

## **Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> March**

### **Sermon by Rev. Peter Lyth**

#### **A prayer of adoration**

Yours, Lord, were the arms stretched wide on the cross,  
a welcome to all in the midst of your agony.  
Yours were the arms spread in blessing after the resurrection.  
Crucified Lord, risen Lord,  
we adore you in your pain and in your victory,  
your welcome ever the same,  
gathering us to you and blessing us,  
enfolding us in your loving embrace. Amen.

#### **A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**

Lord God, in covenants old and new  
you have held your arms open to your people.  
In the arms of a baby in a manger, waving in delight at strangers from near and far,  
you embraced all humanity.  
On the cross, you held your arms open to the world.

God incarnate, God crucified and risen,  
we praise you for all you have sacrificed to welcome us.  
Help us to give up our pettiness, our selfishness,  
in order to embrace others in the welcome that comes from you. Amen.

**Read** Hebrews 5.5-10

#### **Sermon**

A good few years ago, I had the opportunity to participate in Jury service. It was a chance to see first hand the Criminal Justice system first hand and in particular to see the court and in particular its stars, the Barristers at work. The defence lawyer was impressive as he pleaded the cause of the defendant (unsuccessfully as it turned out as he still failed to convince us, the jurors). Nonetheless, it was reassuring that, if one were to be tried in court, there would be someone of that calibre available to speak up on one's behalf. Of course there are many other instances where someone speaks up on behalf of an individual or organisation. I recently (at my wife's suggestion) watched the Parliamentary Accounts Committee hearing where Jim Harra spoke up on behalf of HMRC, of which he is Chief executive. He spoke very clearly, presenting the organisation's case.

Then there is the advocacy service, which appoints people to speak up for people who struggle to have a voice, maybe people who are vulnerable or have learning disabilities so that they can address those in authority when otherwise they might not be heard.

In the United Reformed Church, as with the Baptists and Methodists (amongst others) we do not have a tradition of formal priesthood in the tradition of churches such as the Roman Catholic Church. Instead, we talk of the “Priesthood of all believers” – a term that comes out of Peter’s first letter chapter 2 where he says, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light”. This discomfort that we have with the concept of external priests means that the passage from Hebrews that we heard this morning may appear problematic. It’s worth remembering that the letter was addressed to Jewish Christians who were being persecuted. They would have been very familiar with their Jewish heritage which included Jewish temple worship which involved the High Priest and so the image would be familiar to them and they would be comfortable with the analogy. However, I do think that it is also an image that can tell us a lot about Christ and his relationship both to us and to God.

So what role does a High Priest have? The writer of Hebrews conveniently sets out for us what the traditional position is. A high priest offers sacrifices to God for the sins of the people, he empathises with the weaknesses of the people whom he represents (after all, his is a representative job). He also should show humility in the light of his appointment by God. So how does Jesus fit into this?

Firstly, Jesus was not self-appointed, rather God chose him for this role. It is one chosen precisely because he is God’s son. It is this fact that is more important than the idea of being in the line of Melchizedek, although his role is foundational as being the priest who blesses Abram in Genesis. The fact that Jesus is God’s Son means that it is more than a formal role – as he pleads to God for us, he has God’s ear. He is God’s choice.

The second thing is that Christ has fully identified with human weaknesses. We are told that the prayers are “loud cries and tears”. We can relate to those as they could be the cries at Gethsemane or Golgotha, or maybe like the many righteous sufferers in the Old Testament. What it does mean is that Jesus does not escape his own mortality. His pleas do not prevent him from fear of the crucifixion or the painful death on the cross. He fully shares in what it means to exist as a human being. So what is the point of it all then? Jesus “cried and was heard. We are not promised release from anxiety, nor are we to expect easing of pain or rescue from death. We will not be granted instant happiness. But what we do get is dialogue with God. We are no longer alienated from God. And what we do know is that, as we are not granted immunity from suffering, neither was the high priest, Jesus himself. Instead we gain comfort from the fact that Jesus too went through suffering and so he

empathises with our plight. Instead of seeming to deal with a God that is remote, we find a companion that understands the bad situations that we sometimes find ourselves in. That Jesus could ultimately prevail leads to hope instead of despair.

Finally, Jesus is described as, “the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him”. For the writer of Hebrews there is a contrast between the old system where sacrifices were made in the Temple and the sacrifice of Christ and between the old Temple and the perfect tent not made with human hands. The old system was not sufficient– it was only with this new way that we could gain salvation. The contrast is also between the old priesthood descended from Aaron and the new – Jesus who faced mortality and was made perfect in God becoming the source of ultimate redemption.

Jesus also becomes the model for us. Just as he was in dialogue with God as the son obedient to his Father, then we too are called to obey him as we are granted eternal salvation. He relied on God whilst identifying with human weakness. He is the ultimate role model and the route by which we gain access to the treasure which is knowing God. WE may not be spared the tribulations of life, but we know that God will ultimately prevail.

### **Prayers of intercession**

God of all, we turn to you to pray for those who,  
like Christ, are ridiculed for what they believe  
and persecuted for what they hold dear...

God of all, we turn to you to pray for those who,  
like Christ, put their lives on the line for others,  
in the full knowledge of the risks they are taking...

God of all, we turn to you to pray for those who,  
like Christ, are beaten and abused,  
the victims of torture and brutality...

God of all, we turn to you to pray for those who,  
like Christ, are betrayed by friends and colleagues  
who run away at their hour of greatest need...

God of all, we turn to you to pray for those who,  
like Christ, know their need of you,  
and turn to you in prayer.

Amen.

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