)	Summer 29	9 months	Matthew 16:24, Mark 8:34, Luke 9:23
Traveling to Jerusalem for Crucifixion: On Counting the Costs of Discipleship	Winter 29	3 months	Luke 14:27
Advice to the Rich Young Ruler	Spring 30	A few weeks	Mark 10:21

³ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LIV, 6.

Table 2
Works and Offenses of the Cross

Works of the Cross	
All the Sins of Mankind are Nailed to the Cross	Colossians 2:14
Jews and Gentiles are Reconciled in One Body	Ephesians 2:16
All things are Reconciled to Christ by the Cross	Colossians 1:20
Paul Boasts Only in the Cross	Galatians 6:14
Offenses of the Cross	
The Cross Has Enemies	Philippians 3:18
The Cross Offends People	Galatians 5:11
Persecution Follows Those Who Follow the Cross	Galatians 6:12

For Jesus, the Cross was His glorification. “The hour has come that the Son of man should be glorified” (John 12:23). He then talked about a grain of wheat falling into the ground in order to produce much grain (John 12:24). Similarly, He said, “He who loves his life will lose it and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (John 12:25, Mark 8:35). His conclusion was that “for this purpose, I came to this hour” (John 12:27).

For us, if we take up our cross and “lose our life”, we save it; if we don’t, we lose it. If we avoid the call to take up our cross, we make ourselves not worthy of Him (Matthew 10:38) and we forfeit being His disciple (Luke 14:27).

This does not mean we have to go on some dramatic suicide mission to “lose our life” for the Lord. Rather we lose it by saying in the words of the Lord’s Prayer, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

John Chrysostom put it⁴ this way, “I do not force, I do not compel, but each one I make lord of his own choice. Wherefore I say, ‘If any man **desires** to come after me’. For to good things do I call you, not to things evil or burdensome; not to punishment and vengeance that I should have to compel you. No, the nature of the thing alone is sufficient to attract you. For you ought not, O Peter, because you have confessed Me Son of God, therefore only to expect crowns (Cf. Mark 8:29), and to suppose this enough for your salvation, and for the future to enjoy security, as having done everything. For although it is in My power, as Son of God, to hinder you from having any trial at all of those hardships, yet such is not My will for your sake, that you may yourself contribute something, and be more approved”.

Approaching the halfway point of the Lenten fast, we are in the process of denying ourselves certain foods and pleasures, as the Lord had said, “Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me” (Mark 8:34).

⁴ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LV, 1.

What does it mean to deny oneself? John Chrysostom compared⁵ that to denying someone else,

“What then is it to deny another? He that is denying another, should he see him either beaten, or bound, or led to execution, or whatever he may suffer, does not stand by him, does not help him, is not moved, feels nothing for him, as being once for all alienated from him. Thus then, He will have us disregard our own body, so that whether men scourge or banish or burn or whatever they do, let him have nothing to do with himself and let him so feel as though another were suffering it all”.

The way this often happens is our body screams back at us, “Feed me!” Or we have strong cravings for certain kinds of entertainment. To deny ourselves these pleasures invites criticism, ridicule and persecution from friends and family. Yet this persecution does not affect our soul; it only affects the mortal that will eventually put on immortality (1 Corinthians 15:53). By doing this, we begin to learn to follow the lead of the Holy Spirit and not the cares of our body. Learning this may not come easy and it may not come quickly, but it is a beginning.

The Cross is the ultimate act of the love of God for man (John 3:14-16). As we show love in humility to fellow members of the body of Christ, we take up our crosses also. And just as Jesus was highly exalted because He took up His Cross (Philippians 2:5-9), so we shall be also. Our crosses are not our enemies; they are for our benefit and our glory.

We “adore” the Cross because of the effect it has in transforming us. The working of this is one of the mysteries of the ages that was hidden prior to Christ’s crucifixion. Had the rulers of this age (Satan and his legions) known this, they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory (1 Corinthians 2:7-9).

“Peace on Earth” vs. a Sword

As part of our Crosses, there will be conflict with the world. This is to be expected. Christ said, “I came to send fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!” (Luke 12:49) “Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword” (Matthew 10:34). John Chrysostom commented⁶ at length on what Christ meant by bringing a “sword” instead of peace. Both will come because His peace is not like that of the world. There can be no true peace when the world is alienated from God, and the “sword” will sort this out and expose it. The same thing was true in the Old Testament, and Chrysostom gives a number of examples. The Apostles saw this first hand as the world reacted to their message and their works.

“Christ commanded the Apostles to pronounce peace⁷ on entering into each house. The angels also said this, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on the earth peace!’ (Luke 2:14) All the prophets published peace as good news. This more than anything is peace, when the diseased is cut off, when the mutinous is removed. For thus it is possible for Heaven to be united to earth. The physician

⁵ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LV, 2.

⁶ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, XXXV, 1-4, 6.

⁷ This pronouncement of peace from the Apostles continues today in the Liturgy, where the priest says, “Peace be to all”; and the people respond, “And to your Spirit!”

in this way preserves the rest of the body, when he amputates the incurable part; and the general, when he has brought to a separation those that were together in evildoing. Thus it came to pass also in the case of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:7-8); for their evil peace was ended by their good discord, and the peace that was made resulted. Thus Paul also divided those that were conspiring⁸ against him (Acts 23:6-7). And in Naboth's case⁹ that agreement (1 Kings 21) was worse than any war. For concord is not in every case a good thing, since even robbers agree together!"

"The will of God was that all should agree in the word of godliness. He comforted them by saying, 'I did not come to send peace' (Matthew 10:34). As if He said, 'Don't think that you are to blame for any of these things; it is I who order them so. Be not therefore confounded, as though the events happened against expectation. I came for this end, to send war among men; for this is my will. Be not therefore troubled, when the earth is at war, as though it were subject to some hostile device. When the worse part is torn away, then after that Heaven will be knit for the better. And actually He didn't say 'war', but what was worse than it, 'a sword'".

"He unfolded also the very nature of the war, signifying it to be far more grievous even than a civil war. "I am come to set a man against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-Law against her mother-in-Law" (Matthew 10:35). For not friends only, or fellow citizens, but even kinsmen shall stand against one another, and nature shall be divided against herself. That is, not merely among those of the same household is the war, but among those that are dearest, and extremely near to each other. And this more than anything signifies His power, that hearing these things, the Apostles both accepted Him, and set about persuading everyone else to do so".

"This reminds us of ancient history at the Exodus when Moses commanded the Jews to each slay his neighbor. Then God laid aside His anger against them; both when they made the golden calf (Exodus 32:27-29), and when they were joined to Baal of Peor (Numbers 25:7-11). He has filled the world with blood, shed by kinsmen. Nevertheless even this we affirm to be a work of His great love towards man".

"He makes mention also of a prophecy, which involves the same meaning. 'A man's foes shall be those of his own household' (Matthew 10:36). For among the Jews something of the kind took place. There were prophets, and false prophets, and the people were divided, and families were in dissension; some believed the one, and some the other. The prophet admonished, 'Trust not in friends, have no hope in guides; beware of your wife, so as not to commit anything to her' and, 'A man's enemies are the men that are in his own house'" (Micah 7:5-6 LXX).

"And this He said, preparing the person that would receive the Word as above all. To die is not evil, but to die an evil death is. On this account He

⁸ The Pharisees and Sadducees were conspiring against Paul. Paul divided them against each other by proclaiming that he was a Pharisee and the son of a Pharisee, and that he was being tried for his belief in the Resurrection. The Pharisees believed in the Resurrection, but the Sadducees didn't. This caused the Sadducees to break out of their harmony with the Pharisees against their common enemy Paul.

