

Albert Vanhoye SJ, *Let Us Confidently Welcome Christ our High Priest*, Gracewing: Leominster, 2010 (ISBN 978 085244 768 0)

CHAPTER 6 OF VANHOYE

*Christ Merciful High Priest (Heb. 4:15-16)*

At the end of Hebrews, chapter 2 the author of the letter to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus is our high priest and his two important qualities are, 'Mercy' and 'worthy of faith'; two qualities that are fundamental to establishing the relationships vital for priesthood of the New Covenant.

In Heb. 4:14 he concludes his meditation of the glorified Christ who is our High Priest and worthy of our faith in this way: *"Since then, we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heaven, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession"*. In the next verse he goes on to treat of another quality of a high priest, the quality of mercy: *"for we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin"*. He follows this with a short but very encouraging exhortation: *"Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in times of need"*

The qualities of mercy and of being worthy of our faith or putting our trust in him complement each other and are both important from our standpoint. Because Christ is worthy of faith, is a quality that attracts us to put faith in him and guides us in developing our faith. And being merciful gives us a hope he will be compassionate to us and anxious to help us. If Christ our high priest had never been human but only a heavenly high priest most likely we would feel he would not be able to understand or have sympathy with our difficulties, though worthy of faith in dealings with God. He is full of compassion for us as we are his own and he acquired that quality of compassion through his personal suffering in his human life and death. He knew poverty, hunger and thirst, tiredness, hostility betrayal, an unjust condemnation to a cruel death by crucifixion.

In the O.T. God showed mercy in many instances but these instances of mercy did not come from a human heart nor was the mercy acquired through suffering the experiences of a human being. And some texts of the O.T. required the priest to show severity and not mercy. To emphasise that God had set the priest apart, it was necessary that the priest should deal harshly with sinners who were regarded as enemies of God.

There is an example of this in the book of Numbers chapter 25 where a Levite found and Israelite sinning with a woman from Median in his tent and the Levite killed both of them. And was rewarded with a promise of perpetual priesthood for himself and his family (Numbers 25:6-12). Jesus never raged nor showed such severity for a sinner; rather he showed them great mercy. In his public life he welcomed sinners and ate with them so much that he was called a "friend of publicans and sinners". His life was a ministry to the sick, the possessed, the poor the unnoticed and abandoned in society and especially sinners.

Reading the N.T shows that mercy/compassion was a characteristic attitude of Jesus; he was so deeply moved that he worked many a miracle; for example when he was beseeched by a leper to be healed (Mk1:40) by two blind men to have their sight restored (Mt. 20: 34) by the sight of a widow as her only son was being taken for burial. (Lk.7:13) by seeing a hungry crowd who were without food for three days he said; 'I have compassion for the crowd'. (Mt. 15:32) And in the story of the 'Good Samaritan' he invited all to follow the example of that man.

Sometimes we may wonder, does the fact that Jesus was "without sin" diminish his solidarity with us? Our first parents and Aaron's complicity are examples of where no one wished to accept the consequences of sin. But thinking a little deeper about it we realise that sin can never contribute to authentic solidarity between humans as sin is not an

authentic basis for solidarity. Sin is always egoism in one form or other and it creates division rather than solidarity.

Solidarity with sinners is generously accepting the situation caused by sin and helping sinner to leave that place. Such is the generosity of God; he has taken upon himself the sins of all sinful people including our sins. He has taken upon himself the punishment of the worst criminals namely the Cross. As a result every person, even the most sinful and guilty when they suffer on account of their own sins, can feel the presence of Christ at their side.

The priesthood of both the O.T. and the N.T. demand purity of their priests as necessary for having a relationship with God. But there is a contrast between the O.T and the N.T in the attitude of dealing with sinners. This is evident if we consider Aaron and Jesus. In the case of the O.T. Aaron, the first high priest had no compassion for sinners but in the N.T. Jesus, the high priest, who is without sin is full on compassion for sinners.

Since Christ is our high priest, we can God with confidence as Hebrews 4:16 says ; *'So let us confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace for timely help'*. That gives us confidence in approaching God. But in the O.T. God's seat was a seat of frightening holiness and Isaiah's reaction to being in the presence of God as he received his call to be a prophet was. *'I said: "Poor me! I am doomed for I am a man of unclean lips living among a peOople of unclean lips and yet I have Yahweh Sabaoth"'*. (Is. 6:5) God's throne is now a throne where we receive gratuitous, generous merciful love because Christ is seated beside this throne and he is our compassionate brother who intercedes for us. We are invited to avail of this boundless mercy in the sacrament of reconciliation. And hopefully our trustworthiness will lead others to be open to the good news that we have a High Priest who is compassionate to our weakness and who wishes to help and save us.