

Jesus Our Great High Priest Makes Us Priests

Hebrews 10:19-25 (NIV)

¹⁹ Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. ²³ Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. ²⁴ And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, ²⁵ not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

In our readings from Hebrews in this Lenten season, we have considered many aspects of the form of worship God gave the people of Israel in the Old Testament. We have looked at the high priest with his official religious garments, the headpiece and the *Tzitz*. We have looked at the animals that were offered day after day, according to God's command, and we have seen the altar that stood out in front of the tabernacle and later in front of the temple in Jerusalem. All that remains is the tabernacle itself. We have not looked into it yet; we have not entered it. With good reason, you might say. After all, only the priests were permitted to enter the sanctuary to serve God in the first room of the tabernacle—the Holy Place. And beyond that first room, into the Most Holy Place, no one ever went—except the high priest—and he went there only once a year. The first readers of Hebrews knew this, so it must have come as a shock to hear the author invite them to pass through the curtain that hid the Most Holy Place from sight and enter into the very presence of God. Only the high priest could do that! How could they as common sinners? That's the question the writer of Hebrews answers for us tonight. He says that **Jesus is the Great High Priest who makes us priests**. We are priests who enter God's presence through Christ's body and who enter God's presence through Christ boldly.

I. We are priests who enter God's presence through Christ's body.

The Old Testament tabernacle was built according to plans that God himself gave his people. It was 45 feet long and 15 feet wide. It was, as we said, divided into two rooms: the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place. The Holy Place was the first room one entered when going into the tabernacle. In it were the table of showbread, the golden lamp stand, and a small altar for burning incense. It was separated from the Most Holy Place by a heavy curtain or veil. The only way to get into the Most Holy Place was through the curtain. In that cube-shaped room, which was 15 feet by 15 feet by 15 feet, was the Ark of the Covenant. With its atonement cover, the Ark of the Covenant served as the throne of God because the cloud of his presence filled that Most Holy Place. It was a place shrouded in mystery since the Most Holy place was off-limits to all in Israel except the high priest, who was permitted to go behind the curtain or veil once a year—on the Day of Atonement. When he went there, it was with the blood of a bull and a ram and the smoke of burning incense. Anyone who dared go there at any other time and in any other way was subject to death.

The Jews knew all about the Most Holy Place and how it was off-limits to them—it was certain to catch their attention when the writer of Hebrews says in our reading, "We have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place." It was unthinkable for a sinful human being to come into the presence of God, and yet that is what we are told tonight. "We have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place." The statement becomes even more startling when we consider that the Most Holy Place in the tabernacle was symbolic of the presence of God in heaven. That was unheard of; no one could enter the Most Holy Place and live—that was the presence of God. Who can come before the God of whom King David says, "The arrogant cannot stand in your presence. You hate all who do wrong" (Ps 5:5)? Who can come before the God whose glory Isaiah saw and filled with fear cried out: "Woe to me! . . . For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King" (Isa 6:5)?

How can sinful people enter the Most Holy Place, the presence of a holy God? Well, in the tabernacle and temple there was only one way—through the curtain. A heavy curtain hid the Most Holy Place from the sight of the people and reminded them that by their sins they had fallen short of the glory of God. Because of sin, they could not see God—let alone enter into his presence. And what was true of Israel is true for us too. Sin has created a barrier before the door to heaven that not one of us could scale with our own efforts or break down by our own good works. The prophet Isaiah has us in mind when he says, "Your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear" (Isa 59:2). Sin created a gulf between a holy God and sinful humankind that no amount of human efforts could ever bridge. And yet there was hope.

That hope was proclaimed every Day of Atonement when the high priest went behind the curtain with the blood of sacrificed animals and sprinkled that blood on the cover of the Ark to cover the sins of the people. But the fact that the veil stayed in place

even after those animal sacrifices were offered was a reminder to the people that the blood of animals could not give the guilty conscience peace before God or wash away sin's stain. But that ritual proclaimed God's promise and his plan of salvation—a promise and plan that was fulfilled when God sent his Son into the world. The Son of God left his throne on high to bleed and die on the altar of the cross. Tonight, we heard the account of that offering and we heard the verdict God rendered on the sacrifice brought by his Son. Look again into the temple in Jerusalem. See the huge curtain—60 feet high by 30 feet wide and as thick as the palm of a man's hand—and then see it torn into two by the unseen hand of God. That torn curtain says that the sins that separated God and humans are gone. God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. With that miracle, God declares that his Son truly is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. God shouts to all the world—the angel guards the gate no more, the door is open, redemption is finished, salvation is free.

