

MELCHISEDECH—CHRIST

BRO. PHILIP EMMANS, O. P.



SACRIFICE has always been the central act of all peoples. Before the formation of a priestly order, whose duty it is to perform all religious services, sacrifice was offered by the father of a family, or by the chief of a tribe, or by the king of a city or nation. In the histories of the most ancient nations we read that it was the king who performed this service. It seems strange, then, that particular mention¹ should have been made of Melchisedech, for he was a king, and, consequently, a priest. For the reason why this king, rather than any other, has been singled out, we must look, not to the Genesis account, but to that given in the Epistle to the Hebrews.²

Of the historical Melchisedech we know only that he was king of Salem, that he offered a sacrifice of bread and wine to the One True God, that he blessed Abraham, and that Abraham gave him tithes. Truly not much! But, considered as a type of Christ, he far outranks those to whose histories many pages of the Bible have been devoted, for he prefigures, in an especial manner, Christ the King, and Christ the Priest.

Melchisedech was, first, a king. Christ, too, was a king; He was the Messiah, the Anointed One, long before promised by God and long awaited by the Jews. The Jews of His own time looked for a Messiah who was to be a temporal prince, one who would free them from the yoke of their masters, and who would subject all the world to Israel. Although as a whole their concept of the Messiah was erroneous, fundamentally it was the true one. He was indeed to be a king; He was to free Israel from its conquerors; He was to subject all to His rule. But all this was to be in the spiritual order: He was to be king of souls; He was to free Israel from the bonds of the Old Law; He was to subject the world to the New Law which He was to inaugurate.

¹ Gen. xiv, 18-20.

² Ch. vii.

Since Christ was a king, it is necessary that He possess all the characteristics which a king must have. And Melchisedech, being a type of Christ the king, we must find in him these same characteristics. The name Melchisedech is interpreted, king of righteousness, of justice. Justice may mean, either the virtue of giving to each man what is due to him, or the sum of all virtues. When we consider the custom among ancient people of giving names to signify some particular event connected with the birth of a child, or with some work of a man, or with some future event,³ we may conclude that it was because of Melchisedech's just dealings with his subjects that this name was given to him. In Christ, however, both definitions of justice are verified. He was both just in all His dealings with His subjects, and He was possessed of all virtues. The Gospel accounts of His life prove this beyond all doubt.

From the name of the city over which Melchisedech reigned we learn what was to be Christ's reign. Melchisedech was king of Salem, that is, king of peace; Christ became king of the heavenly Jerusalem, king of the city of peace. From His own words, however, it would seem that it was not peace which He was to bring to His kingdom, "Do not think that I came to send peace upon the earth; I came not to send peace, but the sword."⁴ The context of the tenth chapter of Matthew, however, shows that it was indeed peace that He was to bring. But this peace, like His kingdom, was to be of the spiritual order. History has shown that from the very birth of Christianity they who have accepted His reign of peace have been subjected to hatred, persecution, and even death. It is a spiritual, rather than a physical peace, that has come into the world.

The peace of a king's reign depends upon how he governs his subjects. If he is a tyrant, his subjects rebel, and the result is war and bloodshed; if he is too lenient, his subjects take from him some of His power, and here, too, the result will eventually be war and bloodshed. But Christ's reign has been neither tyrannical, nor too lenient. He made laws according to which His subjects were to be governed; He gave His ministers the

³ Many such cases are found in the Bible. Thus, the name Abram was changed to Abraham, "father of a multitude," because he was to be the father of a numerous people; Anna named her child Samuel, "heard of God," because he was born in answer to her prayers for a child; Jacob's name was changed to Israel, "prince with God," because from him were to descend the chosen sons of God.

⁴ Matt. x, 34.

power to enforce these laws. But to His people, also, He gave some power. Only in those things which He has commanded may His ministers demand obedience of His subjects. The result has been peace within His kingdom. He guaranteed the continuance of this peace in giving to His kingdom authoritative interpreters of His law. No matter how excellent may be a code of laws, circumstances continually arise when some laws must be interpreted in a manner somewhat different from that in which they have been previously interpreted.

Besides being a king, Melchisedech was also a priest, "For he was a priest of the Most High God."⁵ A priest is defined as a mediator between man and God in those things which pertain to God. It is the priest, then, whose duty it is to perform all the public services whereby God is worshipped. Among the various ways in which this service of worship may be performed, sacrifice plays the leading part. By sacrifice is meant "the offering of a visible object, effected through any change, transformation or destruction thereof, in order effectually to acknowledge the absolute Majesty and Sovereignty of God, as well as man's total dependence and submission."⁶ In sacrifice, then, is effected the twofold object of every act of religion, namely, acknowledgment of God's supreme dominion over man, and of man's subjection to Him. It is the supreme act of religion, in as much as it best expresses these two objects. The visible victim is offered in place of man himself, thus showing man's subjection to God; by its destruction is manifested God's supreme dominion over man and all other created things.

Since it is the duty of a priest to perform all services pertaining to divine worship, and since the offering of sacrifice is preeminent among these, to offer sacrifice especially pertains to the priest. In fact, so closely connected are the priesthood and sacrifice, that without one the other cannot be. None but a priest can offer sacrifice. Saul, king of Israel, but not a priest, in order that he might put a stop to the desertion of his army in the presence of the enemy, himself offered a sacrifice to God, because Samuel, the priest, had not arrived. For this sacrilegious act God took away from him the divine favor.⁷

Melchisedech's sacrifice was legitimate, because he was, at the same time, both king and priest. Before considering the sac-

⁵ Gen. xiv, 18.

