

*Priesthood in the Old Testament primarily involved sacrificing of animals at the altar and worship in the shrine. Other functions were blessing the people (Num. 6:22-26), determining the will of God (Ex. 28:30), and instructing the people in the law of God (Deut.31:9-12). This instruction included the application of the laws of cleanness (Lev. 11-15). Some of these functions, like blessing and teaching would not be reserved for priests alone, but sacrificing was theirs exclusively. When they cleaned the temple they did it with the blood of the sacrificed animals. The priesthood embodied the highest levels of sanctity in the temple life of ancient Israel (Harpers, p. 823). They served as mediators between God and humans. They came from the tribe of Levi or Aaron. In Christianity the entire institution of Temple, priesthood, sacrifice and the cleansing ritual became obsolete (Harper, p. 1146). Christians transferred the role of the priest as mediator between God and humans onto Jesus whom they saw as both God and man. He became eternal High Priest by God's appointment (Hebrews 5:1-6) and (Heb. 7:27-28; 9:23-26) supplanted the ancient sacrificial system by his own sacrifice (Harpers Bible Dictionary, p. 822). Jesus alone became priest to those who believed that his death constituted the perfect sacrifice and is referred to as the Lamb of God. You may be familiar with the prayer: *Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us sinners.* The Holman Bible Dictionary defines the priesthood of Christ in this way: *That work of Christ in which He offers Himself as the supreme sacrifice for the sins of humankind and continually intercedes on their behalf. This priesthood**

of Christ is said to be "after the order of Melchizedek" (Heb. 5:6), which means that God appointed Him directly and Jesus did not have to trace his priesthood through the human line of Aaron or Levi. The gospel accounts report that when Jesus died the great veil in the Temple which separated the holy of holies from the rest of the sanctuary was torn asunder from the top to the bottom. For Christians, this action and image suggests that God opened up the direct access to the holy of holies (Presence of God) through the death of Christ.

In some Christian Churches the ordained clergy are called priests and confession is a sacrament of the church. In our Protestant tradition we believe that Jesus is the sole mediator between God and us. We believe that we have direct access to God through Jesus Christ (pray in his name), and that he alone gives us assurance of pardon of our sin. In our church, the ministry of priesthood is derived from the priestly ministry of Christ and it is the responsibility of every Christian to offer spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ. *What are these spiritual sacrifices? Hebrews 13:15-16 lists praise of God in prayer and song, doing good and sharing with others. We are to pray for one another by offering the priestly ministry of intercessory prayer. We are also urged to confess our sins to one another and to bear one another's burdens. The ancient role of the priest was to receive the confession of people and to convey it to God to receive God's forgiveness. We are to bring others to Christ. The ancient*

role of the priest was to bring people in contact with God. While Christ came to reveal God it is necessary for us to fulfill the priestly role of bringing people to Jesus in order that they may have access to God through Him. (Holman, p. 1137).
In the Protestant tradition, this is called the Priesthood of Believers and Jesus Christ is named as the Head of the Church.

Hebrews 5:5-10

So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you"; as he says also in another place, "You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek." In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

“Jesus, Our Priest”

In your head, please complete the following sentence.

Jesus is my _____. If you are like most Christians you will choose one of the favorite Biblical roles for Jesus such as teacher, preacher, leader, prophet, guide, pastoral shepherd, healer, friend, brother, prince of peace, counselor, pilot, sustainer, redeemer, king, ruler, lover, savior . . .

Jesus is my priest rarely appears as anyone’s first pick.

When’s the last time you approached anyone with the questions, Have you been washed in the blood of the lamb? Do you believe Jesus died for your sins? Personally, I never have. I have never asked them of you. For me, the image of being washed with blood is repulsive. At first mention, Jesus’ death evokes sadness rather than joy within me. Additionally, the “are you saved” questions both anger and scare me with their simplistic demand for “True/false,” “Yes/no” and date/time answers to a “once saved always saved” exclusive perspective of salvation. Have you been washed in the blood of the lamb? and Do you believe Jesus died for your sins? are also two questions that none of you have ever asked of me. But it is Lent and the Epistle reading from Hebrews invites us to disarm these negative powers through an intellectual study of just how it is that Jesus is priest to us and how his death connects us to the life of God.

