

Scripture: Hebrews 7:1-28

Message: Melchize...who?

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There's a saying that's been floating around over the years that goes like this: "If ya ain't Dutch, ya ain't much." Now I've heard this saying spoken by people from Dutch descent, which is part of my own family history.

Maybe if I had a Scottish background, I would have heard (with apologies for the lousy accent): "If ya ainy't Scotch, ya ainy't motch!"

Or if I had German descent, I might have heard: "Nein Deutsch, nein meutch!"

Or someone from a British heritage might have different line: "Ya ain't Brit, y'ain't got a wit!"

There has been a lot of marketing about identifying your ancestry through DNA testing and searching genealogies. Somehow, knowing our family history gives us identity. For some, it becomes a source of pride or even arrogance to identify that ethnic history. When that arrogance leads us to belittle others from a different background, that is very unfortunate.

The idea of proper heritage is an important part of the background story to what we read in Hebrews 7. The book of Hebrews is written to Christians who had come from a Jewish background. They had grown up with the prophecies and teaching and practices of their Jewish faith. They had also come to see and believe that Jesus was the fulfilment of those prophecies and teachings and practices. However, their suffering and the difficulties they were experiencing was leading them to question whether they should continue living their faith in Jesus.

Through this entire letter, the author is showing that Jesus *is* the one to continue to believe in. The theme of the epistle to the Hebrews is that Jesus is better. He is better than the prophets and he is better than the angels. He is better than Moses. He provides a better rest than that which was promised by Joshua. In chapter 7 we see that Jesus is a better high priest.

That might not seem so shocking to us. We've heard that before and accept that. But for a person raised in Jewish faith, this would automatically bring an objection: How can Jesus be a better priest? He's got the wrong family history: he's from the tribe of Judah. All priests in the Old Testament were required to be of the tribe of Levi and specifically from the

descendants of Aaron.

Genealogy, tracing one's family line, was important to the Jews. That is one reason why we read those lists in different places in the Bible. You know, "so-and-so was the father of...and he was the father of..." and so on.

But, says the author to the Hebrews, Jesus is greater and better than those priests from the tribe of Levi. Jesus is from a priesthood which existed before Aaron or the tribe of Levi. Jesus is a priest in the order of Melchizedek.

Melchize...who? This name comes up in Genesis 14 and in Psalm 110 and then again only in the book of Hebrews. Who is this Melchidezek individual? Truth is, we know very little. And we don't need a lot of details; we need to look at what he represents.

He shows up as Abraham is returning from a battle where he rescued his nephew Lot and other citizens of Sodom. The king of Sodom came out to meet Abraham but is interrupted by a visit from Melchizedek, the king of Salem. Salem is commonly understood in historical documents to refer to Jerusalem. And so he appears as a king from Jerusalem before King David has set up his throne there.

Melchizedek met Abraham, and gave him and his tired men some bread and wine to nourish them after the battle. Then he speaks a word of blessing from God Most High, of whom he is a priest. In Hebrew that is *El Elyon*, a term regularly used to refer to the one true God. Abraham recognized his status as priest and gave him a tenth of all his spoils from the battle.

So what does this Melchizedek have to do with Jesus? In verses 1-3, the author reminds us of his identity as king of Salem and priest of the Most High God. He is both a king and a priest. He is unique, as no other Old Testament figure had that dual role. He also mentions that Melchizedek has no genealogy, no family line that gave him authority. There is also no date as to when his role as priest ended. It doesn't mean he didn't die, but there is no record.

Melchizedek represents the new order of priests. He is "like the Son of God" (v.3). That priest-king from the time of Abraham is a type, pointing to Christ, the divine Son of God, who is also from everlasting to everlasting. Jesus is the fulfilment. Jesus has come as the new priest, fulfilling the Old Testament laws and regulations. He becomes a priest by declaration and oath from God himself, not by claim to a family line.

Jesus is a priest, greater than the Levites. There were many of these priests from the tribe of Levi. They would live, serving their term, and then they would die, to be replaced by another. The priest from the tribe of Levi could not continue his service as priest, because death prevented him.

But Jesus lives forever. He died, but rose again. He does not have to pass on his position as priest to any other, as a successor. He continues to serve as our priest. Therefore we can trust in Jesus to intercede for us as our priest forever.

This shows that he is also a priest from a different order. Perfection could not be obtained through the Levites as priests. They had to continue offering sacrifices for the sins of the people and for their own sins. To obtain perfection, another priest was necessary. This other priest is in the order of Melchizedek.

Why all this talk about a priest? Why do we need a priest? In Old Testament Israel, the priest was the mediator between the people and God. They would go between the people and God, bringing sacrifices and prayers to God on behalf of the people. They would also speak God's word of forgiveness to the people. We confess that we, too, are sinners, in need of a priest to go between us and God.

That is what is so glorious about this understanding that Jesus is a greater high priest and serves in a permanent priesthood. Hear again the words from verses 25-27:

"Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him." Jesus is a Saviour who does his work completely, fully, and to perfection. He sets people free from the curse of sin and accomplishes restoration between God and people; through Jesus we are united with our God.

"He always lives to intercede for them." Jesus died and rose again and lives as eternal high priest, not for himself, but for the people who look to him for help. Standing between God and people, he constantly intercedes for those who come to God in prayer. He answers our prayers for daily bread, for forgiveness of sin, for protection from the evil one. When we pray "in Jesus' name" we are claiming Jesus as our High Priest.

Jesus is the "high priest who meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself."

Jesus himself said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Jesus opens the way for us to come to the Father, to be adopted as children of God. We do not need any other Saviour.

Three weeks ago, when we looked at Hebrews 4, we highlighted Jesus' humanity. In Hebrews 4:14-15, we were reminded that we can have confidence because "we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God....For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin."

Jesus, the great high priest, identifies with our humanity. In this passage from Hebrews 7, the author identifies that Jesus, as our high priest, is greater than any human priest. He is "holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens." He is the Son of Man and the Son of God. He has been made perfect forever. In Jesus, we find our identity as children of God. That is greater than any ethnic identity we might claim: we belong to the family of God, through Jesus Christ, our great High Priest.

Think about that when you hear the words of assurance in our weekly worship service. Your sins are forgiven. Jesus has paid for them, once and for all. He is our priest forever.

Think about that as you wake in the morning and as you go to sleep at night. Jesus is our King of righteousness; in him we are made right before God. He is our King of peace; we have peace with God through Jesus, our Saviour. Rest in this assurance. Live boldly in this promise. Jesus, the great High Priest forever, is with you. He always lives to intercede for you.

Think about that as you take the bread and cup of Communion. It is a reminder and a celebration of the work Jesus has done for us as priest, offering the sacrifice of himself. But this is not just a remembrance of a past event. Jesus, our great High Priest, lives forever. He meets you here, this morning, at the table, in this place of worship. He always lives, even now and is with us to assure us: "Your sins are forgiven."

Thanks be to God!

Amen.