

The Threefold Office: *Christ the Priest*

Hebrews 4:14-16

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn to HCC on December 8, 2013

Introduction

- ❖ This Advent season we've begun a new series on the Threefold Office of Christ where we're trying to understand why the Son of God became man. Why Christmas? Who did he claim to be, what did he claim he could do, and (most importantly) what did he actually accomplish?
 - ▶ **The Threefold Office is a theological concept that breaks down the Son's mission in his first Advent into three offices (roles).** God the Son became a man that he might function as a prophet, a priest, and a king.
 - In this morning's passage we see that because the Son became human he is now the perfect priest, the priest of priests. He's the great high priest.

- ❖ But let me begin by explaining what a priest is. Because most of grew up with backgrounds where – if you did go to church – you didn't go to one that had priests. Your church probably had pastors, reverends, or ministers. You didn't have a priest.
 - ▶ And for good reason. Most Protestant churches don't like to use the title *priest* for their clergy. One of the foundational principles of the Protestant Reformation was the *priesthood of all believers*. That's the idea that the Church is a royal priesthood (1 Pet. 2:9). All believers are priests, in a sense. That means we don't have to go to a priest to confess our sins. We can go directly to God in confession. We don't need a priest or a dead saint to pray to God for us. We can talk directly to Him.
 - *"I don't need a priest. I don't need anyone to stand between me and God. I have direct, open access. I'm a child of God. I don't have to go through another human to get to God."*

- ❖ Actually, that's wrong. You'd be mistaken to think that. Our passage is saying that you and I still need a priest. **We still have to go through another human being to get to God.** But not just any human. As a matter of fact, he's not *just* a human. He's the Son of God.
 - ▶ Granted, we don't need priests. But we certainly need a Priest. Which is why we need a clear understanding of what a priest is and what makes a good priest – a great priest.

- ❖ **If you look in the Old Testament you'll see that a priest is not someone who speaks to the people but someone who speaks for the people.** This is where an Old Testament priest is distinct from an Old Testament prophet.
 - ▶ As we saw last week, prophets spoke to God's people on God's behalf. They would draw near to you. Look you in the face. And say, *"Thus says the Lord."* But priests had a different role. Their job was to speak to God on behalf of God's people. A priest would draw near to God. His back would be to you and his face would be towards God. He would enter God's presence to offer sacrifices and prayers for you.
 - *Do you see the difference? Prophets speak God's words to you. Priests speak your words to God.* And the point is that you need both. Too many churches preach a Christ who is either a prophet or a priest but fail to preach that he's both. But then you end up with half a Christ and half a gospel.

- ❖ Think about it: **If all you stress is the priestly ministry of Christ at the expense of his prophetic ministry, then you end up with the Christ of liberalism.** All you hear about is how Christ the priest secures you grace, but he's not one to speak truth – hard truth you don't necessarily want to hear. The Christ of liberalism doesn't call you to repentance of personal sin. He won't challenge you. He's all grace, no truth.
 - ▶ But think about the flip side. **If all you stress is Jesus' prophetic ministry at the expense of his priestly ministry, then you have the Christ of legalism.** You have a God who is distant and demanding. He's harsh. Always pointing out your sin, where you're wrong, where you've gone off track. He has no sympathy. He doesn't understand. There's no mercy. It's all truth, no grace.
- ❖ But Jesus is both. He's priest *and* prophet. He brings grace *and* truth. **Jesus is the Great Prophet who speaks God's words to you. He's also the Great High Priest who speaks your words to God.** He can sympathize. He understands where you're coming from. He understands where you're at – even if you're spiritually in the pits.
 - ▶ He knows your weaknesses. He knows when you're in a time of need. So he'll bring you near to God. He'll speak to Him on your behalf. He'll advocate for you. He'll intercede for you. He'll be your priest – the priest of priest, the Great High Priest.

