

The Priesthood of Christ

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- Last week, Fr Dunbar talked to us about Christ as Prophet, that is, as the perfect revelation of God to a blind and sinful human race.
- But we need more than knowledge... we need to move toward it and appropriate it, that is, make it our own. Fr Dunbar said there's no loving him without knowing him, and he's quite right; we can't love what we don't know. But the opposite is also true: there's no knowing him without loving him. After all, the demons know Christ, in a way. And there are lots of people who can quote Scripture until the cows come home, but their anger and insecurity reveal that their hearts are in fact far from him; these people don't truly *know* God. We can't just know *about* God as do demons and jerks; to *know* him truly is to be *like* him. Those who *know* their Father actually look like His children; there's a family resemblance.
- In fact, it is this work of making many to be children of God that is much of the *content* of his revelation, that is, his work as Prophet. He came to earth first to reveal the Glory of God, and then to reveal his will for us, tell us what he would do in us, in our hearts.

The Problem with Only Knowledge as Such

- The Apostle Paul is fairly optimistic about our ability to perceive certain truths about God. But it's not our ability to see the truth that's the problem; our fault lies in our inability to *appreciate* and *acknowledge* the truth as such:
 - For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness; Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, And changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things. (Rom 1.18-23)
- The human heart greatly complicates and ultimately undermines our ability to live in the truth; in the perversity of our wills we prefer the darkness of our own "vain imaginations" to the clear light of day in the truth of God. The truth was available, but nobody was interested!
- In preferring our own versions of truth to God's, we're profoundly and foolishly arrogant. Our vanity is ironic, because the more we interpret 'reality' through a perverse heart, the

farther we get from the truth, and the more foolish we become. Our pride is our weakness, and leads to death.

- Following in St Paul's footsteps, St Augustine noted much the same of the best of the Platonists: they could *see* the homeland fairly well, but what they lacked was the ability to get there. Wherein lies the cure? Our ability to participate in and imitate the humility of Christ. Hear St Paul again:
 - Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2.5-11)
- Other translations of this passage are perhaps less obscure; essentially, Paul is saying that Christ didn't view equality with God as a thing to be "robbed", that is, greedily grabbed through jealous lust for power and glory, but rather "made himself of no reputation", or, "emptied himself"; the eternal, glorious, and almighty Word of God took on common human flesh, and appeared before men as something very average, unglorious, not-special.
- Very crudely speaking, God essentially said: "Alright, if you want to worship creation rather than the Creator, I'll become creation and do some powerful things so that you'll notice me; but then through that same flesh I'll demonstrate the humility that truly suits my creation." He got our attention, and then put on a show.
- Christ's incarnation and obedient death are the foundations of our salvation; in his human body, Christ went as low as a man can go; therefore God raised him up and elevated him as high as a man can go. It's fairly straightforward!

In this coming to us as a man and doing things with our humanity that we could never and would never do, for our benefit rather than his own, Christ is acting as a priest.

CHRIST THE PRIEST CAPTURES OUR HEARTS

- So, Christ's first priestly act is to get our attention, so that he might capture our hearts
- going to us, drawing us in, and bringing our hearts to God
- hence, the Incarnation—Athanasius and Augustine on attention
- "Once the mind of human beings descended to perceptible things, the Word himself submitted to appear through a body, so that as a human he might bring humans to himself and return their sense perception to himself, and then, by their seeing him as a human being, he might persuade them through the works he effected that he is not a man only but God and the Word and Wisdom of the true God" (*De Inc.* 16).
- As Aquinas wrote, "Whatever is offered to God in order to raise man's spirit to Him, may be called a sacrifice."
- So it is that Aquinas significantly calls Christ's incarnation and sacrifice a sacrament (*ST* III.22.2). "Every visible sacrifice is a sacrament, that is a sacred sign, of the invisible

sacrifice." Now the invisible sacrifice is that by which a man offers his spirit to God, according to Ps. 50:19 [52.17]: "The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit: * a broken and contrite heart, O God, shalt thou not despise."

