

Christ the King Year C: 23 / 24 November 2019
St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY
The Reverend Gary Cyr

“Thus, whatever one’s preconceived notion of what a priest is, he or she is first and foremost a sinner, in need of forgiveness, a broken being striving to live the Good News while being Christ’s presence in the world. A humble servant of the Servant of All.”

Jeremiah 23: 1-6
Colossians 1: 11-20
Luke 23: 33-43
Canticle 16

Prophet, priest, and king. Three terms ascribed to Christ by the Church to theologically ground Jesus’ life and ministry in the ethos of faith. These ancient titles are found throughout what I and many scholars term the First Testament, the Hebrew Canon; or what most people know as the Old Testament. They are a means for understanding Jesus’ function and presence as God Incarnate. Think of them as Jesus’ job description – he is the intersection, the intertwining of prophet, priest, and king.

Most of us, I believe, have some understanding of who a prophet is. Just a few weeks ago I described them as skunks; individuals who create a stink thereby disturbing the homeostasis of a community so that God’s word can be heard and understood more earnestly. Prophets were not the most popular individuals to be around, to say the least, and their longevity was questionable at best. One has only to read Isaiah, Jeremiah, or any of the prophetic book in scripture if they have doubts about that. We get who a prophet is since we say, even to this day, that we hear the prophetic voice among us; we hear it in individuals like Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, Verna Dozier, or, one dear to my heart, Madeleine L’Engle. We can understand how the faith community sees Jesus in such light and why he wears the title prophet. We get it.

King, or any royal title, is also an idea we can wrap our minds around. One has only to look at any tabloid publication to read about the shenanigans some modern-day royal is

involved in to get a sense of who and what they are (and I am not suggesting Jesus is a playboy – let us get that straight). Though out of step with modernity, for Jesus, being King simply implies that God’s rule, God’s reign is something tangible where God’s dominion usurps all our human foibles with gracious love. That kind of royalty will never be on the cover of any tabloid magazine. But we get what a king is and how the ancient people of pre-first century Palestine understood and embraced the role of a king in their midst. One has only to recall Saul, David, and Solomon. Jesus is associated with and stands alongside such individuals. As people of faith, we can then understand royalty. For all its obtuseness, scripture is clear on these roles of king and prophet. The priesthood, however, is a bit more enigmatic.

Each and every one of us has some preconceived notion of what or who is priest is. Set that aside for a moment and let us mine scripture for a richer understanding of priest, one our Jewish ancestors had which influenced its application to Jesus. The earliest notion of anyone being identified as priest is Melchizedek, the King of Salem who blessed Abram as recorded in the Book of Genesis (Gen 14.18f). The priest of God most High, is his title. Little is known of him other than legendary stories told about him that have been passed down over the ages. Melchizedek, himself, is an enigma. He is God’s priest before there is even a Jewish people or a Jewish nation. Abram is not even Abraham yet. And here we have the quintessential priest. To unlock this perplexing mystery, I have to look at the *role* of a priest to fully embrace what scripture is saying about Jesus and why we see him as our Great High Priest.

So, we turn to ancient Israel. A priest is one who serves in the temple. His task (because he would have been male in a patriarchal society) is to offer sacrifice to God upon an altar. In other words, priest serve at an altar offering thanksgiving to God through a sacrifice. Even today, in the Christian community, a priest serves at an altar, offering a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to God through the body of Christ made tangible in bread and wine (what Jesus does on the cross as we hear in today’s gospel). That may be a bit esoteric and theologically ambiguous for most people. But, we are fortunate that our catechism extrapolates the essence of priest as exemplified by Melchizedek,

In the Book of Common Prayer, it reads: “the ministry of priest is to represent Christ and [Christ’s] church, particularly as pastor to the people; to share with the bishop in the overseeing

of the Church; to proclaim the Gospel; to administer the sacraments; and to bless and declare pardon in the name of God” There is similarity with bishops and deacons, but there are differences too (I will let you look at those in the BCP– p855f). That is a priest’s ministry: to proclaim the Good News, to preside at the Eucharist, to Baptize and administer the sacraments, and to bless and pardon sins.

Let us take a step back, for a moment, and see how this aligns with Jesus as our Great High Priest: Jesus proclaims the Good News of God’s Kin-dom Incarnating itself in his embodiment – Jesus enfleshes God’s reign by calling to task the wayward through a pathway of justice predicated on love (Jesus as priest and prophet): He ushers in God’s kin-dom by pardoning one’s sin (Jesus as priest and king – the one who has authority to pass sentence or to pardon): Jesus who offers himself upon the cross to fulfill God’s mission of reconciling all things in the Godhead (Jesus as priest and sacrament). In this way, we understand how Jesus is our Great High Priest. The one who intertwines the ancient roles of prophet, priest, and king. And why on this day we celebrate him as Christ the King.

Jesus’ priesthood is well explained in the ordination rite of our Anglican-Episcopal tradition. In the examination of the candidate seeking, through the laying on of hands and anointing of one’s hands, the grace to minister in Jesus’ name, we hear the following imposition: you are tasked to proclaim through word and deed the Good News in Christ; to fashion one’s life in accordance with Christ’s precepts; to love and serve the people among whom one works, caring alike for the young and old, the strong and weak, the rich and poor. To preach, to declare God’s forgiveness to penitent sinners, to pronounce God’s blessing, to share in the administration of Holy Baptism and in the celebration of the mysteries of Christ’s Body and Blood...to nourish God’s people. That is what Jesus does: he loves all people, pardons all transgression, welcomes all to the table. That is why he is our great High Priest and to what each priest is called to emulate. Thus, whatever one’s preconceived notion of what a priest is, he or she is first and foremost a sinner, in need of forgiveness, a broken being striving to live the Good News while being Christ’s presence in the world. A humble servant of the Servant of All.

So, let us pray this Sunday of Christ the King, the collect that is read at all ordinations:
The Lord be with you...let us pray

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquility the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.