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Ardmore, Pennsylvania
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
September 1, 2019

Proper 17, Year C:
Sirach 10:12-18
Psalm 112
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16
Luke 14:1, 7-14

The supremacy of Christ as priest and victim

Today's second reading is from the end of the Epistle to the Hebrews, which we have been reading through for the past few weeks. I mentioned last week that the overarching theme of this epistle is the "transcendental supremacy of Christ," a phrase I took from the late Biblical scholar (and Pennsylvania resident) Philip Edgcumbe Hughes. I said that the transcendental supremacy of Christ means a few things, one of which is that it relativizes all other claims to supremacy of one kind or another. So that, if you are a person in power, you should keep that in mind: your authority isn't absolute. You also are under authority. And, if you are a person without power, you should keep that in mind: the authority of the persons over you is not absolute, whatever they might say about it.

But I was cherry-picking the phrase I liked, "transcendental supremacy of Christ," from what Hughes had to say. Here is the full sentence: "The author of Hebrews has a superb perspective on Christ's transcendental supremacy, [second] on the uniqueness of his priestly mediation, and [third] on the total 'once-for-all' efficacy of his sacrifice of himself for us sinners." That's a mouth full. But to understand it is to understand the instructions found in the thirteenth chapter.

The idea that there is something wrong in the world that can't easily be fixed is an ancient and primitive human intuition. We know that this is the case because some of the most ancient artifacts we have of primitive humans is evidence of sacrifices of various kinds, something offered to powers greater than themselves in order to obtain certain results, results which seemed inaccessible to normal ways of accomplishing things. The idea is that, by offering these sacrifices, the ineffable powers that be would deign to save the crops, or keep the seasons rolling along, or protect the group from the wildness all around. Sacrifice was how those entreaties to the gods were accomplished, in order to set right what couldn't easily be fixed.

The unique insight given to the Hebrew people was that there was a Law that was being transgressed, not only once or twice, but incessantly, and that that transgression was part of why these bad things were happening. To repent from these transgressions and reconcile themselves to the covenant God had made with them, the priests of the Hebrews were given instructions as to how to continually offer sacrifices in the Temple. And, unique among the world's peoples, they found that God remained faithful to them throughout their history, even when they themselves were not faithful. God revealed himself as the one faithful to Israel, even when Israel erred and strayed like lost sheep.

But this cycle of transgression, repentance, and sacrifice was perpetual. It had to be, because there was something wrong with the world—with themselves—that couldn't easily be set right. The fault was not in the stars, but in themselves. So the sacrifices continued.

But God's faithfulness never wavered—that is who God is—and it culminated in the sending not just of another priest, however great, but in the sending of God's son, Jesus, who could make the perfect offering, to set right what couldn't be set right in any other way. With Christ's self-offering—his one-time sacrifice, instead of the perpetual sacrifices in the Temple—things were being set right and Israel, the New Israel, was freed from the oppression of themselves, their own shortcomings. He could provide the priestly mediation that the Aaronic priesthood could not, bringing together God and humanity, creator and creation, but the sacrifice he made was of himself, as both priest and victim.¹

On Maundy Thursday, we strip and clean the altar. In that dramatic moment, we are remembering and representing the continuity between Israel's sacrifices on the altar and Christ's sacrifice on the cross. The Christian priest prepares the altar for the sacrifice, just as generations of Hebrew priests did the same thing. On Maundy Thursday, we are remembering how Christ is taking the place of all the other sacrifices that have ever been offered, and how it has a "total 'once-for-all' efficacy." With Christ's death and resurrection, the eternal concern that there is something wrong with the world that can't easily be fixed is assuaged. Christ has set things right.

This is what the author of the epistle spends twelve chapters unpacking, rather brilliantly. Like a great preacher, he makes his theological, scriptural, and historical points, and then, here at the end, in the last chapter, he gives them the practical results of this for their lives—the consequences of Christ's transcendental supremacy, the priestly mediation, the perfect sacrifice. The fact that Christ is who he is, and has done what he has done, means that the Christian can live in a new way, and the thirteenth chapter describes what that new way is.

First, he says, "let mutual love continue," or what is elsewhere translated, "let brotherly love continue"—a good commandment for the city of brotherly love. Love your brothers and sisters, those in your community. Then, "show hospitality to strangers." Christian love is to be aimed in two directions: first, inwardly to the community of fellow disciples of Jesus; second, outwardly, even to strangers. The Christian's dealings both with the in-group and the out-group should be characterized by love, reflecting the love of God. They will know we are Christian by our love.

Then, the writer continues, remember those in prison, and those who are being tortured, "as though you yourselves were being tortured." Here is another instruction about outwardly focused love and concern. Those in prison, those being tortured: they should receive care just as if they were members of your own family; just as you would want for yourself. They are even further outside the community, however; not just strangers, but guilty strangers. Yet love should extend even to them.

Then, very inwardly focused: "let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled." This is one's responsibility not only to other members of the community (the in-group), but to one's closest companion, a spouse. God's love should be reflected by each person toward his or her spouse.

The pattern has been inward, outward, outward, then inward. It concludes, however, with the most inwardly focused of all, not just the group, or the household, but yourself: "keep your lives free from love of money, and be content with what you have." This is hard. Not only because nice things are nice, but also because having enough money and resources is also having enough security. And so the author gives the means by which all of these instructions can be justified, including this last one. Because Jesus has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you," then we can say, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?"

¹ A prayer that is used at St. George's before services of Holy Eucharist: "Mercifully regard us, O Lord, as we plead the sacrifice of thy Son Jesus Christ, and grant that the feebleness of our intentions may be perfected in the fullness of that intention wherein he offered himself upon the altar of the cross, *both priest and victim.*"

In one of the omitted verses from this passage, the author writes, “For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.” And that city is where the wealth is stored up, a treasure in heaven, where neither rust nor moth can affect it—quite regardless of the situation in the earthly city.

Do not be afraid. No one can do anything to me, not ultimately, because of Christ’s transcendental supremacy, because of his faithful mediation, because of his perfect offering that has set things right. Because of that security, one can show brotherly love, hospitality to strangers, compassion to prisoners, respect to family, and even freedom from money concerns.

Isn’t this the point of today’s gospel? Don’t put yourself up at the seat of honor; humble yourself so that the host can say, “friend, move up higher.” Just like showing brotherly love and the other things, the security one has from one’s adoption by Christ means humility doesn’t result in insecurity, but rather a trusting in the one who has come to save. The Lord is our helper; what can anyone do to us?

These are the sacrifices that the Christian makes, instead of the Temple sacrifices: that of praise of God and generosity toward others, inside the community and outside of it. So that is what we do this morning, and at each service of Christian worship: we praise God, from whom all blessings flow; and we share with one another the peace of Christ in Christian fellowship. Then we gather around the altar, remembering the sacrifice Christ made to make it all possible. His transcendental supremacy; his priestly intervention on our behalf; the perfect sacrifice, perfectly efficacious, and extending to the whole world.