⁹ Jezebel conspired to murder Naboth in order to give his vineyard to her husband King Ahab.

said, 'I am come to cast fire upon the earth' (Luke 12:49). And this He said to declare the vehemence and warmth of the love, which He required. Because He loved us very much, so He will likewise be loved by us".

"These things are not contrary to the Old Testament; rather they are very much in harmony. There He commanded not only to hate the worshippers of idols, but also to stone them (Exodus 22:20, Deuteronomy 13:6-10). Admiring these, at the blessing of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, Moses said to Levi, 'Who said to his father, and to his mother, I have not seen you; neither did he acknowledge his brethren, and his own sons he disowned; he observed Your covenant'" (Deuteronomy 33:9 LXX).

"If Paul gives many directions about parents, commanding us to obey them in all things, do not marvel; for in those things he means that we should obey as long as they do not hinder godliness (Ephesians 6:1). For it is a sacred duty to render them all other honors; but when they demand more than is due, one ought not to obey. For this reason Christ said, 'If any man comes to me, and does not hate his father, mother, wife, children, brethren, sisters, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple' (Luke 14:26). He does not command simply to hate them, since this would be quite contrary to the Law; but 'when one desires to be loved more than Christ, hate him in this respect'. These things He said both to render the children more determined, and to make the fathers that would hinder them more gentle. In speaking of parents, brothers, sisters, and wife, nothing is closer than life to any man; yet if you don't hate this also, you must bear the opposite of his lot who loves Me".

"Christ spoke nothing as yet of His own passion at this point, that when they had been for a time instructed in these things, they might more easily receive His word concerning it. Is there not cause for amazement, how on their hearing these things, their soul did not wing its way from the body, the hardships being everywhere at hand, and the good things far away? Great were both the power of the speaker, and the love of the hearers! Though they heard things far more intolerable and galling than those great men, Moses and Jeremiah, they continued to obey, and to say nothing against it".

"He held out another reward also. As before He threatened punishment to those that do not receive them (Matthew 10:14-15), here He defined certain refreshment for the good. To teach you His greater care for them, He said not simply, 'He that received a prophet', or 'He that received a righteous man', but, 'in the name of a prophet', and, 'in the name of a righteous man' (Matthew 10:41-42). That is, if not for any worldly preference, nor for any other temporal thing, he received him, but because he is either a prophet or a righteous man, he shall receive a prophet's reward, and a righteous man's reward. This was fitting for him to have, because he has received a prophet, or a righteous man".

"Do you see what mighty persuasions He used, and how He opened to them the houses of the whole world? He signified that men are their debtors in many ways:

1. By saying, 'The workman is worthy of his hire' (1 Timothy 5:18).
2. By sending them out having nothing.
3. By giving them up to wars and fighting on behalf of them that receive them.
4. By committing miracles to them also.

5. By their lips He introduced peace, the cause of all blessings, into the houses of such as receive them.
6. By threatening things more grievous than Sodom to those that don't receive them.
7. By signifying that as many as welcome them are receiving both Himself and the Father.
8. By promising both a prophet's and a righteous man's reward.
9. By undertaking that the recompenses shall be great, even for a cup of cold water.

“Now each one of these things, even by itself, was enough to attract them. For when a leader of armies, wounded in innumerable places, and dyed in blood, came in sight, returning after many trophies from war and conflict, who would not receive him, throwing open every door in his house?”

“Let no man twist things with arguments. Paul said, ‘If any will not work, neither let him eat’ (2 Thessalonians 3:10); to us he said the contrary, ‘Don't be weary in doing good’ (2 Thessalonians 3:13). We do this at home; when any two children are fighting with each other, we take each apart, and give them the opposite advice. This God and Moses did also. For while to God Moses said, ‘If you will forgive them their sin, forgive it; otherwise blot me out of Your book also’ (Exodus 32:32 LXX); to the people, on the contrary, he commanded them to slay one another (Exodus 32:27-29). Yet these things are contrary; nevertheless, both looked to one end”.

“Again, God said to Moses as Israel listened, ‘Let me alone, that I may consume the people’ (Exodus 32:10); for though they were not present when God said this, yet they were to hear it afterwards. But privately He gave Moses directions of the opposite tenor. And this, Moses revealed afterwards, thus saying, ‘What! Did I conceive them, that you say to me, Carry them, as a nurse would carry the nursing child on her hip?’” (Numbers 11:12 LXX)

“So also, when Paul was admonishing those of the Gentiles, in his Epistle to the Romans, not to be high-minded against the Jews, he brought forward also the wild olive tree. He seems to be saying one thing to the Jews, another to the Gentiles” (Romans 11:17).

“Let us not therefore fall away into cruelty, but let us listen to Paul, saying, ‘Don't be weary in doing good’ (2 Thessalonians 3:13). Let us listen to the Lord, who said, ‘Give to every man that asks of you’ (Luke 6:30), and, ‘Be merciful as your Father is merciful’ (Luke 6:36). And though He has spoken of many things, He has nowhere else used this expression, only with regard to our deeds of mercy. For nothing so equals us with God, as doing good”.

An example of not loving God above everything is the timid refusal of the High Priest Eli to remove his evil sons from the Priesthood for their sins against God (1 Samuel 2:22-25). Solomon spoke to this by saying, “He who corrects a scoffer gets shame for himself, and he who rebukes a wicked *man only* harms himself. Do not correct a scoffer, lest he hate you; rebuke a wise *man*, and he will love you” (Proverbs 9:7-8).

Christ's Example of Prayer in the Garden When Facing the Cross

Christ's prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane is very instructive toward our taking up our Cross. Christ is both fully God and fully man, which means He has a human will, like us, and a Divine will. In the Garden, we see a conflict as He approaches His Cross. John Chrysostom summarized¹⁰ the situation in the Garden, along with the misinterpretation of some of the heretics of his day.

“What was He saying when we find two wills opposed to one another? For having said ‘Let this cup pass from me’, He added, ‘nevertheless not as I will but as You will’ (Matthew 26:39). When He said, ‘I have not come of Myself’ (John 7:28) and ‘I can of Myself do nothing’ (John 5:30), he does not mean that He has been deprived of authority, either to speak or to act, but He desires to prove that what He says and does is one and the same with the Father”.

“All this goes back to the Incarnation, an event that was so strange as to be disbelieved by many even when it had taken place. He first of all sent prophets beforehand, announcing the fact. David, signifying His incarnate presence, said, ‘He shall come down as rain upon a fleece; and as drops falling upon the earth’ (Psalm 72:6 LXX), because He noiselessly and gently entered into the Virgin's womb”.

“When He had come, lest what had taken place should be thought an illusion, He confirmed the fact by duration of time and by passing through all the phases of man. He did not enter into a man matured and completely developed, but into a virgin's womb, so as to undergo the process of gestation, birth, suckling and growth. He allowed His body to experience the infirmities of human nature: hunger, thirst, sleep and fatigue. Streams of sweat flowed down from His body and an angel was discovered strengthening it in the Garden (Luke 22:43-44). He was sad and down-cast; for before He uttered these words He said, ‘my soul is troubled, and exceeding sorrowful even to death?’” (Matthew 26:38)

“Marcion of Pontus, Valentinus, and Manichaeus of Persia and many more heretics, have attempted to overthrow the Incarnation and have declared that He did not become flesh, nor was clothed with it, but that this was mere fancy, an illusion, a piece of acting and pretense, although the sufferings, the death, the burial, the thirst, cry aloud against this teaching”.

