

10 March 2024 at Sunday 9.00 am and 10.30 am

# JESUS THE MEDIATOR AND HIGH PRIEST

Sermon preached by The Revd Dr Tony Martin delivered at Cromwell  
Presbyterian Church



## READINGS:

**Hebrews 9:11-14**

The Blood of Christ

**11 But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say, is not a part of this creation. 12 He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. 13 The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. 14 How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!**

**Mark 12:28-34**

The Greatest Commandment

**28 One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”**

**29 “The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 30 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ 31 The second is this: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”**

**32 “Well said, teacher,” the man replied. “You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. 33 To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.”**

**34 When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.**

## SCRIPTURE SENTENCE

**He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. Hebrews 9:12**

## INTRODUCTION

What do you understand by the term mediator?

- The troubles in Northern Ireland – Bill Clinton and the Good Friday Agreement.<sup>1</sup>

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### <sup>1</sup> Introduction

Conflict in Northern Ireland has resulted from differing political and religious beliefs for generations. The partition of Ireland in May of 1921 left Northern Ireland part of the United Kingdom. As a result, the country was divided between two groups. The first was the predominantly protestant unionist majority that believed Northern Ireland should remain part of the United Kingdom. The Catholic nationalist community believed Northern Ireland should become part of Ireland.

#### 1. President Clinton and the origin of the Peace Process

The United States involvement in Northern Ireland was traditionally minimal, until President Clinton took office. Several key Irish-American figures engaged Clinton and raised their

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concerns regarding discrimination and sectarian intimidation of the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland. The United States' involvement was substantial with regard to the beginning and development of the peace process because President Clinton took a more active role than the careful comments of Jimmy Carter and the behind-the-scenes encouragement of Ronald Reagan. First, he appointed George Mitchell as Special Envoy for Northern Ireland to specifically support and aid the Northern Ireland Peace Process. Additionally, the Clinton administration became interested in drawing Sinn Fein, the republican political wing, into the democratic political process. In 1994, President Clinton granted a 48-hour visa to Gerry Adams, the President of the Sinn Fein party, which was a pivotal point for the peace process. This move supported Adams internationally but also was a significant influence on the republican move from the Irish Republican Army (IRA) to constitutional legitimacy, signalling a change in US policy. Adams' visit and Congressman Bruce Morrison were both used to help convince the IRA of the benefits of a ceasefire, highlighting the influence of the US on the historic decision of the IRA to call a ceasefire in 1995.

Despite resistance from the British government, the US granted Gerry Adams a second visa to fundraise in the US for the Sinn Fein party. As a result, Sinn Fein became the richest party in Northern Ireland. During this time, the British government had been discussing the unresolved decommissioning of weapons, which was holding back negotiations in Northern Ireland. Adams' visit to the White House helped nudge this process forward. President Clinton had a very pragmatic approach to the peace process, highlighting his hopes for all-party talks at the Whitehouse Investment Conference. His efforts got the Ulster Unionist Party involved with the US.

i. Economic Investment in Northern Ireland

President Clinton had a clear belief that peace, stability, and prosperity were all linked. His beliefs made economics a main component of the US involvement in Ireland because he created an Inter-departmental Committee to consider economic initiatives and the economic potential of a stable Northern Ireland. Additionally, President Clinton appointed George Mitchell, the Special Presidential Advisor on Economic Initiatives for Northern Ireland, the chair of the multi-party talks and the International Body on Arms Decommissioning. This move highlighted the White House's role in keeping direct lines of communication open.

ii. Good Friday Agreement April 1998

The Good Friday Agreement (GFA) is one of the Clinton administration's foreign policy successes. This agreement established a new system that devolved power to Northern Ireland from London through a power sharing method between both nationalists and unionists. This Peace-Keeping treaty offered the opportunity of dual citizenship to the population, allowing them to be British citizens, Irish citizens, or both. The US supported a greater voice for the Catholic minority in Northern Irish affairs through the signing of this historic agreement. With President Clinton and George Mitchell's work, Irish republicanism declared two ceasefires which presented potential for political normality. The signing of the Anglo-Irish agreement meant that the US could easily ratify a set of objectives that both governments had already committed to. While keeping Northern Ireland part of the UK, the principles of the GFA stabilized Northern Ireland and improved living standards for the population with the promise of peaceful alternatives.