The Great Priest Who Sacrificed For Us

- ❖ There are three things about Jesus I want you to see in this morning's passage. The first is this: **1) Jesus is the great priest who sacrificed for us.** The most basic role for a priest in the Bible is to sacrifice. You, as the worshiper, would go to the temple and hand the priest your sacrifice. It could be the first-fruits of that year's harvest or an animal or incense. The priest would then take that sacrifice and burn it on the altar for you.
 - ▶ **If you weren't a priest, you weren't allowed to sacrifice.** Only the priests. They were holy, sanctified. That is, they were set apart from the rest of God's people – set apart for temple service. So only a priest was allowed to make a sacrifice.
- ❖ There was an instance in the Old Testament where King Uzziah, in his pride, presumptuously entered the temple to burn incense on the altar of incense (2 Chron. 26:16-21). He thought he was worthy enough to be both a king *and* a priest for God's people. Instead he was struck with leprosy till the day he died. **Uzziah was right to believe that a priestly king would one day rule over God's people, but he was poorly mistaken in thinking he was the guy.** In his day, kings rule; priests sacrifice. They had different jobs. They were distinct.
- ❖ Now according to the Law of Moses, the priests of Israel all came from one tribe, the Levites. All priests were Levites. And out of all Levites, only those of the house of Aaron were allowed to minister *in* the temple. Anyone else who dared to enter was stuck dead.
 - ▶ I think we fail to recognize how dangerous it is to come into God's presence. Christians take it for granted. There are so many warnings in Scripture (Num. 18:7). When God first appeared to Moses, remember it was in a burning, flaming bush.

- When the Israelites reached Mt. Sinai, not only were they forbidden to go up and meet with God, they weren't even allowed to touch the mountain! (Ex. 19:12) It wasn't safe. God's holiness is like white-hot fire and our sinfulness is like dry stubble. If we try to get close, we're toast.
- ❖ The only person who was allowed to approach God was the priest, and even he had to first put on special priestly clothes. In **Exodus 28**, the high priest's garments are described for us, and we're told that little golden bells were attached to the hem of his robe (Ex. 28:34-35).
 - ▶ Some scholars think that, with those bells jingling, it assured you that the priest had not died in the Holy Place but was still alive and ministering on your behalf.
- ❖ **Bottom line, the high priest had the most dangerous job in Israel.** Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest would enter into the most inner room of the temple, the Holy of Holies.
 - ▶ There he would take the blood of a bull to first make atonement for his own sins (Lev. 16:6), and then the blood of a goat to make atonement for the sins of the people (Lev. 16:15; Heb. 9:7). And he would have to do this every year (cf. Heb. 9:25). It was a constant reminder that these sacrifices – the blood of bulls and goats – were not enough. Not enough to fully and finally take away sin.
- ❖ Enter the Great High Priest. **One of the major themes in Hebrews is to demonstrate the superiority of Christ over the Levitical priests and the entire temple system.** The author is writing to a congregation converted out of Judaism, who were being persecuted for the new found Christian faith (cf. Heb. 10:32-34).
 - ▶ That created intense pressure to revert back to their former Judaism, to rejoin the temple, to return to priests and sacrifices. It was safer. The persecution would stop.
- ❖ But the author of Hebrews says, "*Why would you do that? Why would you go back?*" We have a better high priest. We have a greater one.
 - ▶ Look at chapter 4:14. "*Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.*" Hold fast your confession of faith in Christ.
 - Don't drift away from the gospel (2:1). Don't fall away from the living God (3:12). Hold fast. *Why?* Since we have a great high priest. Since we have Jesus, the only priest who has "*passed through the heavens*". He ascended on high and is exalted at the Father's right hand (cf. 7:26; Eph 4:10).
- ❖ **In other words, Jesus is now carrying out his priestly duties before the actual throne of God.** That's what makes him so great. Aaron, and all the high priests who came after him, only ministered in the Holy of Holies, which was an earthly copy of a heavenly reality (Heb. 9:23-24). And again that was only once a year. Jesus, on the other hand, ministers forever in a heavenly sanctuary, in the very presence of God.

- ❖ Turn with me to **chapter 9:24-26**. *“²⁴For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. ²⁵Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, ²⁶for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.”*
 - ▶ **Jesus the better high priest offers the better sacrifice that can put away sin once for all – the sacrifice of himself.** This is what makes Jesus the better priest. Not only is he the sacrificer; he's the sacrifice. He's both priest and the propitiation.
 - He laid down his life to take your sin away. All your sins. Once for all. It is finished. There is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus.

- ❖ *Friends, why do you still hold on to your guilt? Why are you still carrying your shame? Don't you know there's a great priest who can take it all away? There's a man – the Son of Man – from among our number, who once stood between us and holy God and sacrificed himself. His blood made peace between God and man. His death established a new covenant – a better covenant enacted on better promises (Heb. 8:6).*
 - ▶ You have to believe in this man. Go to this priest. But go empty-handed. Don't try to bring a sacrifice. Nothing you have will do. He's already provided the sacrifice you need. It's the sacrifice of himself.

