

Reflection
Liturgy of the Word
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In today's reading from Hebrews, we are again introduced to Jesus' humanity – his becoming like us so as to defeat the power of the fear of death instilled by the presence of the evil one. It is a gift to humankind to know that Jesus became like us, his sisters and brothers, in “every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God.” This last line reveals to us what Jesuit scholar Albert Van Haye calls a Priestly Christology. Van Haye writes: “The author in Hebrews qualifies the title of “high priest” on Jesus by means of two adjectives: “merciful” and “trustworthy in relationship with God.” These adjectives do not denote two individual qualities, but two capacities for relationship necessary for exercising the task of mediating. Mercy and trustworthy in relationship with God. Marvelous depictions of what the priesthood should be rooted in. Christ is the trustworthy high priest in relationship with God, and Christ is the merciful high priest.

Van Haye says, the author of Hebrews states explicitly that Christ entered into human solidarity – of “blood and flesh” and through this mystery he was “to save those who God entrusted to him” – that is to say, humankind. To do this, the Son of God had to “reduce to impotence the one who held the power of death, identified as the devil, and to do so he had to use death itself. He had to snatch death from the power of the demon. He, therefore, assumed a mortal human nature and made his death into a perfect victory of love over the forces of evil.” ... In Christ, death became the victory over

sin, by the two dimensions of love: filial obedience to God and familial solidarity with humankind. Isn't that the image of the cross?

A striking assertion in Hebrews is the reference to Christ having to be made similar in everything to his brothers and sisters, and that priesthood is the thing to be aspired to. Never in the Old Testament would anyone have thought of saying that becoming a high priest would mean "being made in everything like one's brothers and sisters, on the contrary, insistence was placed on the need for a special consecration that made the high priest different from his brothers and sisters and thus considered closer to God. Hebrews introduces a new notion: this New Testament revelation of the high priest means embodying the two primary qualities for the priesthood of Christ as "mercy and being trustworthy regarding one's relationship with God." Christ's being made in everything like his sisters and brothers did not only mean taking on a similar nature, it also meant especially "suffering" and "being tested", and "being merciful" means not only feelings of compassion, it also means "bringing help to those who are being tested." What might this be inviting us to in our own understanding of our call? Perhaps we struggle like the Old Testament priests and perhaps even the priests of today, to be different, set apart, more special in our calling. Something to ponder. In my reading of the exegesis of this text, it seems to me the author wanted to teach something about the priesthood through Jesus Christ, and the reading from the gospel of Mark affords us that opportunity.

Today's gospel is the second of the healing miracles in this section of Mark. The healing of Simon's mother-in-law is placed between the healing of the man with an unclean spirit and the man who was sick and approached

Jesus in the synagogue. In both cases Jesus is healing each condition that forced these individuals to live on the fringe of Jewish religious society. Scholars raise a question about what the author may be trying to make a point of by situating the story of Simon's mother-in-law in the middle of these texts. Biblical scholar Marie Noonan Sabin poses this question: Is the author not suggesting that the place of women in Jewish society was on par with these two men? The woman is not named, she is known only in her relationship to a man, not her son but her son-in-law. She appears to be nonexistent outside of this context. Jesus responds with immediacy to the urgency of need in the situation. Responding with immediacy is a theme important in Mark. He approached Simon's mother-in-law, took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. Sabin offers that in the act of lifting her up Jesus not only cured her but changed her and this serves as a forerunner of his resurrection as do the other two healing stories. Ultimately, Jesus' resurrection comprehends the raising up of all humanity.

We are then told that Jesus continued to heal and cast out demons and then, when he could, he would go off to a deserted place to pray. But we also see that when he is told that people are looking for him he does not stay in the solitude of prayer or become irritated by the interruption, but returned to the villages to continue to preach, heal, and confront demons - and as he clearly states, this was his purpose. Mark reveals a tension that we know very well, the tension between contemplation and action. Sabin says that this gospel text shows a great deal of pastoral activity on Jesus' part and emphasizes what is essential is Jesus' total commitment to making people whole. He demonstrates the mercy and trustworthiness in

relationship to God that raises people up. This is the essence of both readings for me: making people whole by the way we live among them, through mercy and trustworthiness in our relationship with God. Hebrews text declares Jesus a high priest, and in this narrative in Mark's gospel we see what the attributes of priesthood look like in the life and mission of Jesus Christ. It serves as guide for our living and ministering as a priestly people in service to the liberating mission of Jesus. As we are lifted up and made whole by Jesus Christ, we too, must be about making others whole in our living, and loving, and praying as ministers of mercy and in the trustworthiness of our relationship with God. May it be so.

God's grace and peace lift us up.

References:

Albert Van Haye S.J., Hebrews: The New Collegeville Biblical Commentary.

Marie Noonan Sabin, Mark: The Paulist Biblical Commentary