

5th Sunday of Easter

Our readings for this 5th Sunday of Easter are directly or indirectly about the priesthood. Please do not become inattentive with the thought: Well, I'm not a priest, so this has nothing to do with me.

In the classical theology of the Church, and emphasized in the documents of Vatican II, every baptized person shares in the priesthood of Christ.

Ordained priests, the ministerial priesthood, has its own special character but all of us by our own baptisms are priests.

What is a priest; what does a priest do in this more general sense? A priest is a mediator between God and human beings. A priest is someone who offers a sacrifice of praise to God, and thereby links divinity to humanity. A priest is a kind of "pontifex" meaning bridge builder. The Pope in Rome is, of course, the Pontifex Maximus. He is the Great Bridge Builder. Yet all of us through our baptism share in the office of priestly bridge builder between the divine and the human.

The Old Testament offers us a rich history of priesthood, and most prominent among those priests of old is Aaron. He is the founding father of the long line of temple priests who would, on behalf of Israel, offer sacrifices to YHWH. These Jerusalem priests as the temple developed and unfolded became very interesting figures; wearing special garments and vestments; presiding at the complex liturgies of temple. They, and their attendants, would offer prayers and sacrifices to God throughout the day. These were peace offerings, thanks offerings, and signs of atonement. These priests were essential to the religious life and imagination of ancient Israel.

Jesus was not a temple priest. He was a rabbi, a teacher. But, as a pious Jew, he was a temple-centered person. The gospels tell us that he often went up to Jerusalem. What was he doing there? Like many pious Jews, he was participating in the prayers, rituals, and ceremonies of the temple. We often hear that he preached and taught in the temple precincts.

We can recall that fateful day on which he chased out the money changers from the temple. We find in his reflection on his actions that he identifies his very own body with the temple. In calling down God's judgment on their corruption of the temple, he demonstrates his great love for the temple and the priesthood practiced there. He wants to cleanse, reform, and rebuild this corrupted temple.

In identifying his body with the temple—raised up on the third day—he is proclaiming that he and his body will be the new place where God is properly praised and worshipped. He proclaims that he would personally be the new temple and the new priesthood.

We say, in the theological language of the Church, that in Jesus divinity and humanity come together. In the very structure of his being, he is a priest and a temple. And didn't he interpret his death on the cross precisely as a high priestly act; the ultimate temple sacrifice that would reconcile divinity and humanity?

On the night before he died he took bread and said this is my body which will be given up for you. This is temple language—sacrificial language. The priests of the Old Testament offered up animal sacrifices for atonement and reparation for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus offered up himself, his own body and the shedding of his own blood. In this He is saying: I will perform the final sacrifice; I will be the final and perfect priest; I will be, in my own dying, the new temple.

Against that rich and complex background, let us revisit the readings for today.

At the end of the first reading from the Acts of the Apostles, Luke says: “Even a large group of priests were becoming obedient to the faith.” He rejoices in the number of people coming into the Church and joining the faith. He especially exults in the fact that many of the temple priests were becoming converted. In so doing, these priests were acknowledging that they saw in Jesus precisely the fulfillment of who they were. They saw Him finally, not as their enemy, but as the one who brought their own work of sacrifice to fulfillment. Christian Catholic priests, to this very day, participate in that wonderful relationship and through their priesthood in Christ make present on every altar a re-enactment of His sacrifice.

In the second reading from the first letter of St. Peter we hear: “Come to him, a living stone, rejected by human beings, but chosen and precious in the sight of God, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house....” Language perhaps strange to us but is quite familiar to first century Jews. Peter is saying to come to Him, Christ, a living stone rejected by men, but precious in the eyes of God.

Think of Jesus as this new temple. We think of temples made of great slabs hewn from rock. Jesus is the living stone who has become the cornerstone of His new temple where all sacrifice is fulfilled; all sacrifice is given ultimate meaning.

The message for us is to become living stones in God's temple. Your whole life is meant to be a place of praise where you will become radiant to those around you. A light set upon a hill for all to see.

St. Peter goes on to tell us “to be a holy priesthood, to offer sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” Now we see why the Church has said, from the beginning, that the baptized are priests. This is the biblical root of our belief. You and I, being a holy priesthood and offering spiritual sacrifices to God is how we become configured unto Jesus Christ, Our High Priest.

And so St. Peter concludes: “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people set apart.”

My dear brothers and sisters, if we do not live our Christian faith; if we do not speak it; if we do not allow its power to radiate through us, then no one will come to Christ. We are the mediators; we are the bridge builders that Christ has chosen to bring his message and power to the world.

All of this is summed up in the magnificent passage from St. John’s gospel that we hear today. Jesus presents himself to his disciples at the Last Supper as the perfect priest; because he presents himself as the ultimate mediator between divinity and humanity.

Philip says to him: “Master, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.” In a frustrated tone he replies by telling him: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” That is His priesthood. He is the icon of the invisible God. He is the bridge between us and the invisible Father.

Thomas asks how we can know the way you are about to travel to prepare a place for us. Jesus responds: “I am the way and the truth and the life.” That is His priesthood too! The priest offering temple sacrifice was offering a way, offering a path to connect Israel with its God.

NOW Jesus is saying “I am the High Priest.” I am in my own being the temple sacrifice. I am the place of perfect praise. If you want contact with God, you come through me.

This is true, in an analogous way, of all of us who are baptized; all of us who participate in the life and mission of Jesus Christ **must** be mediators; we **must** be priests; we **must** be the way so that all who meet us will find their way to the Father.

- Fr. David M. Chiantella