⁶ N. Gihl, *The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass*, p. 26.

⁷ I. Kings, xiii, 8-14.

rifices of Melchisedech and Christ, we must first show that Christ was a priest.

St. Paul lays down four conditions to be met by a true priest: 1) he must be chosen from among men; 2) he is ordained for men in things which pertain to God; 3) he is chosen that he might offer up gifts and sacrifice for sin; 4) he does not choose himself, but God chooses him.⁸

In Christ all these conditions were fulfilled; 1) He was chosen from among men. Although He was at the same time both God and man, it was not as God, but as man, that He was a priest;⁹ 2) He was ordained for men in things which pertain to God. He came upon earth that He might intercede for men before God that they might be freed from the penalty of sin; 3) He was chosen that He might offer gifts and sacrifice for sin. His primary mission upon earth was that He might sacrifice Himself upon the Cross; 4) He did not choose Himself, but God chose Him. St. Paul interprets the words, "Thou art my son, this day have I begotten thee," as referring to Christ's ordination to the priesthood by Almighty God.¹⁰

Thus, just as Melchisedech prefigured the kingship of Christ, so does he prefigure His priesthood. Both are priests of the True God, "for he (Melchisedech) was a priest of the most high God"; both were chosen from among men to act as mediators between God and men; both offered sacrifice; both were chosen by God to be His ministers.

The sacrifice of Melchisedech prefigured the sacrifice which Christ was to offer. Melchisedech offered bread and wine; at the Last Supper Christ offered Himself under the appearances of bread and wine. That the sacrifice which Christ offered at the Last Supper was a true sacrifice cannot be doubted.¹¹ It has all the conditions required for a sacrifice.

We come now to that part of the history of Melchisedech which has merited for him the title of "the most mysterious figure in the whole of the Old Testament." Abraham gave him tithes. This seems very strange, especially when we consider the circumstances which immediately preceded this action. Chodorlahomor, the powerful king of the Elamites, with three

⁸ Ep. to the Heb., v, 1, 4.

⁹ *Summa Theologica*, IIIa, q. 22, a. 3 ad 1, "Christus non fuerit sacerdos secundum quod Deus, sed secundum quod homo."

¹⁰ Ep. to the Heb., v, 5.

¹¹ Conc. Trid., sess. 22, cap. 1.

other kings, made war upon and defeated some of his revolting vassals. He then entered upon a campaign against other kings, among whom was the king of Sodom. He defeated them all and took captive the inhabitants of the conquered cities. Among the captives taken from Sodom was Lot, the nephew of Abraham. When the latter heard of Lot's capture, he gathered together his servants and pursued and defeated Chodorlahomor, bringing back with him the spoils of war. The king of Sodom then went out to meet Abraham and honored him; but Melchisedech, the king of Salem, blessed Abraham and received tithes from him of all that he had taken.¹² Instead of greeting Abraham as a conqueror, Melchisedech himself is greeted by Abraham, as if the former were the victorious king. As the chiefs of nations both were equal, as priests, also, they were equal; but as the conqueror of the powerful Chodorlahomor, Abraham was the more powerful of the two. And yet, he gave tithes to Melchisedech!

This strange event has, a far deeper meaning than the words of the Genesis account would suggest. Melchisedech, we have already seen, prefigured the priesthood of Christ. This event, the giving of tithes by Abraham, shows the preeminence of the priesthood of Christ over that of Aaron and the Levites.

From Abraham were to descend Aaron and the tribe of Levi, the priests of the Old Law. He, then, being the ancestor of Levi, was, in some way, the source and head of the Levitical priesthood. Thus, the priests of the Old Law, in the person of Abraham, offered tithes to the priest Melchisedech. Aaron, like Melchisedech, was a type of Christ the Priest, but a less perfect one than Melchisedech. The High Priests of Israel were permitted to enter into the Holy of Holies but once a year, there to worship God and intercede for the Jewish people; Christ, by sacrificing Himself once upon the Cross, interceded for man and succeeded in removing the penalty imposed upon man by sin. Melchisedech, in as much as he received tithes from the priests of the Old Law, in the person of Abraham, showed the superiority of Christ's priesthood.

But Christ's priesthood is also opposed to that of Aaron. The former is eternal, whereas the latter was to end with the priesthood of Christ. This eternal priesthood was also prefigured by Melchisedech. He is "without father, without mother,

¹² Gen. xiv.

without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life." In the histories of most of the important characters of the Old Testament are narrated their birth, genealogy, life, and death. None of these is told of Melchisedech; he is portrayed as having neither a beginning nor an end, as being an eternal priest. Christ's priesthood had no beginning, no end; it is eternal and imperishable. Melchisedech is the only priest thus depicted in the Old Testament; Christ is the only priest of His order, no one preceded Him, no one will succeed Him, for His ministers, while being true priests, merely participate in His priesthood.

Since the priests of the New Law, the ministers of Christ, only participate in His priesthood, they must participate also in all which made Christ a priest. They are chosen from among men, that they might act for men in those things which pertain to God, they are chosen from among men by God that they might offer gifts and sacrifice for the sins of men. They are priests "according to the order of Melchisedech."

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PRODIGALITY

BRO. CHRISTOPHER POWELL, O. P.

A Wafer of Bread—the Body of Christ!
 O Wonderful Mystery,
 That in so humble and common a guise
 My God can come to me!
 He is pleading there in the hands of His Priest:
 "Take Me, and eat!" begs He.