In order to understand what Christ was saying in the Garden, we need to examine all of what He said in context, rather than pick a few examples out of context. There appear to be some conflicting statements made by Christ. He always seems to be looking forward to the Cross, but there are some statements that can be interpreted otherwise. These two polarities are not in conflict with each other.

- **The Cup:** Jesus said, ‘Father if it be possible let this cup pass from me’ (Matthew 26:39). This seems like He was saying, ‘If it be permissible let me not be subjected to crucifixion and death’. Yet when Peter said the same thing, ‘Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!’ (Matthew 16:22), Christ poured an invective on him, ‘Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men’ (Matthew 16:23). The Lord also said to Peter, “Put up your sword into its sheath; shall I not drink the cup which My Father has given Me?” (John 18:11)
- **The Good Shepherd:** He called Himself the ‘Good Shepherd’ who lays down His life for the sheep, whereas the hirelings are unwilling to do this (John 10:11-18).

¹⁰ John Chrysostom, Against Marcionists and Manichaeans, 3-4.

- **Humbling Himself:** Paul marveled that Christ, although equal with God, humbled Himself to become obedient to the death on the Cross (Philippians 2:8).
- **Resurrection:** The Father loves the Son because He lays down His life that He may take it again (John 10:17).
- **Glory of the Cross:** Before the Cross, Christ said, ‘Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son’ (John 17:1), speaking of the cross as glory. Why does He seem to try to avoid it? Christ was “sorrowful unto death” (Matthew 26:38). Yet when Judas went out to betray Him, He said, “Now is the Son of Man glorified?” (John 13:31) If suffering was to glorify Him, how could the fear of it have made Him sorrowful?
- **Benefits of the Cross:** The Cross had huge benefits, which Christ knew would result. Chrysostom stated¹¹, “It destroyed the enmity of God towards man, made the earth Heaven, associated men with angels, unstrung the force of the devil, extinguished the power of sin, brought back the truth, expelled the demons”.
- **Desire for the Cross:** Christ called the Cross a ‘cup’. As a cup is sweet to those who are thirsty so also was the Crucifixion to Him; therefore He said, ‘With *fervent* desire have I desired to eat this Passover with you’ (Luke 22:15), because after that evening the Cross was awaiting Him.
- **Surrendered Himself:** When the soldiers came upon Him in the Garden, He said, ‘Whom do you seek?’ They replied ‘Jesus’. Then He said to them ‘I AM’; and they fell backward to the ground (John 18:4-6). “Having first crippled them and proved that He was able to escape their hands, He then surrendered Himself, that you might learn that it was not by compulsion or force; but willingly and with purpose, He prepared for this event a long time before”.
- **Fear of Death:** Hilary of Poitiers also noted¹² that Christ couldn’t have feared the pain of wounds. He had just created a new ear for the servant of the High Priest when Peter cut it off (John 18:10). His touch restored the flesh that was cut off; how could He be sorrowful out of fear for the piercing of His own flesh?

The prayer that Christ prayer was for our benefit; He was teaching us how to act when we face death. John Chrysostom stated¹³ that Christ prayed as He did to teach His followers. He prayed as instructing us to seek deliverance from distress, but to acquiesce in everything to what seems good to God.

“Christ wished to instruct men in virtue. A good instructor teaches not only by word, but also by deed, for this is the teacher’s best method of teaching. A pilot, when he makes the apprentice sit by his side shows him how he handles the rudder, but he also joins speech to action, and does not depend upon words alone or example alone. In like manner an architect, when he has placed by his side the man who is intended to learn from him how a wall is constructed, shows him the way by means of action as well as by means of oral teaching; so also with the weaver, embroiderer, gold refiner, and coppersmith”.

“Christ does the same: He both tells us what ought to be done, and does it. ‘He who does and teaches the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven’ (Matthew 5:19). He commanded men to be lowly minded, and meek, and He taught this by His words; but He also taught it by His deeds. He

¹¹ John Chrysostom, Against Marcionists and Manichaeans, 2.

¹² Hilary of Poitiers, On the Trinity, X, 28.

¹³ John Chrysostom, Against Marcionists and Manichaeans, 2-4.

said, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the meek' (Matthew 5:3-4). He showed how these virtues ought to be practiced by taking a towel and washing the disciples' feet (John 13:4-5). He commanded men to pray for their enemies (Matthew 5:44); this again He taught by means of His deeds, when He ascended the cross, 'Father forgive them for they don't know what they're doing'" (Luke 23:34).

"Christ also taught them to pray, and the last lesson on prayer occurred in the Garden before the Crucifixion. Three times, Jesus went off and prayed for an hour, only returning to find His disciples asleep. 'Could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you don't enter into temptation'. He not only prays but also admonishes! 'For the Spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak' (Matthew 26:39-41). This He said to empty their soul of vanity, deliver them from pride, teach them self-restraint, and train them to practice moderation. Therefore the prayer, which He wished to teach them, He Himself also offered, speaking after the manner of men, not according to His Godhead, but according to His manhood. And He prayed as instructing us to pray, and even to seek deliverance from distress; but, if this is not permitted, then to acquiesce in what seems good to God".

"Therefore He said, 'Nevertheless not as I will, but as You will' (Matthew 26:39). He did not have one will and the Father another; but in order that He might instruct men, even if they were in distress and trembling, even if danger came upon them, and they were unwilling to be torn from present life, nevertheless to postpone their own will to the will of God. Paul did this also when he said, 'For this thing I sought the Lord three times' (2 Corinthians 12:8). Yet since it did not please God to remove it, he said, 'I take pleasure in infirmities, in insults, in persecutions'" (2 Corinthians 12:10).

"To make this clearer, Paul incurred many dangers and prayed that he might not be exposed to them. Then he heard Christ saying 'my grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness' (2 Corinthians 12:9). As soon as he saw what the will of God was, he submitted his will to God's will. By means of this prayer, Christ taught both these truths: (1) that we should not plunge into dangers, but rather pray that we may not fall into them. (2) But if they come upon us, we should bear them bravely, and postpone our own will to the will of God. Knowing these things, let us pray that we may never enter into temptation; but if we do enter, let us ask God to give us patience and courage, and let us honor His will in preference to every will of our own".

Paul spoke in a similar manner to Christ: he would prefer to die and be with Christ, but he realized that people needed him in this life.

"If I live on in the flesh, this *will mean* fruit from *my* labor; yet what I shall choose I cannot tell. For I am hard pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, *which is* far better. Nevertheless to remain in the flesh *is* more needful for you. And being confident of this, I know that I shall remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy of faith, that your rejoicing for me may be more abundant in Jesus Christ by my coming to you again" (Philippians 1:22-26).

The Call to Perfection

As part of the Adoration of the Cross, we recall Christ's instruction in these matters as a vision for living the Christian life. Do we just kick back and do just the minimum to get by, or do we press on to perfection? In the Gospel, Christ asks us to go beyond merely keeping the Law, but He doesn't force us to do so.

John Cassian compared¹⁴ keeping the Commandments with the call of the New Testament. Keeping the Commandments was easy; the New Testament calls for a journey to perfection, which is more difficult, but which also results in greater rewards.

