**Melchizedeck and Jesus -- a superior Priesthood!**

**A series of four short reflections into the Book of Hebrews.**

**Reflection 1**

**Background** Firstly, we do not really know who wrote this letter or why it appears in the Bible where it does, but it does not really matter because we are only interested in the great truths it establishes and inspires. Before I begin we must understand that we cannot look at the letter to the Hebrews on its own because as we shall see it it is closely tied in with Genesis 14 and in particular Psalm 110 where God promises to establish the rule of Christ.

The Messianic Jewish community to whom the letter was written were suffering for their faith. A that time the Roman authorities had made it illegal to be a Christian, but not illegal to be a practising Jew. That meant that there was real pressure for a Jewish Christian to revert to the faith of their fathers. The writer wants to dissuade them from doing this, and his main argument centres on the superiority of the Priesthood of Jesus. “*Let us hold fast to our (Christian) confession”* he implores (Ch 4 v14), arguing that his readers can go to Christ, the High Priest to find help in time of need. Over Chapter 5 he quotes Psalm 110 three times and states (v11) that he has much to say about Melchizedeck, but that it is hard to explain and his readers have become hard of hearing because they are still seeking the milk of the word and not solid food.

So as the letter to the of Hebrews unfolds it begins to take us into the mysterious world of Melchizedeck, first mentioned in Genesis 14 and Psalm 110 and extensively in Hebrews and to gain a correct understanding we need to look at these together.

Here is what it says in Psalm 110 speaking of Jesus.

“*The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstall for your feet.”*

“*The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind,*

‘*You are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedeck”*

Psalm 110 is referred to in other parts of the bible more times than any other passage of scripture, and several of those references are in the letter to the Hebrews.

Without the book of Hebrews, it would have been very difficult for us to grasp the importance of Psalm 110 and its promises. The fact that Hebrews spends so much time unpacking the Psalm is of real significance.

Hebrews begins with a declaration of the glorification of Jesus and in verse 3, it speaks of the fulfilment of God’s promise in the psalm as it says “*When he had by himself purged our sins, he sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high”.* The writer then goes on to quote other Messianic psalms before returning to Psalm 110 in verse 13.

**Reflection 2** In our first reflection we began to look at the background and some of the complexities of the letter to the Hebrews. The writer to the Hebrews shows an astonishing grasp of the ministry of Jesus. Ch 2 v 9 speaks of his humanity (a little lower than the angels), his death for all mankind and then his final exaltation. At the end of Ch 2 v 17, he introduces the fact that, through this pathway, he has become a merciful and faithful High Priest. His priesthood is referred to again a few verses later, and then at the end of Ch 4 it becomes the focus of the writer’s emphasis of the superiority of the New over the Old.

In Chapter 6 he chides them for their immaturity before coming back again to Psalm 110 where he emphasises the reliability of God’s oath in establishing Christ as High Priest. Over the next four chapters, the writer then begins to unpack his understanding about Melchizedek and his encounter with Abraham in Genesis 14; the superiority of the Melchizedek Priesthood compared to the Levitical one and the nature of the true heavenly tabernacle compared to the earthly one. He then explains the nature of Covenant, the role of shed blood and the superiority of the blood of Christ over the blood of the animal sacrifices. He then again (Ch 10 v 19 – 23) encourages boldness and restates his call to “*hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering”.*

Over chapters 11 and 12, the writer emphasises faith. Although he has been arguing that the New covenant and the New Priesthood are vastly superior to the Old, he now shows that faith is the key consistent factor throughout both Old and New. Importantly, he demonstrates that many of the Old Testament saints saw beyond God’s provision for their time and grasped the future realities that were still to come, they were commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something far better so that together with us they would be made perfect. Praise God!

**Reflection 3** It is worth considering exactly why the Levitical priesthood was doomed to failure. A change from the Levitical to the Melchizedek priesthood would mean an end to the Mosaic Law in favour of a new law under the New Covenant. It is not uncommon for Christians to struggle with the relevance of the Old Covenant, and consequently to slide into a situation where they are trying to please God by striving in self effort to please God rather than resting in the finished work of Christ under the new Covenant.

The Levitical Priesthood was not only inadequate because of the temporal nature of service (all the priests had a limited life span), but for other factors as well. The Law appointed men as high priests who had weaknesses, and who had to offer sacrifices for their own sins before they could offer them for the people (Heb Ch 7 v27). Neither was it possible for those sacrifices, the shed blood of bulls and goats, to actually take away sins, for the Law was only a shadow of things to come. (Heb Ch 10 v 1 - 4). Very importantly, whilst a Levitical Priest might have compassion and feeling for the sinner, they could do no more. But Jesus, the Son Of God, High Priest after the order of Melchizedek, is not only able to sympathise, for he was tempted as we are, but he can actually offer grace and mercy to help us in our time of need (Heb Ch 4 v 14-16). How much better is that?

In his ministry, John the Baptist drew the Levitical priesthood, and hence the Law, to a close. John was the last true Levitical priest. Born of Zacharias of the priestly line of Abijah (one of the Aaronic lines) and Elizabeth, herself a descendant of Aaron, his heritage was impeccable. But John rejected the priestly privileges of robes and sharing of the sacrificial food, in favour of the food and clothing of a prophet. His preaching declared that the axe had been laid to the root of the (Abrahamic) tree (Luke Ch 3 v 8-9), and at the age he should have taken up his priestly office, he laid it down in favour of Jesus who had come in a new priestly role. John’s most important act as a legitimate Levitical Priest, was to examine and identify the acceptable sacrifice which God had provided for the new Melchizedek Priesthood – “*Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”* (John Ch 1 v 29). Jesus as both Priest and sacrifice, needed another to testify of his perfection and purity, and this was done by John. After that act the Levitical Priesthood was obsolete, and this was finally demonstrated when the chief priests failed to recognize Jesus.

**Reflection 4** The letter to the Hebrews is a book containing great truth, whilst we can find some general exhortations in it for ourselves I think we need to take care. I have known many Christians not understanding the letter finding themselves drawn into endless discussions concerning genealogies and unconsciously drawn back into Old Covenant law which is the exact opposite of the purpose of the book.

Hebrews remphasises the greatness of what Jesus has done for us. I think it is probably far more than we can perceive at this stage.

In a church like ours where we are involved in so much Community activity (which is absolutely right by the way), perhaps we should take more time out to reflect on the majesty of Christ and what that means to us personally. It is a truly wonderful thing what God has done for us, let us give thanks and rejoice together in our great High Priest!

**Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever !!!!**