

Sermon, Passion Sunday 21 March 2021

Hebrew's 5 v 5-10; John 12 v 20-33

Why did the author of Hebrew's think of describing Jesus as high priest? It may have been the author's reflection on the tradition which goes back to the words of Jesus himself that his death was a sacrifice. He may have been further influenced by the saying of Jesus that he would build a temple not made with hands.

Here is an instance of fresh creative thinking by an individual of the early Christian church. In his eyes Jesus was to be a priest of the rank of Melchizedek. This was probably first thought of by the psalmist as some Hasmonean prince who would contain in his person both a royal and priestly office, says Harvey. Hebrew's mentions three necessary qualifications for the high priesthood; representative capacity, human sympathy and divine appointment.

The author has to establish that he is the Son of God for only a high priest who is Son of God can have his rightful place at God's right hand and only the Son of God can fittingly minister in the heavenly sanctuary. "In the course of his earthly life," says Hebrews, "He offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears". The author implies that Christ's agony in Gethsemane was a representative act, summing up and representing before God all the entreaties of people in their hour of deepest need. Christ's agony in Gethsemane evidently had made a deep impression on the author, as he writes here with deep feeling.

Jesus found that prayer can meet with an answer very different from that which is requested.. He learnt to submit to himself to the very conditions from which he had asked to be freed. Thus the Son learnt full obedience in the only way possible - in an incarnate life through submission to the will of God under pressure of emotional shock and physical distress.

In the Gospel the festival at Jerusalem drew not only a great crowd of Jewish pilgrims but people of other nationalities who were were proselytes or sympathisers. They also made their journey and their common language would have been Greek. The Greeks simple request was to see Jesus, but this drew out from him a series of exceedingly solemn sayings, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified". The glorifying of the Son of Man consisted in his being lifted up on the cross and appeared to be a dark destiny of condemnation and death. But this death also involves others. It conditions the way in which people must seek to serve and follow Jesus; "If anyone is to serve me, he must follow me, where I am there will my servant be." "Now my soul is in turmoil" says Jesus.

All the Gospels record a time before the final resolution that Jesus seems to have had a moment of inner conflict and resistance. The expression of the agony of one whose faith is stretched to breaking point. Both here and on the cross Jesus uses the language of Hebrew spirituality. This shows that he, like countless just men before him, is in a position where circumstances make it hard to continue to believe in God. So the glory attending Jesus will only be fully realised in his death and resurrection.

Jesus then accepts his destiny,"Father, glorify thy name" he cries. The voice from heaven responds "I have glorified it and I will glorify it again". The glory already shown upon Jesus will now be consummated by that supreme act of glorification by which the Son of Man will be lifted up on the cross to heaven. Jesus after his brief moment of hesitation accepts this deeply demanding role of glorification.

John calls Jesus the Son of Man. What did the Jews understand by that phrase? The term took its origin in Daniel. The Jews believed that into the world would come a new power, the golden age when life would be sweet and the Jews would be the masters of the world. But it became clear to them that their nation was so weak that the golden age would never come by human power or human means. So they believed it must come by the direct intervention of God. He would send his powerful champion to bring it in called the Son of Man.

Talk about the Son of Man then would excite the hearts of all who heard it. But Jesus follows it up with a succession of sayings which must have left them staggered and bewildered. Jesus

spoke not in terms of conquest, but in terms of sacrifice and death. Jesus turned their ideas upside down replacing a theme of conquest with a vision of a cross. The universality which he had come to restore to the temple was not yet fully inaugurated but waited upon his death and resurrection.

For everybody there was the great difficulty of seeing the glory in the humiliation and of accepting that Jesus' death was an expression of God's glory on earth. Jesus' teaching had been preparing them for this and now a voice declared it was so, "This voice spoke for your sake not mine." The events leading up to the crucifixion itself were to be the decisive challenge to declare for or against Jesus.. "Now is the hour of judgement for this world" says Jesus. It was a firm Christian belief that the devil himself, "the prince of this world" was vanquished by the crucifixion. And finally it was the crucifixion which broke through the exclusiveness of Jewish religion and enabled Jesus to draw all men to himself.

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