

SERMON 10-18-15

**The Rev. David Michaud, Rector
St. Peter's Church, Salisbury MD**

Jesus has many titles in our church. He is the Christ, the Messiah, Our Lord and Savior, (other titles?) just to name a few. Today in our second lesson he is given another title, that of High Priest. He is portrayed as the High Priest of the Church. This portrayal of Jesus as priest is even shared by us here at St. Peter's, with Jesus depicted above our very High Altar in priestly garments. Notice that in the depiction of Jesus as Christus Rex he is alive, risen from his death on the cross with a crown on his head, wearing the chasuble of a priest. Similarly in our rose window opposite we see Christ the King in a royal purple robe and a priest's stole crossed in the front.

The High Priest imagery in the Letter to the Hebrews reflects the office of High Priest in First Century Judea. The Jewish High Priest was the religious leader of the Jewish People, appointed from among the class of priests, who were all Levites, that is, the male descendants of Aaron, the brother of Moses. The priests tended to the duties of the temple, and the High Priest was the head priest, the one who represented the people before God in the temple in Jerusalem. It was his duty to offer animal sacrifices of thanksgiving, and to also present offerings to atone for the sins of the entire Jewish people. He alone went at a certain time of the year into the most sacred part of the temple, the Holy of Holies, where God dwelled, to offer sacrifices for the people.

In the Letter to the Hebrews we find then that Jesus is called our High Priest, our leader who represents us, intercedes for us, in God's dwelling place, heaven. He is appointed as our high priest not by mortals, but by God the Father, the one who said, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you." He is also a priest of a different nature, an eternal priest, of the order of Melchizedek. Melchizedek was a priest in the Book of Genesis who came to Abraham and Abraham immediately recognized him as a priest. We know not where he came from nor where he went, and so he is seen as an eternal symbol of the priesthood of God. And God the Son who has neither a beginning nor end, who lives eternally, is part of that eternal priesthood. Jewish High Priests come and go, they die and are replaced, but our Lord Jesus Christ lives eternally. He is our one and only High priest who has sacrificed once and for all on the cross for our sins.

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews says that although he was a Son, Jesus learned obedience through what he suffered. He was obedient to the will of the Father, even unto death, an obedience forged through suffering on the cross. The result of this obedience was perfection, the ultimate example for us of what it means to be a child of God. We in turn are called into obedience to Our High Priest, Jesus Christ, who is the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

Now obedience and obeying someone may not be all that comfortable for us. Obeying can be viewed as a type of subservience, and in the land of liberty, obedience may seem out of place. We are after all, free people. Perhaps another way of looking at obedience besides that of subservience is to think of obedience in terms of allegiance. If you believe in something, you pledge your allegiance to it. We believe in the United States and so obey its laws and its constitution. We even have a formal pledge of allegiance to signify our obedience.

It is through our baptismal covenant that we pledge our allegiance to Our Lord Jesus Christ, declaring our obedience by recognizing him as our Lord and master, and signing on as Christians who follow him on the way. In our obedience we are part of what our Presiding Bishop-Elect Michael Curry refers to as the Jesus Movement. Our allegiance is with Christ and Christ's mission in the world.

This I think is helpful context as we look at our gospel lesson today. Here we find the brothers, James and John, boldly asking Jesus to have the best seats with him in his glory. But Jesus says that this is not a privilege that is his to give. Because to be with him in his glory you have to be with him in his suffering, and even then it's how you attain greatness in the Kingdom of God that will determine where you will be in eternal life. Jesus throws the whole idea of greatness, of status and reputation upside down. James and John's idea of greatness was proximity to power, status seats next to Our Lord. And the rest of the disciples were bought into this, because when they heard what James and John said, they were jealous and outraged that the brothers were trying to increase their status over them. If those seats meant nothing to the rest of the disciples, why were they angry? No, they had visions of power and status as well.

Jesus taught them that whoever wishes to be great among you, must be a servant of the group. And whoever wants to be the first, the top dog, must be slave of all. Greatness, or status in the Kingdom of God is about service. And Jesus gives himself as the example of what we are to strive for, when he said: "For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve." We are called as followers of Christ, to serve.

Now here is the big question: serve who? Who are we called to serve? How are we called to serve? Because we can choose who we want to serve and when we want to serve. There are some people that we are happy to serve, and others that we don't want to be bothered with. There are easy ways to serve, and then there are service opportunities that are so hard and require so much of us that we avoid. The word ministry comes from the Greek word diakonia and means to serve. Individually and as a congregation we are given many opportunities for ministry, and we may have the gifts and talents to make a difference, but maybe we don't feel like doing that, or maybe the terms aren't right and we can't control everything we want to, so we reject opportunities for ministry. What kind of service are we engaging in if we only do it when we feel good and can be in control? I would call that self-service, self-serving.

And it gets back to the question: Who are we serving? Because as Christians we are called to serve others in obedience to Jesus Christ. It is for God that we are serving, and not for

ourselves. Let us consider that for a moment. How do we show our obedience to Jesus Christ? Through service to others, following Jesus commandments. Now we are getting real here about serving. Because serving in obedience to Jesus means to love – to love our neighbors, and even more than that to love our enemies, and to give of ourselves to those in need: to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, visit the sick and lonely, forgive those who sin against us. To serve is to give of ourselves in obedience to our Great High Priest, Jesus Christ. To do the hard work of discipleship, to step down from our status seeking desires, to humble ourselves to be servants to others in obedience to Christ.

That also means that the commandment to serve is not an excuse to put down particular classes of people, as we have had a history of doing in this country, from women to minorities, but a challenge to leaders to seek to lead not through worldly power and status, but by a commitment of service in obedience to Our Lord. Those in power are challenged to take on servant ministry.

What a world this would be if politicians served all the people they represented, and not just the special interests. If business owners and leaders served not just the bottom line and profits for themselves but the welfare and care of their employees and the customers they served. If church leaders made proclamation of the gospel and serving God's people first and foremost and led by example.

Servanthood is a difficult role to play at times. Because we are not in control, we are controlled. That is what it means to be a servant. But remember this, our master is not the people we serve, our master is Our Lord Jesus Christ. And so as a servant we need to be cognizant of that, especially if those we are serving try to manipulate us into doing things that are contrary to Christ's teachings. Sometimes serving means to witness our faith to others, to teach others in service who Jesus Christ is and how we follow him. We are called to service in obedience to Jesus Christ.

How do we know how to obey him? Through studying the word of God in Scripture, in regular prayer to God, in community in reflection with fellow Christians. To be obedient, we must be grounded in our faith, seeking to know God's will, to serve effectively.

It is through giving of time, talent and treasure in service to God that we show our obedience to our Lord. Today is Stewardship Thanksgiving Sunday when we joyfully commit ourselves to serving God and God's church. Our pledges of support that we will soon present are a sign of our service, of our giving control to God of what we have so that God can use us and our gifts to further his kingdom. We are called to serve, to be servants. And Jesus has assured us that in giving ourselves in service, while it may seem foolish to the world, is nothing less than great in the Kingdom of God. May we continue to pledge our obedience to God, and may we go boldly to serve not as we desire, but to serve as our Lord calls us and needs for us to do.