The way in which we start this study with children is to substitute the image of bridge for the sacrificial lamb. The image gets them thinking about how bridges are good

because they bring people together. Once the children get this idea down then we tell them about the priests in the Bible that acted like bridges. We teach them that it was their job to bring people and God together. Then we tell them that Jesus was the priest who knew how to do the priestly job the best (Clergy Journal, May/June 2005, p. 102).

For children the bridge image is sufficient for faith. But when we reach the age of reason our faith seeks an understanding of why Christians think that Jesus was the priest who knew best how to get the job done. For such seekers, their search ends in the Christian doctrine which states that the nature of Jesus was both 100% human and 100% Divine. It was from this doctrine that renown preacher and theologian Fred Craddock formulated the priestly role of Jesus in this way: *he was not as we are and therefore can help; he was as we are and therefore will help* (Christian Century, from Jesus the Priest by Fred Craddock, March 22, 2003p. 19)

First, let's consider . . . *He was as we are and therefore will help*. Those words connect us with verse 7 in our reading from Hebrews chapter 5: *In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission* (Heb. 5:7).

When he walked the earth Jesus intimately experienced the complexities of being human. He battled the powers of sin that tried to separate him from the love of God. The pangs of birth, the joys and sorrows of life, and the suffering of death all tugged at him just as they pull at us. Because he fully experienced what we do, we can ask him to empathize with us and remember our condition. But it was his obedience to suffering unto death on the cross that won him the title of High Priest in Christian hearts. There is a painting, the Isenheim Altarpiece that *portrays Jesus' complete identification with us on the cross*. It was made by Matthias Grunewald for *the hermits of Saint Anthony who cared for the victims of the Black Death plague*. Spiritual writer Deborah Winger described and commented on the painting in this way: *In the central crucifixion panel of this work, the figure of Christ on the Cross is enormous, twice the size of his companions. Christ's suffering is graphic and grotesque: his flesh is green, covered with festering sores, his face and limbs are contorted with agony. Grunewald has, in fact depicted Christ as dying of the plague. In the foreground (lest we miss the meaning) is a lamb, its eyes on Jesus, bleeding from a cut in its breast into a chalice. The message is starkly clear; in the bleeding wounds of Christ live our hope and our salvation. The men and women who died with this image before them five hundred years ago were not cured of the plague by their faith, in Christ, who suffered with them. They were not spared the horrors of that death, did not have their mortal illness "fixed" or eliminated by the crucified one*

any more than Jesus escaped his own end. They did however have the living reality of being companioned by the merciful love and power of Christ in their hour of greatest need. (from Weavings, April/March 2000, p. 18,)

Secondly, let's consider . . . *He was not as we are and therefore can help.* Those words connect us with verses 8-9 from the Hebrew reading. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him (Heb. 5:8-9).

Jesus is our priest because he remembers God, and God alone, to us. He remembers not our mother's listening ear nor our father's kind of care nor our best friend's advice. He remembers only the Perfect Holiness of God and Love's promise for glorifying humanity as children of the Holy One. Just as he understood humanity's sin in becoming children of God he understood God's pain of separation from them. In Jesus' perfect obedience to the Holiness of God, God revealed to him Love's struggle to be born in the hearts people. The Jesus image that I would like to leave with you is the one you may have already seen on the internet. It is a picture of an operation being done in-utero on a 21 week old fetus to fix the life endangering condition of spinal bifida. The image captures the moment just after the successful completion of the procedure when the surgeon positioned his hands to suture up the mother's

womb. The image showed the baby's tiny hand reaching out to grasp the life saving finger of the doctor . . . A fragile unborn hand momentarily gripping a living one. What risk, pain and struggle it is for God to take up residence in the human heart! Jesus knew the whole of it.

These are two memorable images for Jesus who is our priest--mediator--bridge. Jesus is our priest. He remembers us to God and He remembers God to us. Jesus is our priest who *was not as we are and therefore can help; Who was as we are and therefore will help.* Jesus is our priest who loved us deeply and God perfectly. He is the sacrificial lamb who offered himself up once. . . for all . . . for communion in the life of God. I'll end with a poem by Ann Weems in which she affirms the priestly work of God in Jesus Christ (Kneeling in Jerusalem by Ann Weems, p. 90).

The Time For Kneeling

The Lamb has been slain, and the sheep have
scattered.

Now is the time for kneeling,
the time for believers to kneel
and call upon his name,
to kneel and to rise again;
the community of the resurrection.