

A Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Lent 2015 Lent 5B  
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Sometimes there are words in the readings that just sort of stop you short.

Sometimes it's just the pronunciation, but often it's a word or a name that is obviously important in the context, but whose meaning is so obscure to our modern ears that we're just baffled. "Paraclete" comes to mind, that word for "advocate" that we only use any more for talking about the Holy Spirit. Or "Ebenezer," the stone monument that Samuel sets up to remember the Israelites' defeat of the Philistine army. Today's obscure word is a name: "Melchizedek." It's a name we invoke to talk about Jesus' heritage as a kingly priest or a priestly king, and we claim that heritage for ourselves in baptism as well.

But the fact is, we don't know much either about Melchizedek himself, or about what early Christians believed about Melchizedek, except that one phrase that comes to us from a psalm: "A royal priesthood after the order of Melchizedek."

The Book of Genesis tells us that Melchizedek was both king and priest – king of Salem and priest of the Most High – and that he both fed and blessed Abram (before Abram became Abraham). Melchizedek is the first person to be named as a priest in the Bible, and tradition has it that in blessing Abram, he passed on his eternal priesthood to Abram and his descendants.

And while we're on the subject, there's one more obscure word I should mention, and that is "priest." You should know that whenever you hear the word "priest" in the Bible, it's a translation of a completely different word than our modern word "priest." I know that's confusing, but bear with me for a second. In the Bible, the Hebrew Word "*cohen*" and the Greek word "*hieros*" both mean someone who offers blood sacrifices to God on the temple altar. Our modern word "priest" comes from the Greek word "presbyteros," which means "elder," or adviser to the bishop and assembly. I'm not entirely sure why we use the same English word for ancient priests and modern elders, but they aren't the same thing at all.

Why does any of that matter to us? Because when the letter to the Hebrews says that Jesus is a royal priest like Melchizedek, it doesn't mean that he's a leader of a worshipping community like I am, it means that he is part of the traditional line that is allowed to make blood sacrifices to God.

And that matters because we believe that in offering his own life for us, Jesus ended the need for blood sacrifice forever. "Once and for all," as an expression that was invented specifically to talk about Jesus' sacrifice puts it.

But if that's true, and Christians have believed it to be true since the first days of the church, then what are we to make of Jesus' words to his followers:

“Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”

If the need to sacrifice any life in atonement for sins ended with Jesus’ death and resurrection, why does Jesus call on us to give up our lives in this world? And why should we not love our lives, which are God’s most precious gift to each of us?

I could spend some time talking about the metaphysics of life and eternal life in the gospels, and ponder with you whether a life without God is worth loving at all, but I suspect that it would be hard to translate such speculation into anything really helpful.

It is unlikely, after all, that any of us here today will be called upon to actually lose our lives for the sake of the Gospel. But martyrdom, in a peculiar way, is the easier path. If any of us were faced with the terrible choice that many of the earliest Christians and some contemporary ones have faced – give up a life of faith or be killed – we would all know what we ought to do. We might not be able to do it, and might have to rely on God’s boundless mercy to forgive us for our fear, but we wouldn’t be confused.

It’s the everyday decisions that are ever so much harder to figure out – how to live a life of faith in the here and now. Following Jesus through paths he never walked:

a nine-to-five job, the perils and pitfalls of high school, marrying and raising children, balancing real-life economic realities with concerns for social justice and the environment not in the halls of government but in the grocery store aisle; while none of those challenges have the weight and drama of martyrdom, they don't have the crystalline clarity of life-or-death decisions either.

Which is why I really like the metaphor that Jesus uses to frame this conversation. Unless a seed is planted, it can't grow. That's obvious for seeds, of course, but it is just as true about our lives. If we keep our life, our gifts, our experiences, and our wisdom to ourselves, we cannot nurture the world with them, and we ourselves cannot grow.

So the question I do want to raise for you is, what part of who you are and what you have will grow and feed the world if you plant it in God's name? Sometimes that's an easy question to answer if we're just willing to ask it. Fundraising pitches these days are often framed in terms of our minor indulgences. How many hungry people could be fed if you gave up one Starbucks beverage a week and donated the money you would have spent? One McDonald's lunch? One family dinner out? The answer, of course, is "many." A great deal of suffering in the world could be eased if we gave up a few of our luxuries, ate a little less meat, went without a little of our abundance to benefit those who have little.

A lovely example of this kind of thinking is that a young man who I baptized ten years ago announced last week through his parents' Facebook pages that for his eleventh birthday he would rather have people make donations for leukemia research than give him gifts. Think about that.

But money and material goods are really only the least part of our lives. The harvest that God is looking for involves us planting our time, our energy, and especially our gifts in order to create abundance in the world, not just of food and material goods so that all may eat and have shelter and health, but to create an abundance of godliness in the world as well – an abundance of joy, an abundance of beauty, an abundance of kindness and charity and hope, and most of all, an abundance of love.

In order to do that, we need to think about where and how to sow our gifts. We need to plant them in unlikely places, being kind to those who show us no kindness, giving to those who show us no gratitude, loving those who are hard to love.

These are sacrifices too – not blood sacrifices, to be sure, for Jesus did away with the need for that kind of sacrifice forever. But genuine sacrifices of life, of eternal life, that, like the grain of wheat, through sacrifice multiply and multiply again.

And in making those kinds of sacrifices, of our treasure, our charity, our

compassion and our love, we exercise the royal priesthood that we too, as the body of Christ, have inherited from Melchizedek.

Amen.