“On account of the superiority and excellence of the commandments it is said, ‘He that can receive it, let him receive it’ (Matthew 19:12). The forcible compulsion of the lawgiver shows the easy character of the precepts of the Mosaic Law. He says, ‘I call heaven and earth to record against you this day, that if you do not keep the commandments of the Lord your God you shall perish from off the face of the earth’ (Deuteronomy 4:26). Here the grandeur of sublime commands is shown by the very fact that He does not order, but exhorts, saying, ‘if you will be perfect go’ (Matthew 19:21) and do this or that. There Moses lays a burden that cannot be refused on those who are unwilling; here Paul meets with and counsels those who are willing and eager for perfection. This was not ordered as a general charge, nor required, as a regular rule for all, owing to its wonderful and lofty nature. Paul counsels everyone to be stimulated to grace. The result is that those who are great may deservedly be crowned by the perfection of their virtues. Those who are small, and not able to come up to ‘the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ’ (Ephesians 4:13), may seem to be lost to sight and hidden as it were by the brightness of larger stars. However, they may be free from the darkness of the curses, which are in the Law, and not condemned to suffer present evils or visited with eternal punishment. Christ therefore does not constrain anyone, by the compulsion of a command, to those lofty heights of goodness, but stimulates them by the power of free will, and urges them on by wise counsels and the desire of perfection. For where there is a command, there is duty, and consequently punishment. But those who keep the things to which they are driven by the severity of the Law, merely escape the punishment with which they were threatened, instead of obtaining rewards and a recompense”.

In contrast with the viewpoint of Apostles and the Early Church, Irenaeus mentioned¹⁵ that it was the heretics of his day, who were criticizing the Christians for standing firm in their Faith, even in the face of martyrdom.

“Christ promised to confess before His Father those who confessed His name before men; but declared that He would deny those who denied Him, and would be ashamed of those who are ashamed to confess Him (Luke 9:26). And although these things are so, some of these heretics have proceeded to such a degree of recklessness, that they even pour contempt upon the martyrs, and berate those who are slain on account of the confession of the Lord. The Christians

¹⁴ John Cassian, 1st Conference of Abbot Theonas, III, xxi, 5.

¹⁵ Irenaeus, Against Heresies, III, xviii, 5.

suffer all things predicted by the Lord, and in this respect strive to follow the footprints of the Lord's passion, having become martyrs of the suffering One; these we enroll with the martyrs themselves. For, when inquisition is made for their blood (Psalm 9:12 LXX), and they attain glory, then Christ shall confound all, who cast a slur upon their martyrdom. Christ exclaimed upon the cross, 'Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing' (Luke 23:34). The long-suffering, patience, compassion, and goodness of Christ are exhibited, since He both suffered, and Himself excused those who had mistreated Him. For the Word of God, who said to us, 'Love your enemies, and pray for those that hate you' (Matthew 5:44), Himself did this very thing upon the cross. Loving the human race to such a degree, He even prayed for those putting Him to death".

Cyprian stated¹⁶ that the Lord included among the martyrs even those who had not seen martyrdom, but who had their faith remain sound and unconquered.

"The Lord, Himself the avenger of our persecution and the One who rewards our suffering, says, 'Blessed are they who suffer persecution for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 5:10). And again: 'Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you, and revile you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of Man's sake. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy! For indeed your reward is great in heaven!' (Luke 6:22-23). And once more, 'Whoever shall lose his life for My sake, the same shall save it' (Luke 9:24). The rewards of the divine promise do not attend only those who are reproached and slain. If the passion itself, is lacking to the faithful, while their faith has remained sound and unconquered, and having forsaken all his possessions, the Christian has shown that he is following Christ, he also is honored by Christ among the martyrs, as He Himself promises. 'There is no one who has left house or parents or brothers or wife or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who shall not receive many times more in this present time, and in the age to come eternal life' (Luke 18:29-30). In the Apocalypse also He says the same thing. 'And I saw the souls of those that were slain for the Name of Jesus and the word of God' (Revelation 6:9). And when he had placed those who were slain in the first place, he added, 'And whoever had not worshipped the image of the beast, neither had received his mark upon their forehead or in their hand' (Revelation 13:16-17). All these he joins together, as seen by him at one time in the same place, and says, 'And they lived and reigned with Christ' (Revelation 20:4-5). He says that all live and reign with Christ, not only who have been slain. This included those standing in firmness of the Faith and in the fear of God, who have not worshipped the image of the beast, and have not consented to his deadly and sacrilegious edicts".

Double-Minded Man

Another aspect of taking up our Cross has to do with our attachment to worldly goods. A good illustration of this aspect of the Cross was addressed by John Cassian in dealing¹⁷ with

¹⁶ Cyprian, Treatises, XI, 12.

¹⁷ John Cassian, Institutes of the Coenobia, VII, 15.

a problem in a monastic community where some monks retained their worldly wealth, thinking that this would allow them to be more charitable. Cassian referred to them as double-minded, fearful and lacking faith; they twisted the Scriptures to support their avarice. This applies to the non-monastic also in the sense that many people put too much trust in their wealth.

“Of those who say that they have renounced this world, and afterwards are overcome by lack of faith and are afraid of losing their worldly goods, a charge was given mystically by Moses. ‘If any man is afraid and has a fearful heart, let him not go to war. Let him go back and return home, lest he make the hearts of his brethren as fearful as he himself is timid and frightened’ (Deuteronomy 20:8). What is plainer than this testimony? Does not Scripture clearly prefer that they should not take on even the earliest stages of the monastic profession, rather than by their persuasion and bad example turn others back from the perfection of the Gospel, and weaken them by their faithless terror? And so they are asked to withdraw from the battle and return to their homes, because a man cannot fight the Lord’s battle with a double heart. For ‘a double-minded man is unstable in all his ways!’ (James 1:8) And thinking of that Parable in the Gospel, that he who goes out with ten thousand men against a king who comes with twenty thousand, cannot possibly fight (Luke 14:31-32); they should, while he is yet a great way off, ask for peace. That is, it is better not even to take the first step towards renunciation, rather than afterwards to involve themselves in still greater dangers. For ‘it is better not to vow, than to vow and not pay’ (Ecclesiastes 5:4 LXX). It is a good description of us as the one coming with ten thousand and the other with twenty. For the number of sins, which attack us, is far larger than that of the virtues, which fight for us. But ‘no man can serve God and Mammon’ (Matthew 6:24). And ‘no man putting his hand to the plow and looking back is fit for the kingdom of God’” (Luke 9:62).

Controlling the Passions: Lust Versus Covetousness

Another aspect of the Cross deals with different passions in different manners. All passions are not alike; some are stronger than others, and are thus more difficult to deal with, and have to be treated in different manners. John Chrysostom compared¹⁸ the passions of lust and covetousness, concluding that lust is a much stronger passion than covetousness. The Scriptures condemn covetousness, but allow marriage to control lust. Even the heathen philosophers despised wealth, but none were indifferent to women.