- This is what we do in the Eucharist; "And here we offer and present unto Thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy and living sacrifice unto Thee..."
- Christ is a walking, talking, dying, and rising again sacrament; and he is our model
- This is what the Christian is meant to be, and especially the ordained priest is meant to embody... this dying to sin and rising again to new life, following after God is the essence of baptism

CHRIST THE PRIEST ESTABLISHES OUR HEARTS

- In his Incarnation and obedience, Christ is also both priest and victim, offering up himself on our behalf. As the book of Hebrews tells it, the primary effect of this is to give us a foundation of confidence upon which to receive further grace, and to build the Christian life
- here we get into more familiar territory on the usual discussion of Christ as priest
- The best place to look in Scripture to understand the priesthood of Christ is the Epistle to the Hebrews, where the essential message on Christ's priesthood is that "he became what we are, but has gone where we could never go"—think of a taut line, from earth to sky
- in his humanity he both identifies with our weaknesses, but also intercedes for us while sitting at the right hand of God
- His priesthood began by becoming man:
 - Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. For verily he took not on him the nature of angels; but he took on him the seed of Abraham. Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people. For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted. (Heb 2.14-18)
- What Christ accomplished in being made like us is covered in the very opening of the Epistle, where we have Christ perhaps most excellently described as Prophet and Priest, together:
 - God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds; Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high. (Heb 1.1-3)
- And I will go out on a limb and suggest that with these passages in the background, we're prepared to understand 4.14f as the most important verses in understanding the argument of Hebrews, on how Christ's priesthood affects those who believe:
 - "Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession. For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but

was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.” (see also Heb 10)

- In his humanity he did what we could never do—he valued the promises of God over the pleasures of the flesh; Through his sacrifice, once for all, Christ has broken down the barrier between man and God through the power of his “indestructible life” (Heb 7.16); and once he has got our attention, in his unique priesthood he also enables us to approach God not in fear but with confidence, with boldness.
 - “In the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, and was heard in that he feared; Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered; And being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him; Called of God an high priest after the order of Melchisedec.” (Heb 5.7-10)
- The Law and sacrifices of Israel were miserable failures at accomplishing what God found in Abraham, and is looking for in us: he wants pure hearts that obey him out of love; after the pattern of Abraham, but more perfectly
- The ancient prophets of Israel proclaimed this as the ultimate goal of God in his creation, as seen for example in Deut 30.6: “And the Lord thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live.”
- and more fully in Jeremiah 31.31-34, which is quoted in the Epistle to the Hebrews 8.8-12 to describe the effect that Christ’s priesthood has on us, and which is the beginning of the fulfillment of God’s purposes in mankind:
 - Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah: Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they continued not in my covenant, and I regarded them not, saith the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith the Lord; I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts: and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people: And they shall not teach every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for all shall know me, from the least to the greatest. For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more.
- Hebrews: through the ‘staying power’ giving us through Christ’s priesthood, where we are able to approach and remain in the presence of God, we are transformed by grace through the renewal of our hearts, the transformation of our mind
- By way of summary, Thomas Aquinas describes these passages in Hebrews pretty neatly, through listing the three reasons we need Christ’s priesthood, where he is both victim and priest, “offering himself” (*ST III.22.2*):
 1. for the remission of sin
 2. “that man may be preserved in a state of grace, by ever adhering to God, wherein his peace and salvation consist.”

3. “in order that the spirit of man be perfectly united to God: which will be most perfectly realized in glory.”

CHRIST THE PRIEST HEALS OUR HEARTS

- I think it’s helpful here to reflect on the fact that many Christian teachers fail to get past number 1, the remission of our sins. But the effect of Christ’s sacrifice is so much more than that! Note that, according to the Epistle to the Hebrews, this was done not so that we could merely be innocent of wrongdoing, but our consciences are made pure that we might approach the throne of grace with confidence, and be transformed by our nearness to and eventual union with God!
- Again, Aquinas points us to those two further effects of Christ’s priesthood, 2) our adhering to God, which preserves us, and 3) our union with God, which is our joy and glory, our end
- The chief result of this in Hebrews is a longing for our homeland, and our final union with God; this drives the entire Christian life, it orders its loves; it drives us to stir up one another “unto love and to good works” (Heb 10.24).
- So it is that we look to Christ our high priest and forerunner for our example; as the Epistle to the Hebrews exhorts us,
 - Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds. (Heb 12.1-3)
- The rightly-ordered life Christ’s priesthood is seeking to bring about is one that looks like his; loving the joy set before him, he humbled himself, enduring the cross, despising earthly conceptions of honor and shame; through his suffering he became what we never could, and has brought us with him. So let us have confidence to approach God through Christ our high priest, and let us become priests ourselves, despising the world and laying down our lives for the joy set before us. Despising the joys of this world for the joys of the world to come involves some suffering; but for those who have their hearts set on the promises and our future transformation, it’s worth it. This way of suffering and sacrifice is the way Christ has revealed as Prophet, and is the one he walked and lives as Priest.
- So it is that to participate in Christ’s priesthood is to embrace the inner death and resurrection of baptism, and by means of our imitation of Christ we can look forward to the day when we ourselves will rise from the dead and be perfected in him.

Close by reading John Donne on the Sacrifice of the Infant Christ