And now notice how the writer says this: “We have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place . . . by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body.” Do you see what the writer is saying? He says, yes, God tore down one curtain, one veil, the old lifeless curtain that stood in the temple as a testament to man's sin and his separation from God. That old curtain barred the way to God, but now there is a new curtain, a new veil, not a dead one made of fabric but a living one made of our own flesh and blood—the body of Jesus Christ our Great High Priest. That body that once hung on a cross was raised in glory, proving that Jesus was correct when he proclaimed himself to be the Way, the Truth, and the Life—that no one could come to the Father except through him. Unlike the old veil that blocked the way to God and sealed the entrance to God's presence, Jesus opens the way, inviting sinners to enter God's presence. “Come to me,” he says, “all you who are weary and burdened” (Mt 11:28). And he promises, “Whoever comes to me I will never drive away” (Jn 6:37). All who come to the Father by faith in Christ—trusting that the sins they committed in thought, word, and deed, and the sins they could not get rid of by themselves are paid for in full—find free access to God. What only the high priest could do in the Old Testament, we are privileged to do today as priests of God—we can come into God's presence. That is another reason to praise our Great High Priest, Jesus, because he makes us priests who enter God's presence by his body and

II. Who are urged to enter God's presence boldly.

The writer of Hebrews says, “Since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place, . . . let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings.” He means with an unwavering, unshakable confidence—not timidly or fearfully, not doubting but firmly believing—let us boldly draw near to God. That means coming before him and confessing our sins, not doubting but firmly believing that our sins are forgiven for Jesus' sake. That means coming to God with our songs and sacrifices of praise, not doubting but firmly believing that our offerings are an acceptable sacrifice through Christ. But drawing near to God also means coming to him with our prayers and petitions in every time of need. We have access to the heavenly Most Holy Place, to the very presence of God. We need no human mediator or priest to bring our prayers to God; we can go before him ourselves. When we go there, God will not treat us as our sins deserve and command us to be bound hand and foot and be thrown out of his presence. For we have been sprinkled and washed; through Holy Baptism, the merits of Christ's life and death have been applied to us. We have been clothed with his righteousness, cleansed and made holy in God's sight. Let us draw near to God boldly.

We saw some excellent examples of what that means in our reading of the Passion History tonight. Think of the penitent thief who prayed: “Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom” (Lk 23:42). Think of that. Talk about boldness. The man had spent his life in crime and was paying for his wickedness with his life. But the Spirit of God opens his eyes to see that Jesus is the Son of God and Savior of the world, who came to take away the world's sin. Boldly he comes into the presence of God, into the Most Holy Place, and prays: “Remember me.” What boldness, what confidence. But with such boldness, God is well-pleased.

Think of our Savior and his prayers. As he closed his eyes in death, he prayed, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Lk 23:46). Of course, Jesus is the Son of God in a way we are not. He is the Son eternally begotten of the Father; we are God's children by gracious adoption. But we are children nonetheless. And while we live, we can commend ourselves, our bodies and souls and all things, those we love near and far, into the hands of a gracious Father. And when we die, we can close our eyes saying, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”

But remember that we are priests. And as the Old Testament priests served not only themselves but others, so our Great High Priest set an example for us tonight as he prayed for others. “Father, forgive them,” he prayed (Lk 23:34). So let us be concerned for others as we serve as priests of God. For that is what we are. St. Peter says, “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Pe 2:9). St. John, in the book of Revelation, praises the Savior who loved us and freed us from our sins by his blood and who made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father. So the writer of Hebrews urges us to consider others in our priestly service by interceding for them as we pray, by professing the hope that we have in Christ, and by spurring one another on to love and to do good works as we gather together and encourage one another here in worship. When we do that, we are being and doing what God has called us to be and do—his kingdom of holy priests.

That's what our Savior has made us: a kingdom and priests. We have access to God's presence by the body of Christ—the new and living way—so let us approach God boldly with our prayers in every time of need and for others and their needs. Amen.

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