

HOLY THURSDAY 2020

You may have noticed that I often wear my cassock. This is nothing more than the official uniform of the Roman Catholic clergy. It isn't universally worn for various cultural, historical, practical or even, ideological reasons. But because of this lack of uniformity regarding the uniform many parishioners ask me, "What order are you?" I have an urge that I resist to respond, Order of Melchizedek. I suppress this smart-aleck answer knowing that so many life-long practicing Catholics may have had very little experience with the cassock. Or maybe that they picked up the erroneous idea that only "religious" priests have funny looking habits.

Back to my snarky remark, no doubt that you've heard the name, "Melchizedek" before, but you might be hard pressed to say much about him. In the New Testament we read in the Letter to the Hebrews how Mel is an image of Christ. "In the days when (Jesus Christ) was in the flesh, he offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. ... He became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, declared by God high priest according to the **order of Melchizedek.**" (Heb 5:7-10)

Or maybe you recall the name at Mass during the Eucharistic Prayer on occasion: "Be pleased to look upon these offerings with a serene and kindly countenance, and to accept them, as once you were pleased to accept the gifts of your servant Abel the just, the sacrifice of Abraham, our father in faith, and the offering of your high priest **Melchizedek**, a holy sacrifice, a spotless victim." Who is this guy, and why is he associated with Jesus?

We revere him as a prefiguration of the Christ. He is first introduced in Genesis. "Melchizedek, king of Salem, brought out bread and wine, and being a priest of God Most High, he blessed Abram with these words" (Gen 14:18) In our seminary chapel in Rome there is a mosaic on the walls of the sanctuary that depicts the images of the Eucharist in the Old Testament. We had an image of Elisha multiplying bread to feed the multitude (2Kg 4:44), Abraham offering his son Isaac (Gn 22), Noah offering animals after the Flood (Gn 8:20-22), Abel offering the firstling from his flock (Gn 4), and Melchizedek offering bread and wine (Gn 14:18).

In this present time crisis, or even, dare I say, chastisement, and why not say that? Really what is the modern parent's recourse to discipline today? We don't believe in corporal punishment, but we do utilize the "time-out". It seems to me that God the Father has issued a worldwide time-out. Well it is interesting to note that the first thing that Noah did after the flood is to offer a propitiatory sacrifice. That is a

sacrificial prayer to atone for sins. There was no such prayer offered during the flood, or the chastisement. I guess there was the concern about burning a hole in the Ark, but also maybe it wasn't appropriate. When they got back to life as normal, then they fittingly returned to the public sacrificial prayer.

My point is, before my veering into speculation about our present time, the human race had a priesthood to offer propitiatory sacrifices. That is, an offering that would appease God or atone for offenses. This priestly office is found in the Old Testament among the paterfamilias (the patriarchs), e.g. Noah, Abraham, and Jacob (Israel) (Gn 31:54). In the Old Testament it is switched from firstborn males (patriarchs) to Levites. "It is I who have chosen the Levites from the Israelites in place of every first-born that opens the womb among the Israelites. The Levites, therefore, are mine." (Number 3:12) This switch occurs because God establishes a new covenant with Moses at the Passover events.

We are in a new era. As our Church proclaims at each and every Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, **"Take this, all of you, and drink from it, for this is the chalice of my Blood, the Blood of the new and eternal covenant, which will be poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins."** From where does this priesthood come that offers the new covenant for the forgiveness of sins?

From what Jesus did with the Apostles this very night when He told them, **"Do this in memory of me."** (Mt 14:22-25, Lk 22:18-20, 1Cor 11:23-25) That is, he gave these men the role of priest to offer the sacrifice of the new covenant. But where does He come off?

We know that He is the Son of God and can do whatever He wants. But for those of His era, He needed *bona fides*. This is why both Saints Matthew and Luke take great pains to compile genealogies for Him. And it is clear from this that He isn't from the Tribe of Levi (the priestly tribe). None of the prophecies said that Christ would be. In accord with Sacred Scripture, He descends from the tribe of Judah and King David. (Although interestingly on a side-note, there does seem to be some mixing among the tribes. We read that His blessed mother went to visit her kinswoman, Elizabeth, whose husband has Temple duty. That is, John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, is a priest. Some posit the idea that Jesus is priestly on His mother's side, but as far as the law is concerned is royal on His adopted father, Joseph's side.)

Back to the Tribe of Judah, who is David? David is the King of Jerusalem. Who was the first King of Jerusalem? It turns out Melchizedek is a title which means the King of Righteousness. Not only is he the titular king of justice, but he is also the king of a place called Salem or "peace". We know this place today as Jerusalem.

Mel is the king of justice and peace, and his town some day will be the capital of Judah. Why would Abraham recognize this foreigner's credentials?

Remember this is before Salem was Jerusalem. This town would have meant very little to Abraham. Nevertheless Abraham is really impressed with this man. Not only does he recognize his right to offer up a propitiatory sacrifice to the one God but also, he then gives him ten percent of his war booty. According to scripture scholar Dr. John Bergsma, there is an ancient Rabbi tradition that teaches Melchizedek is the title for the man named (wait for it ... enter the music, dah, dah, dah, **dah!**) Shem.

You know, one of Noah's three sons, from whom the word "Semite" comes. He is the father of the Semitic peoples. According to Genesis Noah lived to be 950, living 350 years after the flood. His son, Shem, lived 150 years past that. (The idea that scripture conveys is that we lived longer before flood and that our lifespans gradually diminished to the present lifespan. E.g. Psalm 90:9-10, "Our life ebbs away under your wrath, our years end like a sigh. Seventy is the sum of our years, or eighty, if we are strong".) So according to this timeline, Noah dies in Abraham's lifetime.

Who would have had instant respect and honor from the human race at this point in history? Shem would be a good candidate. Firstly, he seems to be still alive. And secondly, he would be everybody's forefather, or at least fore-uncle.

So on this Holy Thursday, a day where the Church observes the institution of the Most Blessed Sacrament, the Holy Eucharist, and at the same time celebrates the establishment of the priesthood to minister this great sacrament, we all have the unique ability to sit back and observe the Mass without our presence. Does it have a value without us?

As long as we have the priesthood that goes with it, then the answer to the question is, yes. It atones for sin no matter where we are. This is why your membership in the Church has value even if you can't be present, or if you can't receive Communion, or if you can't understand the language. None of that matters as much as the fact that the Sacrifice is offered. This is what is so important about the propitiatory Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

As Shem and the family of Noah exited the ark after forty days of confinement to begin a new with a new promise from heaven, so I hope and pray that we might emerge from our houses and gather to offer our Holy Sacrifice with new perspectives. I pray that we and our neighbors may enter into a society that is more willing to see their need for God and that we who believe in God may value more of what He values most: peace, justice and the expiation of sin.