“Sobriety means more than just abstaining from fornication; we must also be free from other passions. So then he who loves wealth is not sober. As the fornicator loves women, so the other loves money, and even more excessively, for he is not impelled by so strong a passion. A charioteer, who cannot manage a gentle horse, is more powerless than he who cannot restrain a wild and unruly one. Similarly the love of wealth is a weaker passion than the love of women. This is clear for many reasons. In the first place, lust springs from the necessity of nature, and what arises from this necessity must be difficult to restrain, since it is implanted in our nature. Secondly, the ancients had no regard for wealth, but for women they had great regard, respecting their chastity. No one blamed him who lived with his wife according to Law, even to old age,

¹⁸ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Titus, V, 2:11-14.

but everyone blamed him who hoarded money. Many of the heathen philosophers despised money, but none of them were indifferent to women, so that this passion is more domineering than the other. But since we are addressing the Church, let us not take our examples from the heathen, but from the Scriptures. This then the blessed Paul places almost in the rank of a command. 'Having food and clothing, let us be content' (1 Timothy 6:8). But concerning women he says, 'Do not defraud one another, except it be with consent', and 'come together again' (1 Corinthians 7:5). You see him often laying down rules for a lawful intercourse, and he permits the enjoyment of this desire, and allows a second marriage. He bestows much consideration upon the matter, and never punishes on account of it. But he everywhere condemns him that is fond of money. Concerning wealth also Christ often commanded that we should avoid the corruption of it, but He says nothing about abstaining from a wife. Hear what He says concerning money; 'Whoever forsakes not all that he has' (Luke 14:33). But he nowhere says, 'Whosoever forsakes not his wife'; for he knew how domineering that passion is. Paul also says, 'Marriage is honorable in all, and the bed undefiled' (Hebrews 13:4); but he has nowhere said that the care of riches is honorable, but the reverse. Thus he says to Timothy, 'They that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts' (1 Timothy 6:9). Being rich brings on covetousness."

"And that you may learn from the common notions the true state of this matter, it must be set before you generally. If a man were once for all deprived of money, he would no longer be tormented with the desire of it, for nothing so much causes the desire of wealth, as the possession of it. But it is not so with respect to lust, but many who have been made eunuchs have not been freed from the flame that burned within them, for the desire resides in other organs, being seated inwardly in our nature. To what purpose then is this said? Because the covetous man is more intemperate than the fornicator, inasmuch as the covetous gives way to a weaker passion. It proceeds less from passion than from baseness of mind. But lust is natural; avarice is not."

THE PRIESTHOOD

March 18, 2012
3rd Sunday of Lent
Revision E

Epistle: Hebrews 4:14-5:6

In the West, today's Epistle lesson is used for Good Friday and sometimes also in late October.

Background

The Apostle Paul wrote his Epistle to the Hebrews toward the end of his life and just before the destruction of Jerusalem¹⁹ by the Romans. The Apostle James, the Lord's brother and Bishop of Jerusalem (d. 62 AD), had drafted a Liturgy for the Jerusalem Church that was in use during the times that Paul visited Jerusalem. Thus Paul wrote his Epistle to the Hebrews about the time of or just following the martyrdom of James. Following is an excerpt²⁰ of the St. James Liturgy, where there is a distinct flavor of and allusion to the sacrifices²¹ going on next door at the Temple in Jerusalem. Since the St. James Liturgy predates Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews, Paul seems to refer²² to parts of the St. James Liturgy as he drafted his Epistle.

“And, O God, look upon us, and have regard to this our reasonable service, and accept it, as You accepted the gifts of Abel, the sacrifices of Noah, the priestly offices of Moses and Aaron, the peace-offerings of Samuel, the repentance of David, the incense of Zachariah. As You accepted from the hand of Your apostles this true service, so accept also in Your goodness from the hands of us sinners these offered gifts. Grant that our offering may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit, as a propitiation for our transgressions and the errors of the people (Hebrews 5:2), and for the rest of the souls that have already fallen asleep. That we also, Your humble, sinful, and unworthy servants, being counted worthy without guile to serve Your holy altar, may receive the reward of faithful and wise stewards, and may find grace and mercy in the terrible day of Your just and good retribution”.

PRAYER OF THE VEIL

“We thank You, O Lord our God, that You have given us boldness for the entrance to Your holy places, which You have renewed to us as a new and living way through the veil²³ of the flesh of Your Christ. We therefore, being counted

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¹⁹ The siege of Jerusalem began about 66 AD and was completed by 70 AD.

²⁰ Roberts and Donaldson, “The Divine Liturgy of James, the Holy Apostle and Brother of the Lord”, *Early Liturgies*, 2, xxvii, just prior to Anaphora, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., Peabody, MA 01961, 1995.

²¹ The St. James Liturgy was very long (about 4 hours). St John Chrysostom and St. Basil composed Liturgies in the 4th Century that shortened the Liturgy to about 1 ½ hours; in doing so, some of the allusions to the Old Testament sacrifices were omitted.

²² Paul also said, “We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat” (Hebrews 13:10), referring to the “tabernacle” as the Temple in Jerusalem. That is, even the High Priest from the Temple next door has no right to partake of the Eucharist that is served during the St. James Liturgy.

²³ There are two “veils” referred to. One is the veil that covers the oblation (the bread and wine). The other is the veil in front of the altar, which represents the veil separating the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place in the Temple.

worthy to enter into the place of the tabernacle of Your glory, and to be within the veil, and to behold the Holy of Holies, cast ourselves down before Your goodness”.

“Lord, have mercy on us! Since we are full of fear and trembling, when about to stand at Your holy altar, and to offer this dread and bloodless sacrifice for our own sins and for the errors of the people (Hebrews 5:1-2), send forth, O God, Your good grace, and sanctify our souls, and bodies, and spirits. Turn our thoughts to holiness, that with a pure conscience we may bring to You a peace-offering, the sacrifice of praise”:

(ALOUD.)

“By the mercy and loving-kindness of Your only-begotten Son, with whom You are blessed, together with Your all-holy, and good, and quickening Spirit, now and always”:

THE PEOPLE

“Amen”.

THE PRIEST

“Peace be to all”.

THE DEACON

“Let us stand reverently; let us stand in the fear of God, and with contrition; let us attend to the holy communion service, to offer peace to God”.

THE PEOPLE

“The offering of peace, the sacrifice of praise”.

THE PRIEST

[A veil is now withdrawn from the oblation of bread and wine.]

“And uncovering the veils that darkly invest in symbol this sacred ceremonial, reveal it clearly to us; fill our intellectual vision with absolute light, and having purified our poverty from every pollution of flesh and spirit, make it worthy of this dread and awful approach. For You are an all-merciful and gracious God, and we send up the praise and the thanksgiving to You, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now, and always, and forever”.

The St James Liturgy is not used very much today, perhaps because it is about 4 hours long. Instead the St John Chrysostom Liturgy (about 75 minutes) or the St Basil Liturgy (about 90 minutes) are used, where these two liturgies were drafted in the 4th Century in an effort to shorten the St James Liturgy.

The subject of the Epistle Lesson is the priesthood, but there are several priesthoods mentioned in the Scriptures: the Levitical priesthood, the Melchizedek priesthood, the priesthood in the Church and the Priesthood of Believers. And each of these kinds of priesthood needs to be understood in terms of the Cross. As one serves as a priest, one takes up his Cross in some respect.

The Levitical Priesthood

Prior to Moses, the priests were the heads of families. For example, the Patriarchs, beginning with Adam and Abel (Genesis 4:4), served as a priest, performing priestly duties that were later limited to the Levites.

Abel	Genesis 4:3-5	Isaac	Genesis 26:25
Noah	Genesis 8:20-22	Jacob	Genesis 33:20, 35:1-2, 35:14
Abraham	Genesis 12:7, 13:18, 15:7-10, 17	Job	Job 1:4-5

When Israel was in Egypt, Joseph married the daughter of the priest of On (pronounced: “Own”) and showed special favor to the Egyptian priests during the famine (Genesis 41:45, 50, 46:20, 47:26).

Moses was born of the tribe of Levi (Exodus 2:1-10) and was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians (Acts 7:22), which included priestly activities also. Moses married Zipporah, the daughter of Jethro, the priest of Midian, where Midian was one of the sons of Abraham by Keturah (Genesis 25:1-4). We may be inclined to think of the Gentile nations as utterly pagan and knowing nothing of God. But this only became so as the Gentile nations got into idolatry and the worship of demons (Deuteronomy 32:16-17).

