

Fifth Sunday in Lent
Year B

Jeremiah 31:31-34
Psalm 119:9-16
Hebrews 5:5-10
John 12:20-33

When we hear the title “high priest”, we all have some mental picture of what that person looks like. Usually, we will picture a man with a grey beard, wearing elaborate clothing, carrying some sign of his office. Beyond the trappings of the office, the high priest was the only person who could enter the Holy of Holies to offer the annual sacrifice on the Day of Atonement. In the Gospels, the high priest is shown as a political leader of the Israelites, as one who stood in judgment.

But what makes a man eligible to be the high priest? While we may look to the ancestral focus most people think about, being a Levite, that isn't really the case. There are actually two criteria - be of the people and being chosen by God. Melchizedek, who is revered by the Jews because of his interactions with Abraham, was clearly not a Levite, but was of the people and chosen by God.

Hearing that title used for Jesus confuses us because we never picture Jesus in costly apparel. We don't see Him in a political role. However, the aspect of the high priest as the intercessor for the people is the role we see for Jesus. Thus, we get mixed messages in this passage. How are we to reconcile the two images we now have in our minds?

To complicate matters, we twice see the image of Melchizedek used for Jesus. In Genesis, we see this man greeting Abraham. He is called both the priest of the Most High God and the King of Salem. We also understand the Anointed One is also a term used for kings. Is the writer of this letter labeling Jesus as both high priest and king?

Leaving aside the image of kingship, the role of priest is very fitting for Jesus. Looking at that role, one who is fully human like us, struggling to fulfill the calling placed upon him, the priest is the one commissioned by God to bring the needs of the people to God. The prayers of Jesus point out that this aspect of priesthood is central to the work Jesus does. Jesus intercedes for us continually before God. Like the priests of old, Jesus also bears the sacrifice for the people to God through the offering of Himself. Through His crucifixion, Jesus not only enters the Holy of Holies, but destroys the divide to allow all to enter with Him. The writer reminds us that in His sacrifice, Jesus offers all our sins, our pain, our tears and supplications to God. Jesus takes on the grief and anguish of us all in His cries in Gethsemane and on the cross.

Today, we can access God through the cries of Jesus. Our pain, our grief, our concerns for this world and the people around us are carried to God through our faith in the work of Jesus. We can offer the ravages of this world to God because we are called to follow the example of Jesus and that is what He did during His earthly pilgrimage. It is through this that we have the hope of

transformation. Our vocation, as the Body of Christ, is to hear the pain and join in the cry to God - never despairing, but confident in the victory Jesus has already given to us.