The Great Priest Who Sympathizes With Us

- ❖ But I know what some of you are thinking. *“You don't understand. My sin runs too deep. My guilt is far too heavy. What I did, what happened to me, what they did to me, it's too much. Shame has been seared into my conscience. The memories haunt me. You don't understand. There might be hope for other but not for me. You don't understand.”*
 - ▶ You might be right. Perhaps I don't understand. But there is one who does. There is one who knows exactly what you went through and what you're going through. One who identifies with your pain, with your weaknesses, with the temptations that plague you. **2) He's the great priest who sympathizes with us.** He's the perfect priest. He's exactly what we're looking for in a priest.

- ❖ There are two things that make a good priest. Two things you want. **You're looking for a priest who is like you and yet unlike you.**¹ You want a priest who can walk the hard path with you (so he can sympathize), but you also want a priest who's off the path, who's already reached the destination (so he can help you get there). You want both.
 - ▶ Imagine you go to a priest. You bare your soul. You pour out your heart. You speak of your unfulfilled longings, of your loneliness, of deep disappointment. Now imagine he says, *“Yeah, yeah, okay I'll pray for you. Anything else?”*

¹ I was greatly helped here by a sermon of Pastor Timothy Keller called “The Sympathy of Jesus” preached on December 24, 1995.

- ❖ *What are you going to think?* You're going to think this man is no real priest. He doesn't understand me. He's not like me. He doesn't know loneliness like I do. He hasn't felt longing as I have. He hasn't wrestled with the same pain of deep disappointment. He's not like you.
 - ▶ What you're looking for is a priest who understands. Who's been there. Who knows what's its like. Who puts his arm around you and says, "*Let's go to God together. I'll advocate for you. I'll stand with you. I won't leave your side.*"
 - That's a good priest! That's what you want. You want a priest who's like you.

- ❖ But, in a sense, you also want him to be unlike you. Here's what I mean. Imagine you go to the priest. You bare your soul, and while you're sharing, he begins to sob uncontrollably. He says to you, "*You're right. Life is so cruel. What's the point?*" He wants the two of you to cry on each other's shoulders.
 - ▶ What are you going to do? You're going to put your arm around him and say, "*Come on, let's go find a priest.*" That's no priest. He's too much like you. He's so much like you that he can't help you.

- ❖ **What you need (want) is a priest who is like you and unlike you all at the same time.** Look with me at v15, "*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.*"
 - ▶ As we are...yet. Like us and yet unlike us. Do you see why Jesus is the perfect priest? The great priest. The priest you want. The priest you need.

- ❖ Let me explain. **Consider first how Jesus is like us.** It says here that he "*in every respect has been tempted as we are.*" The word for '*tempted*' could also be translated '*tested*'. It could be describing the same situation but whether you'd call it a temptation or a test really depends on whose perspective you're using.
 - ▶ Are you looking at it from the world's perspective, from the prince of this world's point of view? Then it's a temptation. But if you're looking at it from God's perspective, then it's a test.

- ❖ **Either way, it says Jesus has been tested/tempted in every respect, in every humanly-possible way** (cf. Heb. 2:17). And that's why he can sympathize with us. He sympathizes with our weaknesses, our *moral* weaknesses – weaknesses that lead us to temptation and sin.
 - ▶ Jesus knows what those temptations feel like. He knows it all. He knows what your temptations, what your trials, what your tests are like. He knows.

- ❖ Now you might be thinking, "How is that possible? **How does Jesus know what I'm going through in every respect?** He's never been through a bad breakup like I have. He's never had a miscarriage like I have. He's never been tempted to cheat on his finals like I have. He hasn't felt the lure of Internet pornography like I have. How does he know? He's never been through these things."

- ▶ Granted, he hasn't. He only lived 33 years, so he never experienced the unique trials and temptations of an elderly man. You could say the same about the unique trials and temptations of a single woman or a married person.
 - **But you have to realize that there's the *surface* on an experience and then there's the *core* of an experience.**

- ❖ On the surface, our experiences are all different and unique. **But at the core, every experience is going to touch upon the same basic emotions.** And when it comes to difficult, painful experiences, it doesn't matter what's on the surface, at the core is temptation, weakness, suffering, disappointment, confusion, abandonment, loneliness, betrayal, mourning, sadness.
 - ▶ And of those raw human emotions, Jesus is familiar. He knows them all too well. Jesus knows abandonment and loneliness. He knows betrayal. He knows weakness and suffering. He knows temptation.