After the Exodus, the plan was for all the firstborn in each household to serve the Lord as priests (Exodus 13:1-3, 11-16). The intended result was for Israel to be God’s special treasure among all peoples of the earth and a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:4-6). That intent hasn’t changed and the church has become what God intended for Israel (1 Peter 5:9, Revelation 1:6, 5:10). But the firstborn proved to be unfaithful to God.

When Moses went up Mt. Sinai to receive the Law from God, the people built the Golden Calf, thinking Moses died in the smoke, thunder and lightning (Exodus 19:16-20, 32:1). When Moses returned to find idolatry and the people out of control (Exodus 32:25-26), Moses called for “whoever is for the Lord, come to me”. Only the Levities responded, not the firstborn of every tribe! Therefore, the Lord chose the Levities as priests instead of the firstborn of every family (Numbers 3:12-13, 41; 8:14-19).

By the 1st Century, the Sanhedrin was in charge of determining who was qualified to be a priest, and met daily regarding new candidates. Two principal issues were considered: Was the candidate of the tribe of Levi? And did he have any physical deformity? (Leviticus 21:17-23). Regarding descent, all genealogical records were kept in the Temple, and so a careful search was possible. This was how the genealogies of Jesus were obtained as recorded in Matthew 1:1-17 and Luke 3:23-38. Regarding deformity, Jewish tradition had added to the list given in Leviticus 21.

The Melchizedek Priesthood

In contrast to the Levitical Priesthood, the Epistle lesson speaks of the Melchizedek Priesthood. Details of the Melchizedek Priesthood are the subject of the Orthodox Feast of the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple²⁴. Much debate has been generated on the identity of Melchizedek.

Paul pointed out that the lesser, Abraham, is always blessed by the greater, Melchizedek

²⁴ For more details, see Mark kern, The Feast of the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple, Unpublished Work, St Athanasius Press, 2000, where the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord is celebrated on February 2nd.

(Hebrews 7:7). Was Melchizedek an angel? The giving of a tithe by Abraham was an acknowledgment by Abraham that Melchizedek's priesthood was of God, and Abraham seemed to recognize Melchizedek as someone greater than himself, since the tithe was customarily presented to Deity (Lev. 27:30-32, Deut. 26:12-15). While angels' appearance often resembles that of the Son of God, angels are not spoken of as priests but as messengers ("Angel" means messenger) and as deacons (Hebrews 1:14, Greek text).

Ambrose stated²⁵ that Melchizedek was not an angel but was a holy man and a priest of God who prefigured Christ as a "type" or a shadow of the Truth. Cyprian of Carthage stated²⁶,

"Melchizedek bore a type of Christ; He offered bread and wine and blessed Abraham. Who is more of a priest of the Most High God than our Lord Jesus Christ is, Who offered Himself as a sacrifice to God the Father. He offered the very same thing that Melchizedek offered; that is, bread and wine, that is, His body and blood".

The person Melchizedek was tied intimately with the person of the Messiah in Old Testament prophecy and in 1st Century expectation. Referring to the messianic expectation, Jesus asked the Pharisees a question, "What do you think about the Messiah? Whose Son is He?" They answered, "The Son of David." Jesus replied, "How then does David in the Spirit call Him Lord, saying 'The Lord said to My Lord, sit at My Right Hand till I make Your enemies Your footstool' (Psalms 110:1)? If David then calls Him 'Lord', how is He his Son?" This was very embarrassing for them and no one dared question Jesus any more (Matthew 22:41-46). The answer, of course, is that Christ is the Son of God in His Person and the Son of David in His humanity.

Thus everyone agreed that Psalm 110 was addressing the Messiah. In this light, Psalm 110 also states, "The Lord has sworn and will not change His mind. Thou art a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek" (Psalm 110:4). Paul quoted this in saying that Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of David in becoming High Priest according to the Order of Melchizedek (Hebrews 5:6, 10; 6:20; 7:21). The prophet Zachariah also foretold that Messiah would be both a ruler (i.e. King) and a priest (Zachariah 6:12-13). In His genealogy, Jesus descended from both the kings of Judah (Matthew 1:6-12), and from the high priest Aaron²⁷.

Paul used the figure of Melchizedek to compare the Levitical priesthood to that of Christ. In doing so, he described Melchizedek as having no father and mother, no genealogy and neither beginning of days nor end of life (Hebrews 7:3, 6, 16). John Chrysostom stated²⁸ that when Paul described Melchizedek in these terms, he was speaking in comparison to the Levitical priesthood, and he meant that information about Melchizedek's parents, his birth and his death wasn't available, never having been written down. Records that were kept in the Temple in Jerusalem for determining the Levitical priests would not include Melchizedek if he were not a descendant of Shem. Similarly, genealogical records for Job, a descendant of Esau, were not kept in the Temple either. The point was that if Melchizedek was greater than Abraham and was

²⁵ Ambrose of Milan, Of the Christian Faith, III, xi, 87-89.

²⁶ Cyprian of Carthage, Epistles, Lxii, 4.

²⁷ We can see this by noting that the Virgin Mary was related to Elizabeth (Luke 1:36), who was of the daughters of Aaron (Luke 1:5).

²⁸ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Hebrews, XII, 3.

a type of Christ, then Christ is far greater than Abraham, the priesthood of Christ is far greater than the Levitical priesthood, and genealogies are irrelevant.

Christ as Priest Without Sin

Like the Levitical priesthood, Christ was made completely human, just like us. Paul stated, “For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15). In defining what “without sin” means, the “passions” of the flesh are defined as those longings that lead to sin. Gregory of Nyssa stated²⁹ that Christ had the longings, but He did not follow them to lead to sin.

“‘Passion’ is that which tends to sin. We give the name of ‘passion’ only to that which is opposed to the virtuous unimpassioned state, and we believe that Christ, Who granted us salvation, was at all times devoid of this, Who ‘was in all points tempted as we are yet without sin’ (Hebrews 4:15). That, which is truly passion, is a diseased condition of the will; Christ was not a partaker of this. ‘He did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth’” (1 Peter 2:22).

“By a kind of customary abuse of terms, the peculiar attributes of our nature are called by the same name of ‘passion’. Of these, we confess, the Lord did partake, such as birth, nourishment, growth, sleep and toil. He experienced all those natural dispositions which the soul experiences with regard to bodily inconveniences, the desire for that which is lacking, when the longing passes from the body to the soul, the sense of pain, the dread of death, etc. Except He did not follow these longings to lead to sin!”

John Cassian stated³⁰ the same thing about Christ, but referred to the “longing” of the flesh as an appetite.

“Our Lord Jesus Christ, though declared by the Apostle’s word to have been tempted in all points as we are, is yet said to have been ‘without sin’, i.e., without the infection of this appetite, as He knew nothing of incitements of carnal lust, with which we are sure to be troubled even against our will and without our knowledge”.

Cyril of Jerusalem noted³¹ the dual role of Christ, both saving and ruling over His people as a king, and serving them as a priest. Joshua and Aaron pre-figure Him in these roles.

“Jesus is called by two names, Jesus Christ; Jesus, because He saves, and Christ, because He is a Priest. Knowing this, the inspired Prophet Moses conferred these two titles on two men distinguished above all: his own successor in the government, Hoshea (Numbers 13:8, 16), renamed Jesus³². His own brother Aaron he surnamed Christ³³, that by two well-approved men he might represent at once both the High Priesthood, and the Kingship of the One Jesus Christ who was to come. For Christ is a High Priest like Aaron; since He ‘glorified not Himself to be made a High Priest, but He that spoke to Him,

²⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, Against Eunomius, VI, 3.