- **DEFINITION:** A mediator is one who stands between two parties in order to establish friendly relations. This usually presupposes that the situation existing between the two parties is one of alienation which the mediator then attempts to overcome.
- In the Old Testament, the supreme example of a mediator, is Moses.
  - As ascending and priestly mediator he pleads for the people of Israel to God;
  - as descending and prophetic mediator he conveys the commands of God to the people.
  - We read:

## **18 When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the**

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President Clinton's use of multilateral diplomacy was effective in encouraging peace in Northern Ireland. Specifically, the US involvement helped both parties recognize areas where compromise was possible and narrowed the gap between their political objectives. President Clinton was increasingly welcoming to those who would 'take risks for peace.'

**mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance 19 and said to Moses, “Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die.” Ex 20:18–19**

And this morning, we read in Hebrews about another mediator ... the greatest and most important.

This passage presents an image central to our faith: Jesus Christ as the mediator ... or using another term ... the high priest ... who stands before God ... on behalf of all humanity ...

- as descending and prophetic mediator he conveys the will and activity of God to humanity
- As ascending and priestly mediator he offers up two things: firstly prayers or intercessions and, secondly and terrifyingly, sacrifice for our sin
- So, we read:

## **Hebrews 9:11-14.**

**11 But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say, is not a part of this creation. 12 He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. 13 The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. 14 How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!**

Okay, several things to note:



## 1. **FIRSTLY, WHAT DOES THE TITLE HIGH PRIEST ACTUALLY MEAN?**

The letter to the Hebrews is a unique book of the New Testament.

The author – and there is little agreement on who the author was - portrays Jesus Christ and his redemptive work.

It uses extended metaphors from the Jewish priesthood and in particular from the Yom Kippur liturgy as described in Leviticus.

**According to tradition, the first Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) took place after the Israelites' exodus from Egypt and arrival at Mount Sinai, where God gave Moses the Ten Commandments.**

Descending from the mountain, Moses caught the people worshipping a golden calf and he shattered the sacred tablets in anger.<sup>2</sup>

Now, because the Israelites atoned for their idolatry ... by that I mean, the gold calf was ground into powder and mixed with water for the Israelites to drink, and 3000 people were killed by

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<sup>2</sup> Exodus 32 <sup>19</sup> When Moses approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, his anger burned and he threw the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain. <sup>20</sup> And he took the calf the people had made and burned it in the fire; then he ground it to powder, scattered it on the water and made the Israelites drink it.

<sup>21</sup> He said to Aaron, "What did these people do to you, that you led them into such great sin?"

<sup>22</sup> "Do not be angry, my lord," Aaron answered. "You know how prone these people are to evil. <sup>23</sup> They said to me, 'Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him.' <sup>24</sup> So I told them, 'Whoever has any gold jewellery, take it off.' Then they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!"

<sup>25</sup> Moses saw that the people were running wild and that Aaron had let them get out of control and so become a laughingstock to their enemies. <sup>26</sup> So he stood at the entrance to the camp and said, "Whoever is for the Lord, come to me." And all the Levites rallied to him.

<sup>27</sup> Then he said to them, "This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: 'Each man strap a sword to his side. Go back and forth through the camp from one end to the other, each killing his brother and friend and neighbour.'" <sup>28</sup> The Levites did as Moses commanded, and that day about three thousand of the people died. <sup>29</sup> Then Moses said, "You have been set apart to the Lord today, for you were against your own sons and brothers, and he has blessed you this day."

<sup>30</sup> The next day Moses said to the people, "You have committed a great sin. But now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin."

<sup>31</sup> So Moses went back to the Lord and said, "Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold. <sup>32</sup> But now, please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written."

<sup>33</sup> The Lord replied to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book. <sup>34</sup> Now go, lead the people to the place I spoke of, and my angel will go before you. However, when the time comes for me to punish, I will punish them for their sin."

<sup>35</sup> And the Lord struck the people with a plague because of what they did with the calf Aaron had made.

the sword by the Levites, and a plague was sent by God through the camp, and Moses prayed for forgiveness ... then God forgave their sins, and offered Moses a second set of tablets.

This is the historical setting for the establishment of Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement.