- ❖ But it says he never sinned. He's perfect. He's never done anything wrong in his life. You might be thinking, "***How can he know what temptation is like if he's never sinned?***"
 - ▶ If you think about it, it's because he's never sinned that he knows temptation better than any of us. **It's because he's not like us in this regard that makes him the most understanding, most sympathetic priest.**
 - Listen to this quote by one commentator, "*Sympathy with the sinner in his trial does not depend on the experience of sin but on the experience of the strength of the temptation to sin which only the sinless can know in its full intensity. He who falls yields before the last strain.*"²

- ❖ No one knows temptation like Jesus. Only Jesus has experienced temptation at its fullest strength. Every other man, even the best of men, have yielded at some point or in some degree. **Only Jesus knows what it's like to resist temptation every waking hour of his life.** No one else can say the same.
 - ▶ He knows how disappointment tempts you to grow bitter towards God. He knows how loneliness tempts you to make idols of others, of getting married. He knows how betrayal tempts you towards vengeance and taking justice into your own hands.

- ❖ He knows, and that's what makes him a sympathetic high priest, the perfect priest. Who knows exactly what you went through. He knows exactly what you're going through. He's the priest you need. He'll go to God *for* you. He'll be your advocate. He'll stand with you and never leave your side.

² "B.F. Westcott, quoted in Bruce Milne's *Acts*, 116. Consider also this quote by C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*, "A silly idea is current that good people do not know what temptation means. This is an obvious lie. Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is... A man who gives in to temptation after five minutes simply does not know what it would have been like an hour later. That is why bad people, in one sense, know very little about badness. They have lived a sheltered life by always giving in."

The Great Priest Who Always Lives To Serve Us

- ❖ That's the Great High Priest, the one who sympathizes with us. But he does more than just that. This leads to our final point. **3) Jesus is the great priest who always lives to serve us.**

- ❖ When we're in a time of need we can go to him as our priest and he'll serve us. **A priest has two primary duties: to sacrifice for you and to pray for you (to speak to God for you).** Now we already talked about Jesus' highly priestly work of sacrificing. That's a finished task. The sacrifice of himself was once for all. He doesn't offer sacrifices anymore.
 - ▶ Jesus simply points to himself and the perfect sacrifice for sin. So if Jesus is your priest, then you have every confidence to draw near the throne of God – no matter what condition you're in – because the fearful throne of judgment has now become a welcoming throne of grace.

- ❖ Look at v16, "*Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*"
 - ▶ If Jesus is your priest, then you can find grace to help in time of need. Specifically through that second responsibility of every priest – to pray for you. Unlike his work of sacrificing, Jesus carries out this task on a continued, daily basis.

- ❖ Turn with me to **chapter 7:23-25**. This is another place where the author stresses how much greater Jesus is compared to all the priests who came before. He points to the fact that Jesus has conquered death and now lives forever.
 - ▶ "*²³The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, ²⁴but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. ²⁵Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.*"

- ❖ That word for "make intercession" (*entygchano*) refers to making specific requests or petitions on behalf of someone (cf. Acts 25:24; Rom. 11:2). Jesus doesn't just sit in the presence of the Father as a continued reminder of his once for all sacrifice (which is glorious in itself). **He actually pleads your cause. He makes specific requests on your behalf.**
 - ▶ That's where your confidence should lie. Not in thinking you're great and worthy to draw near to God. But in knowing Jesus is great – a great high priest who is always praying for you even when you're inconsistent in your own prayer life.
 - He's bringing to the Father spiritual needs and requests that you haven't even thought of or those that you too easily forget. He's praying that your faith may not fail when Satan tries to attack you and sift you like wheat (cf. Lk 22:31). He's praying for your protection from dangers and enemies of which you're not even aware. He's interceding for you.

- ❖ Just think of the comfort and confidence this brings, especially in times of need. Christians don't just have a great prophet telling us, "*Don't lust, don't hate, don't envy.*" We also have a priest we can go to.

- ▶ Going to Jesus and asking him to be your priest is essentially to say, "*I can't do it myself. I can't keep the Law on my own, by my own strength. I could never try hard enough or be good enough. Jesus, please go to God for me. Speak to him on my behalf. Be my sacrificer. Be my sacrifice. Be my interceder. Be my advocate. O God the Father, receive me as you receive Christ, my Great High Priest.*"
 - That's how Jesus serves his people. He's not just our prophet. **He's our priest who draws near to us that he might draw us near to his Father in heaven.**

- ❖ And that's really how we ought to serve one another. Christians have a real nasty habit of standing at a distance, and in a prophetic voice, pointing out the sin in other people's lives. There are times we fail to embrace the role of a priest – the task of engaging sinners, sympathizing with their weaknesses, and bringing them to the throne of grace where they can receive mercy.
 - ▶ **Friends, let's be prophets *and* priests to our family and friends.** Be a channel of truth *and* grace in their lives. Speak God's Word to them *and* speak to God for them. This is what the Great Priest has done for us and what he calls us to do for others.