

Lent 3

'Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession.' Hebrews 3 v1

28 2 16

Almighty God,
whose most dear Son went not up to joy
but first he suffered pain,
and entered not into glory before he was crucified:
mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross,
may find it none other than the way of life and peace.

My text for today's sermon may be found in the Letter to the Hebrews, chapter 3 and verse 1: *'Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession.'*

Half-way through Lent, today we come to our third of six sermons on hard texts. We're going to look at a passage from the Letter to the Hebrews, exploring the interesting idea that Jesus is both *'apostle and high priest of our confession.'*

Well, there are many Christological titles for Jesus: Son of God; Son of David; Son of Man; Lamb of God; Word of God; Christ; Messiah; Lord; Saviour; King. But here, surprisingly, we hear that Jesus is also to be considered as apostle and high priest.

Well, our source is the Letter to the Hebrews, an epistle which William Neil describes in his one volume Bible Commentary as 'probably one of the least familiar writings of the New Testament even by those who claim to know their

Bible.’ The author is unknown and though it has been attributed to St Paul, Origen, in the third century, sums up the consensus view by wisely saying, ‘Who wrote the epistle, God only knows for certain.’ Hebrews reads more like a sermon than an epistle and is addressed to a small group of conservative-minded, Jewish Christians, possibly a house church in Rome, and its origin is possibly Alexandria, a great centre of Jewish learning outside Jerusalem. It is written at a time of persecution when Christians were under attack for their rejection of the predominant pagan values of the eternal city, possibly around 60AD. It was a time when some Jewish Christians were longing for the ancient traditions and practices of their faith. Instead of the old certainties of an inflexible Jewish Law, there is the new uncertainty of trying to living a life informed by the prompting of the Holy Spirit. Instead of looking inwards and backwards, they are being encouraged to go out and spread the word – to point to the Christ as the real bridge between a righteous God and sinful Man. The message of Hebrews, like Matthew’s gospel, makes clear that the Old Testament foreshadows that of the New. The Letter to the Hebrews encourages us to run with patience the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus as the pioneer and perfecter of our faith who is the same yesterday and today and forever.

Strong stuff but what of the claim that Jesus is both apostle and high priest? The word apostle *αποστολος* (apostolos) is rooted in Greek verb *apostellein* – to send out – and its equivalent noun in Hebrew is *shaliach*. A *shaliach* is an envoy, a representative, a stand-in, a substitute, someone for who speaks on behalf of, with the authority of, the one who sent him. And here we have an insight into the nature of what it means for the writer to the Hebrews to call Jesus apostle and

high priest. Of the 79 times that the word Apostle is used in the New Testament only in Hebrews is it used to refer to Jesus. In doing so, the writer to the Hebrews neatly captures the idea that Jesus is sent to us by God and that it is entirely legitimate and proper for him to act on behalf of the one who sent him.

In this sense, too, Jesus is acting as high priest, the representative of the people, the substitute for the people, the one who is making the appropriate sacrifice on the part of the people but, in this case, the sin-offering is Jesus himself, a man without sin rather than a spotless lamb or a goat.

So, if Jesus is the apostle sent to us to speak to us directly from God the Father, then so too were the twelve apostles sent out with his authority to witness to him, inspired by him. We, in our turn, too, are rightly part of that holy, catholic and apostolic church because we are informed by the Spirit and are called by Christ to be his representatives, witnessing to the truth of the gospel.

May Jesus, then, be to us what the writer to the Hebrews tells us he truly is –
‘apostle and high priest of our confession.’

I have spoken in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

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