³⁰ John Cassian, Conference of Abbot Serapion, I, v, 5.

³¹ Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lectures, X, 11.

³² The name Jesus (Greek *Yesous*) was the 1st Century pronunciation of the ancient name Joshua (Hebrew *Yehoshua*).

³³ “Christ” means Anointed.

You are a Priest forever after the order of Melchizedek' (Psalm 110:4; Hebrews 5:6, 10; 6:20). And Jesus (i.e. Joshua) the son of Nun was in many things a type of Him. For when he began to rule over the people, he began from Jordan, where Christ did also, after He was baptized, and began to preach the gospel”.

Ambrose of Milan noted³⁴ that just as Aaron the High Priest did not take the priesthood upon himself, neither did Christ. The true meaning of Melchizedek's lack of genealogy is the prefiguring of Christ. As Melchizedek was described as without father and mother, so Christ was without (human) father in His humanity and without mother in His Deity.

“Christ did not honor Himself to be made a High Priest, but He honored Him Who spoke to Him. The Father said, ‘You are My Son, this day have I begotten You’. He also said, ‘You are a Priest forever after the order of Melchizedek’ (Hebrews 5:5-6). Since He was the type of all future priests, He took our flesh upon Him, that ‘in the days of His flesh He might offer prayers and supplications with a loud voice and tears. By those things which He suffered, though He was the Son of God, He might seem to learn obedience, which He taught us, that He might be made to us the Author of Salvation?’ (Hebrews 5:8-9) And at last when His sufferings were completed, as though completed and made perfect Himself, He gave health to all and He bore the sin of all”.

“And so He Himself also chose Aaron as priest, that not the will of man but the grace of God should have the chief part in the election of the priest (Numbers 16:40). Aaron did not voluntarily offer himself, nor take it upon himself; this was the vocation from heaven that he should offer gifts for the sins of those who sinned, for He Himself, it is said, bears our weakness (Hebrews 5:2). No one ought to take this honor upon himself, but they are called of God, as was Aaron (Hebrews 5:4), and so Christ did not demand, but received the priesthood”.

“The succession derived through family descent from Aaron, and contained heirs of the family rather than sharers in his righteousness. There came, after the likeness of that Melchizedek, the true Melchizedek, the true King of peace, the true King of righteousness. This is the interpretation of the Name, ‘without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life’ (Hebrews 7:3), which also refers to the Son of God, Who in His Divine Generation had no mother, and was in His Birth of the Virgin Mary without a father. He was begotten before the ages of the Father alone, born in this age of the Virgin alone, and certainly could have no beginning of days seeing He ‘was in the beginning’ (John 1:1-2). And how could He have any end of life, Who is the Author of life to all? He is ‘the Beginning and the Ending’” (Revelation 1:8).

“But this also refers to Him as an example: a priest ought to be without father and without mother, since in him it is not nobility of family, but holiness of character and pre-eminence in virtue, which is elected”.

The Priesthood of Believers

In the Epistle lesson, Christ is referred to as our High Priest (Hebrews 4:14-15, 5:5-10, 2:17, 6:20, 7:26). But a high priest, in the Old Testament context, has a great deal of fellow

³⁴ Ambrose of Milan, Epistles, LVIII, 47-49.

priests whom He is in charge of. This is not a recent development; it was formalized by Moses and Aaron and has roots going back earlier with the Patriarchs.

At the time the Lord led Israel out of Egypt, it was His intent that His people would be a kingdom of priests (Exodus 19:6). After stating this to His people, He gave them the Law (Exodus 20:1-18), where the intent of the Law with all its ordinances was to bring us to Christ (Galatians 4:24, Romans 10:4). Thus, our future in glory involves our being kings and priests of God the Father and of Christ (Revelation 1:6, 5:10, 20:6).

In our economy, the Church has been given the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. Whatever the Church, in faith, binds on earth will be, having been bound in heaven and whatever the church looses on earth will be, having been loosed in heaven (Matthew 16:19, 18:18). To illustrate this, the Lord gave an example of a brother who sins against his fellow brother. He counseled us to confront him and tell him his fault. If he repents, great; if not, He counseled us to take one or two others that “by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established” (Deuteronomy 17:6, 19:15). If the errant brother refuses to hear them, He said, take it to the Church. If he refuses to hear the Church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. And this will be bound in heaven (Matthew 18:15-18).

In doing this, we are guarding the Lord’s holiness, since members of the Church are members of Christ (1 Corinthians 6:15-20). If we refuse to do this, the Lord Himself will take action. Some examples are the refusal of the High Priest Eli to correct his evil sons (1 Sam. 2-4), and the warnings to the seven Churches in Asia (Revelation 2-3).

Within the Church, we are instructed to “obey those who rule over us and be submissive, for they watch out for our souls as those who must give account” (Hebrews 13:17). We are instructed to “follow their faith, considering the outcome of their conduct” (Hebrews 13:7, see also 1 Peter 5:5). Just as Elisha referred to Elijah as “father” (2 Kings 2:12), so we refer to our priest in the Church as “father”. For more discussion on this, see the special Feast Day for Hierarchs.

Referring to the priest watching out for our souls, John Chrysostom said³⁵ that the priests’ role is like the helmsman on a ship. Regarding responsibility, the priests sit, not on Moses’ seat, but that of Christ.

“While the steersman continues in good courage, the crew also will be in safety. But if their reviling him and showing ill will against him tire him out, he cannot watch equally well, or retain his skill; and without intending it, throws them into ten thousand mischiefs. So too the priest; if he enjoys honor from you, will be able well to order your affairs. But if you throw them into despondency, you weaken their hands and render them, as well as yourselves, an easy prey to the waves, although they are very courageous. Consider what Christ said concerning the Jews. ‘The Scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat (Exodus 18:13); therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do’ (Matthew 23:2). Now we do not say ‘the priests sit on Moses’ seat’ but ‘on that of Christ’; for they have successively received His doctrine.

³⁵ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, LXXXVI, 4.

Priests in the Church

In the New Testament, Paul and Barnabas, (and Paul and Silas) appointed presbyters (Greek *presbuteros*) at the Churches they established (Acts 14:23, 20:17, 1 Timothy 4:14, 5:17, Titus 1:5). The Greek word *presbuteros* implies elders and the word is used to refer to the elders (or presbyters) of the Church in Jerusalem (Acts 11:30, 15:2-6, 15:22-23, 16:4, 21:18) and to the Jewish elders who opposed Paul and crucified Christ (Matthew 21:23, 26:3, 26:57, Acts 23:14, 24:1, 25:15). Thus, government in the Church was patterned after that in Jewish society. Today the terms presbyter and priest are used interchangeably in the Orthodox Church and also in some Western Churches.

The Epistle lesson refers to Christ in His role as High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek (Hebrews 5:5-6). Many of the characteristics of our High Priest also apply to priests in the Church who serve under His direction. For example, a priest:

1. Is appointed for men in things pertaining to God (5:1)
2. Offers gifts and sacrifices for sins (5:1); e.g. in the Eucharist and Liturgy
3. Has compassion on those who are ignorant and going astray (5:2, 4:15); e.g. during confession
4. Is himself also subject to weakness (5:2)
5. Does not take this honor to himself, but is called (5:4-5)
6. Deals with holding fast our confession (4:14); e.g., the Creed, etc.
7. Administers mercy and grace to help in time of need (4:16).

