

Text: Hebrews 10: 11-25; Mark 13:1-8

Title: the Future of Priesthood

Date: November 15, 2009

Priest- now there is a loaded word. Partly because of all the conflicting images it conjures up. There are those of us whose immediate images are of a guy in robes with a knife, ritually slaughtering an animal and pouring out its blood on an altar. Or maybe not. For many others the word conjures up the guy in the black shirt with the white clerical collar, which I am sure is the most common. What does that priest do- the best description I ran across is from the Mount Mary Seminary in Maryland. *"A priest must be humble. He is called to serve. Each day he prays for a world in need of hope and peace. As an instrument of God, the priest leads souls to the Lord by offering them forgiveness and true happiness. Most importantly, through the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, the priest offers the faithful life-giving bread from Heaven, food for the journey, which leads them down the pathway of eternal life."* What both of these images share is the notion that the Priest stands as a bridge between God and Humanity, interpreting one to the other. We would be forgiven if we thought that is the way it always was. Certainly it was that way in the disciple's day, but that is not the way it was in Moses' day.

To get handles on this we have to revisit the notion that God calls Israel as His covenant people. we read in Exodus 19 *Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.* An entire nation of priests, dedicated to holiness. Looks good on paper, but how does that work in the real world? I mean, we have an economy to run. Farmers need to farm, carpenters need to make stuff, cooks need to cook. Can a mother be a priest when she is changing diapers? So, from the very beginning there were people set aside to *vicariously* maintain the covenant for the rest of the people. in other words, I dedicate myself to the intricacies of maintaining the covenant so that you can get on with whatever it is that you do. This is where the whole idea of holding religious leaders to a higher standard came from. (and if you think that still isn't the case, just look how we crucify religious leaders who get involved with scandal. While it is true that Tony Alamo

is a wing nut cult leader- but he was just sentenced to 175years on child porn charges! Don't get me wrong- he got off light!- but I haven't seen anyone in sachs goldman get that.)

We are told that the tribe of Levi was set apart- to represent the people to God. originally they were divided into 3 groups. There were the Levites who served as the substitute for the first born of every family that was supposed to be consecrated to the Lord's service. (can you imagine the inheritance headaches that would have caused?) then there were the priests, who represented the people standing before the altar. They were the only ones allowed to offer sacrifice. And finally there was the chief priest who was the only one allowed into the holy of holies. So from the very beginning the function of the Levitical priesthood was to assure, maintain and constantly reestablish the holiness of the people.

But wait- there's more. In describing what the chief priest Aaron is supposed to wear we read *You shall make a rosette of pure gold, and engrave on it, like the engraving of a signet, "Holy to the Lord." You shall fasten it on the turban with a blue cord; it shall be on the front of the turban. It shall be on Aaron's forehead, and Aaron shall take on himself any guilt incurred in the holy offering that the Israelites consecrate as their sacred donations; it shall always be on his forehead, in order that they may find favor before the Lord.* Since the Chief Priest represents the people to God, we bears their sins as well. See where Hebrews in coming from?

But of course, down through the years this notion of the priests serving as the people' representative got tossed and instead priests were seen as God's represatives- which earned them all sorts of perks. There were near the top of the economic and power ladder- by the First Century they were getting a cut off the taxes paid to Rome- and take a look at the Temple! this is a nice church but it doesn't hold a candle to that. even now, people come from all over the world to touch its retaining wall!

But in gaining earthly status- it lost heavenly status. People took pride in the exterior appearances- the massive complex and the accoutrements of the priests, all the while turning a blind eye to how the priesthood became more concerned with power and privilege- substituting ritual holiness for personal holiness. The conversation in our Mark passage takes place within a context of judgment. While the disciples seem to

pointing to temple as an example of timeless permanence, Jesus already knows that the Temple had long since stopped functioning as such. Every stone will be destroyed as God turns his back. The irony is that this had happened before – Jeremiah had warned the King and Priest that God was going to fire them for being faithless- and the Babylonians were the ones to deliver the pink slip. Jesus' condemnation was no less scathing.

But in a larger context, there was no longer a need for the priests- this is what Hebrews is getting at. The priests were needed because it was not possible for everyone to be holy- certainly not in the ritual sense of the world. But ritual holiness is not what Hebrews is talking about.

In one fell swoop, Hebrews returns us to the earlier Mosaic understanding of Priesthood and Covenant People. Jesus Christ is our High Priest. And like Aaron before him, Jesus took the weight of the people's sins upon His shoulders. But unlike Aaron, who had to do this over and over (for after all, he was a sinner too) Jesus' sacrifice was once and for all. We are made clean. In a very real sense we are going back to the notion that the High Priest represents the people to God. And since Jesus is sinless- we are sinless – and therefore holy.

But holy in a obedience to some ritual sort of way. I don't know about you, but I have absolutely no interest in the proper way to sacrifice a turtledove. No, for us, to be made holy allows us to rediscover what it means to be God's covenant people- the people that He has made promise to.

The promise that Hebrews references is that classic promise of restoration and redemption found in Jeremiah 31. Jeremiah, as you recall, was in the condemnation business. God's people had sinned, had turned their backs on the covenant- and turned their backs to God, all the while paying Him lip service. But condemnation is not to be God's last word. For the time is coming when God will bring his people back; forgive their sins and write His Law upon their hearts. They will truly be his people, doing his will. That time, says Hebrews- has come- now.

We are God's holy people. not holy in the sense that we need to be held separate for everything lest we become contaminated; but holy in the sense that we are free to do God's will. And what is God's will? How do we work His will in our lives and

work? I love how verses 24 & 25 put it: *and let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day [of Judgment] approaching.*

I love that- we are to provoke one another to do good. I have this mental image of 2 kids poking their fingers in each other's side daring one another to do something. And isn't that what we do? We don't exactly dare one another to "jump on a crack and break your mother's back" and then race home to make sure it didn't work- but we do dare each other, to provide food for those who have none; to comfort those in loss and to model for those younger what the successful Christian life look like.

Bottom line- we are priests- one to another. And together we are priests to our world. We represent each other before God, praying for and doing whatever it takes to lift each other up. And, as God's holy people, we are then free to be light and hope to an increasingly dark and hopeless world. Let us recommit ourselves to God's service together.