Jewish texts today recount ... that during biblical times ... Yom Kippur was the only day on which the high priest could enter the inner sanctum ... the Holy of Holies ... of the Temple in Jerusalem.

There, he would perform a series of rituals and sprinkle blood from sacrificed animals ... on the Ark of the Covenant ... which contained the second set of the Ten Commandment tablets.

Through this complex ceremony<sup>3</sup> the high priest made atonement for sin ... and asked for God's forgiveness ... on behalf of all the people of Israel.

And the tradition is said to have continued until the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 A.D; it was then adapted into a liturgy for rabbis and their congregations in individual synagogues.

So, the high priest was a mediator between God and humanity.

Now, you are probably aware that Hebrews is not concerned with the historical Jerusalem temple and its liturgy ... but ultimately ... with the heavenly realm ... where the true presence of

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<sup>3</sup> Before the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, the high priest performed an elaborate sacrificial ceremony in the Temple, successively confessing his own sins, the sins of priests, and the sins of all Israel. Clothed in white linen, he then entered the Holy of Holies—allowed only at Yom Kippur—to sprinkle the blood of the sacrifice and to offer incense. The ceremony concluded when a goat (the scapegoat), symbolically carrying the sins of Israel, was driven to its death in the wilderness.

God is to be found ... and of which the earthly temple is only a shadowy reflection.

At the same time, the book of Hebrews emphasizes the unique identity of Jesus ... and his mission ... to save humanity, not just Israel, from its sin ... so to provide an entrance to eternal life for us all.

It was the mediation of Christ and especially ... his sacrifice on the cross.

And it is important to note ... the New Testament is very clear ... there is no other way for humanity ... including individuals ...to be reconciled to God.

There is no other mediator ... no other means ... appointed by God ... for our salvation.

But the overall purpose of Hebrews, however, is not theological ... and I admit that it kind of feels like that doesn't it ...but is pastoral.

The description of Jesus as high priest is meant as encouragement for us ... to deepen and to ... persevere in our faith.

Essentially, the high priestly role is exercised on the boundary between the human and divine realms.

In the Old Testament the high priest is genuinely human (“from among mortals”), yet chosen by God (5:1, 4) and given authority in “things pertaining to God” by offering gifts and sacrifices for sins.

Because the high priest in the Temple is human and himself subject to weakness and sin ... he should deal gently with others ... who are also subject to weakness and sin.

And, because the high priest is mortal and sinful, he must offer sacrifice ... not only for the sins of the people ... but also for his own sins.

But, to call Jesus the high priest, intensifies the role to a whole new level, condensing to an ultimate embodiment.

In the most terribly sacred space ... all alone ... he bears to God ... the most crucial human need... our collective and individual need to be forgiven ... to be reconciled to God ... and ultimately, to be reconciled to each other.

And Hebrews sees Christ as ... being forever ... in this place. It is a permanent appointment. He is our High Priest.

Well, alright, let's look:

## **2. SECONDLY, ROLE OF PREIESTLY INTERCESSION**



You see, Jesus knows the pain and ambiguity of being human. Jesus embodies human life, including its frailty and limitation.

The incarnation is the joining of the divine with the complete range of human experience, not avoiding agony and suffering.

**“In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and**



tears, to the one who was able to save him from death” (7:7).

Jesus as the great high priest ... risen and ascended ... standing at the mercy seat of the heaven Holy of Hollies ... is offering to God ... the whole broken human condition ... praying tearful ... sorrow-drenched prayers ... to the God of our salvation, prayers for all humanity.

The main point in Hebrews chapter 5 ... an earlier chapter ... is that Jesus ... through his suffering ... fulfils the pastoral role of empathetic prayer ... of the former temple high priest.

But it is more than that. Jesus, like the former high priests, was fully human, but unlike them his humanity did not erode into despair, loss of faith, and sin.

Christ's suffering was not because of his sin.

Christ's earthly limitation and weakness were not because of his sin.

Jesus, as a human being, suffered and was limited, and was weak ... but all this was as a fulfilment of the Father's will. (5:8)

And, importantly, Jesus's frailty deepened his reverence for the Father rather than stiffening his rebellion (5:7).

So, pressed into the muck and mire of human anguish, Jesus never forgot that he was the Son.