Roberts and Donaldson, editors of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, point out³⁶ that when the priest in the Church “offers gifts and sacrifices for sins” (Hebrews 5:1) during the Liturgy, he does not crucify Christ all over again. He does this in remembrance of the sacrifice offered once for all (Hebrews 7:27, 10:10). Later teaching of the Latin Church at the Council of Trent (1545-1563) stated that the Eucharist, besides being a commemoration of the sacrifice effected on the Cross, is also truly a propitiatory sacrifice, by which God is appeased, and rendered propitious to us. The Latin Church, even as late as the 9th Century, did not teach this.

From Apostolic tradition, the priest in the Church, who was ordained by the Bishop, had certain duties. Priests were called, and did not take this honor to themselves. Those that tried to take that honor to themselves brought down on themselves severe and sudden punishment from the Lord. According to tradition,

“We do not permit³⁷ the laity to perform any of the offices belonging to the priesthood; for instance, neither the sacrifice, nor baptism, nor the laying on of hands, nor the blessing, for ‘no one takes this honor to himself, but he that is called of God’ (Hebrews 5:4). For such sacred offices are conferred by the laying on of the hands of the bishop. But a person to whom such an office is not committed, but he seizes it for himself, he shall undergo the punishment of king Uzziah”.

³⁶ Roberts and Donaldson, “Elucidation 1 after Epistle 82 of Cyprian”, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Volume 5, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody MA, 1995, p. 409.

³⁷ *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles*, III, I, 10.

“Saul, when he had offered³⁸ without Samuel (1 Samuel 13:8-14), was told, ‘You have acted foolishly’ (1 Samuel 13:13); so every person among the laity, doing anything without the priest, labors in vain. As Uzziah the king, who was not a priest, and yet wanted to exercise the functions of the priests in offering incense, was smitten with leprosy for his transgression (2 Chronicles 26:16-21); so every layperson shall be punished who despises God, and is so mad as to affront His priests, and unjustly to snatch that honor to himself. We should imitate Christ, ‘who didn’t glorify Himself to be made a high priest’ (Hebrews 5:5), but waited till He heard from His Father. ‘The Lord has sworn, and will not repent, You are a priest for ever, after the order of Melchizedek’ (Psalm 110:4). If, therefore, Christ did not glorify Himself without the Father, how dare any man thrust himself into the priesthood, who has not received that dignity from his superior, and do such things, which it is lawful only for the priests to do? Were not the followers of Korah, even though they were of the tribe of Levi, consumed with fire, because they rose up against Moses and Aaron (Numbers 16:35), and meddled with such things as did not belong to them? Dathan and Abiram went down into hell (Numbers 16:31-34); and the rod that budded put a stop to the readiness of the multitude, and demonstrated (Numbers 17:1-9, Hebrews 9:4) who was the high priest ordained by God”.

Coming to Our Priest, We Come to God

Just prior to the Epistle lesson, Paul states, “For the Word of God is living and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account” (4:12-13). John Chrysostom explained³⁹ the term “naked and open”:

“It is a metaphor from the skins which are drawn off from the (Old Testament sacrificial) victims. For as in that case, when a man has killed them, and has peeled the skin from the flesh, he lays open all the inward parts and makes them visible to our eyes. So also do all things lie open before God”.

When we come to our priest for confession, we come to the Word of God and all things are laid open. Here we can bare our soul because we are coming to the throne of Grace (4:16) in order that we might obtain mercy at the throne of Judgment. The priest is not the Word of God himself, but through the Church, he has been given the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 16:19). And as the body is connected to the Head, so the priest administers the Word of God.

John Chrysostom stated⁴⁰ that we should approach the throne of Grace now, before it becomes a throne of Judgment later.

“The throne of grace (4:16) spoken of is the royal throne concerning which the Psalmist said, ‘the Lord said to My Lord, sit at My Right Hand until I make Your enemies Your footstool’ (Psalm 110:1). We should approach boldly

³⁸ Constitutions of the Holy Apostles, II, iv, 27.

³⁹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Hebrews, VII, 2.

⁴⁰ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Hebrews, VII, 6.

because now it is a throne of Grace and not a throne of Judgment. If we approach now, we will receive both Grace and mercy, for we approach ‘in due season’ (2 Corinthians 6:2, Galatians 6:9, James 5:7). If we approach then, no longer will we receive it”.

All Believers are Priests

The Apostle Peter referred to us as “living stones, a spiritual house, a royal priesthood, who offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:5). He continued: we are a “chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that we may proclaim the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy” (1 Peter 2:9-10).

These same things that Peter said about the church -- and the Gentile Church at that -- were told to Moses and the Israeli nation just before the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai, “If you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own special treasure among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine, and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:5-6). The result of the Lord’s word to Moses and Israel in the wilderness was the Levitical Priesthood. The Lord’s intent has now been fulfilled in us.

There are many aspects to this. We “continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His Name” (Hebrews 13:15, Ephesians 5:20). This is comparable to the “peace offering with thanksgiving” about which the Lord instructed Moses in the wilderness (Leviticus 7:11-14). We also can offer our bodies as “a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is our reasonable service” (Romans 12:1); this is comparable to the whole burnt offering (Numbers 28). John Chrysostom stated⁴¹,

“As much as a man is superior to a sheep, so much is this sacrifice superior to those (Old Testament sacrifices). For here you offer your soul as victim”.

Even in the Old Testament, these better sacrifices were described. For example:

- “Offer to God a sacrifice of righteousness” (Psalm 4:5).
- “Offer a sacrifice of praise” (Psalm 50:14).
- “A sacrifice of praise shall glorify Me” (Psalm 50:23).
- “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (Psalm 51:17).
- “What does the Lord require of you, but to do justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).
- “Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required. Then I said, ‘Lo, I come; I delight to do Thy Will; O my God’” (Psalm 40:6-8).
- “I desired mercy and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings” (Hosea 6:6).

But our work as a priest goes beyond this; we also have a priestly relationship to the world. For example, Paul spoke about how he was a “minister (or liturgist) of Jesus Christ to the

⁴¹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Hebrews, XI, 5.

Gentiles, serving as a priest the Gospel of God that the offering consisting of the Gentiles might be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit” (Romans 15:16). Similarly, Isaiah wrote of many Gentiles as being a grain offering to the Lord (Isaiah 66:20). John Chrysostom wrote⁴²,

“And other sacrifices there are also which are whole burnt offerings: the bodies of the martyrs, where both soul and body are offered. These have a great savor of a sweet smell. You also are able, if you will, to bring such a sacrifice.”

“If you do not burn your body in the fire (i.e. martyrdom), yet in a different fire you can; for instance, in that of voluntary poverty, and in that of affliction. For to have it in your power to spend your days in luxury and expense, and yet to take up a life of toil and bitterness, and to deaden your body, is this not a whole burnt offering? (For this) you shall also receive a crown of martyrdom”.

Such were the offerings of Cornelius; for the angel said, “Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God” (Acts 10:4). On the one hand, “He that stops his ears that he may not hear the poor, his prayer God will not listen to” (Proverbs 21:13). But on the other hand, one can act as a priest to the world, “Blessed is he that considers the poor and needy; the Lord will deliver him in the time of trouble” (Psalms 41:1).

In all this, the Cross is at work. Paul wrote about being hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed, always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus’ sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh”. To Paul, this was death working in him, but life in those that he served (2 Corinthians 4:8-12).

As we continue in Lent looking forward to Pascha, we can take joy in our crosses as our High Priest took joy in His (Hebrews 12:2).

⁴² John Chrysostom, Homilies on Hebrews, XI, 6.