

TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (2024 - B)

When I was a young boy, my parents took care of me and my brothers and sister. They would see to it that we had what we needed, clean clothes, food to eat, a warm place to sleep, and lots of love.

Another thing dad and mom did was this. They took care of our relationships with adults. For example, when we were sick, they called our doctor and made an appointment. When we needed shoes, they took us to the shoe store. When we were in grade school, they went to parent-teacher conferences (and in my case, a few parent-principal conferences).

My parents bridged the gap between the adult world and the world of children. They took care of things we children could not and did not know how to get from the adult world. They were the go-betweens, the intermediaries between us and the world of adults.

Now, I mention this because I want to say a few things about our second reading today. It's a short passage from the Letter to the Hebrews, and in this passage, our Lord Jesus Christ is referred to as our **"Great High Priest."** The passage goes on to say that,

"We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has similarly been tested in every way, yet without sin."

So what does this mean? What exactly is a high priest, and for that matter, what is a priest?

In answer, a priest is someone who offers sacrifice to God on behalf of the people. In other words, He's a go-between. Just like parents bridge the gap between children and adults, so too priests bridge the gap between God and man. They are intermediaries.

The Book of Hebrews affirms this later on when it says that priests are **"appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins (Heb 5:1)."**

In the Old Testament, in the time before Christ, God set apart a whole tribe from among the Israelites to offer sacrifice for the sins of the people. These men were the Levites. They continually offered sacrifices in the Temple in Jerusalem. The Levites followed the directions and rites God had established. When they conducted their sacred duties, they also wore special clothes or vestments as a sign of their office.

During the sacred rites, the priests presented to God the offerings brought to them by the people. These offerings included grains they had harvested from their fields and lambs or oxen taken from their flocks or herds. These offerings had a special name. They were called victims.

Since God is infinitely holy, the things offered to Him, these victims, could no longer be used by man. They had to be taken out of ordinary use. That was accomplished by burning them in a sacred fire, and this sacred offering was called a holocaust. Its flames and the smoke and scent from it rose up to God who dwelt in the heavens. These offerings symbolized the Israelite's sorrow for sin and their desire to be reconciled to God.

However, there was a problem. The sacrifices offered by the priests could not bring about man's salvation nor his reconciliation with God. The offerings were defective in two ways. First, they did not truly come from man, and second, they were not worthy of God because they did not have infinite value.

These sacrifices were not worthy of God because the priests could only offer to God what He had already given to the people. In essence, they were only giving back to God what God had first given to them. It would be as if you loaned me \$100, and I only gave you back \$10 and then called us even.

Or, think about it this way. Suppose someone gave you a wonderful present, say a new Dodge Ram with all the extras, and you turned to that person and said, "Wow! This is great! I want to give you something in return. How about a ride around the block?" Or suppose someone gave you a beautiful set of diamond earrings, and you said to them, "What a nice present! Let me treat you to a happy meal at McDonald's."

In a similar way, what man was offering to God was like that only more so. Man's offerings to God were not even remotely equivalent to what God had given to man.

A second problem with the Temple sacrifices was this. Only a gift worthy of an infinite God would suffice to make up for man's sins, and man had nothing of infinite value to give to God.

Still, even with this imperfect sacrifice, the temple priests and the High Priest who oversaw the worship of God were doing what they could. In fact, it was God Himself who had ordered the priests to perform these sacrificial rites on behalf of the people, and this was all part of God's plan to prepare for the perfect sacrifice Jesus would offer for us on the cross. Here's how.

God the Father would send His Son to be both the priest and the sacrifice, to be both priest and victim. Jesus Christ would become "a man like us in all things but sin." He would offer Himself on the altar of the cross to God the Father. He would be the sacrifice that would take away our sins and the sins of the whole world. He would offer the only sacrifice worthy of God: Himself, and His offering would have infinite value.

The temple sacrifices were offered on an altar. In Christ's sacrifice, the altar was to be the cross. In the temple sacrifices, unblemished lambs were offered to God. In Christ's sacrifice, He would be the holy and spotless victim, the unblemished lamb.

[By the way, that's where we get the prayer, "Lamb of God you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us."] Finally, in the temple sacrifice, priests offered the victims to God. In Christ's sacrifice, Jesus would be is the priest who offered the sacrifice. As Hebrews says, He is **"great high priest who has passed through the heavens."** In Christ's sacrifice, the priest and victim are one and the same.

Note here that Christ's sacrifice has infinite value, and that's because He is God. Also, His infinite sacrifice is not limited by time or space or any other human consideration. Consequently, His sacrifice only had to be offered once. That means Christ's offering is a never-ending sacrifice of praise, and we join in this sacrifice each and every time we celebrate the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

By virtue of the Sacrament of Holy Orders, each priest participates in a sacramental way in the one priesthood of Jesus Christ. Then, in obedience to our Lord's command, "Do this in remembrance of me," each Catholic priest re-presents this sacrifice of Christ to the Father at every Mass.

Furthermore, all of you participate in this same sacrifice when you join yourselves and your prayers and works to those of Jesus as He offers Himself to the Father. That is why the priest says "Pray brothers and sisters that my sacrifice **and yours** may be acceptable ..." When we are at Mass, we are at the greatest event to have ever taken place on this earth.

Let me make one final point today. Jesus Christ our great high priest sacrificed Himself for our sins. However, our reading also says that he is able **"to sympathize with our weakness."** Why? Because He is not only true God but also true man. That means what He offers to the Father truly comes from us, from the human race.

As man, our Lord experienced all that we experience. He knows what we go through each day. He understands our trials and our difficulties and our weaknesses. In fact, He understands us better than we understand ourselves. He is one of us, but at the same time, He is also the great high priest. So, He can go to the Father on our behalf.

Jesus is our intermediary. That means, when we sin, we can **"confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace ..."**

What a great High Priest we have! He is our mediator, our go-between. Just as parents are the mediators between the world of children and the world of adults, so too Jesus is our mediator. He bridges that gap between us and the Father.

Unlike the Israelites who were forever offering sacrifice in the hope of reconciliation, we have a great high priest who intercedes for us before the Father's throne. He offers a new and eternal sacrifice, a sacrifice of infinite value and one that is pleasing to the Father. That means His sacrifice does indeed reconcile us to the Father.

So, let us never fear to approach His **"throne of grace"** in time of need. Instead, let us go to Him with joy and confidence to receive mercy and to find grace and peace. Amen.