Therefore, not only is he compassionate toward those who are lost ... Jesus can also take them by the hand and lead them safely home.

Here is a high priest ... not lifting the blood of a bull or goat as an atonement for sin.

But, into the presence of the Father, this high priest offers ... through weeping and loud cries ... as he did in the Garden of Gethsemane ... the prayers of you and me.

So, we understand ... as a high-priestly act .. Jesus is bearing in his person ... all the loud cries ... all the tears ... and all the supplications of the people.

**Hebrews 7: 23 Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; 24 but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. 25 Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. Hebrews 7:23-25**

His passion ... his earthly and terrifying crucifixion ... coupled with his heavenly high priestly ministry embodies and suffers not only the guilt of the world, but also the grief of the world, human

anguish, isolation, longing, misery, and rage, cried out to the heavens.

All of this accrues to Christ ... our great high priest ... is borne by him and poured painfully out of him ... as water and blood oozed from his side ... and from his wounds on the cross.

Certainly, in the Garden of Gethsemane, the prayers, tears, and loud cries were for himself, for his own deliverance.

But more deeply, now he is a high priest, staggering ... beneath the weeping, groaning supplications of the world ... in the eternal and heavenly holy of holies ... he is interceding for you and me.

**3. THIRDLY, LET US NOW CONSIDER HIS ROLE OF PRIESTLY SACRIFICE FOR SIN**

Now, this final point in my sermon today, is very complex, and requires considerable study and understanding.

But let me mention one aspect of Christ's sacrificial death on the cross.

I do not mean his intercessions and prayers ... as our ongoing high priest ... I have already covered that point.

I now mean ... his high priestly act of sacrifice ... not the blood of a bull or goat

... but of himself ... laid on a cross of wood, pinned by nails, and hoisted high ... before the mocking world ... at the hands of the murderous soldiers and the authorities both civic and religious

**He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself. Hebrews 7:27**

It is extremely important to understand ... that Jesus was the sacrifice, indeed our substitute, required by the holiness and justice of almighty God.

The understanding here ... is God's honour and sense of justice have been wounded and broken by human sin and rebellion ... which have broken the covenant between God and humanity.

As we are born into this state of sinfulness, there is nothing we can do to change our condition. As Paul says

**“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” Romans 3:23**

**And**

**"For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."  
Romans 6:23**

If anything is to be done ... only God can do it.

You see the issue is ... how to overcome our sin, with its guilt ...

How to balance out the need for the justice ... demanded by God's eternal laws and God's holiness on the one hand ...

And God's longing to show mercy and forgiveness on the other.

So, Jesus, the perfect man, the sinless life, who is both human and divine was the answer.

So, Jesus's high priestly sacrifice on the cross ... was an offering to God the Father ... which satisfies God's need for justice and judgement

... permitting God to pour out mercy and forgiveness on humanity.

Can you see, Jesus, the substitute, absorbed the full measure of God's 'wrath' ... in judgement and punishment ... on behalf of humanity.

And now, the book of Hebrews goes on to say

**“their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more” (Hebrews 10:17),**

and

**“so, we can boldly enter heaven's Most Holy Place because of the blood of Jesus; he has opened a new and life-giving way through the curtain of his body into the Most Holy Place. Let us go right into the presence of God with hearts fully trusting him, for our guilty consciences have been sprinkled with**



## Christ's blood to make us clean" (Hebrews 10:19-22).

Well, do you believe this? I exhort you to lay hold of it in faith ... and to cling to the cross ... the sacrifice of our high priest Jesus Christ.

If not, then we are truly on our own ... before the justice and holiness of God.

So, we have a choice ... between the mercy or justice of God ... and in Jesus's teaching ... heaven or hell.

### SO, TO CONCLUDE

I began my sermon by asking you a question "What do you understand by the term mediator?"

I hope you will have an answer ... and that you will recognise the greatest mediator of all ... is our High Priest ... Jesus Christ.

Perhaps you are familiar with John 3:16

**16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.**

But we also need to understand John 3:18

**18 ... but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.**

In his sacrifice ... as our substitute ... and through his ongoing intercessions and prayers ... we are presented as:

- Forgiven
- Loved
- and eternally welcomed
- into the presence of Almighty God
- who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in the one and undivided Holy Trinity.

**AMEN**