HIMSELF THE VICTIM AND HIMSELF THE PRIEST!

The fourteenth in a series of sermons entitled “Good News for Young and Old” preached by Dr John Thiel, Pastor of Holy Cross Lutheran Church, “Where the Good News never stops”, cnr Charles and Florence Sts, Murray Bridge

Basis: Hebrews 5:5-10
Date: Sunday 29th March, 2009 (5 i L)

1. The hymn I liked least

The title of today's sermon comes from the hymn I like least of all. It was sung at every communion service in my home congregation. It was sung slowly, it was sung softly, it was sung like a funeral dirge!

But the hymn is listed as a suggested hymn for today, no doubt because it refers to Jesus as a priest. When it says, “Himself the priest” it is saying that Jesus Christ is a priest.

2. Today’s text tells us that Jesus is a high priest

You see, today’s text refers to Jesus as a High Priest. Both the first and last verses of today’s text refer to Jesus Christ as a High Priest: “Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed (by God)” (v5) and “(he was) designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek” (v10).

3. What is a high priest?

For the Jewish religion there came to be a system of religious leaders including Levites (the lowest), priests (who could offer sacrifices), and a High Priest (the only one who could enter the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement to offer sacrifices on behalf of the people).

3. Examples of high priests and the prestige they have (glory!)

Abba (not the pop group) tells us that “after the (Babylonian) exile the high priest occupied a position of increasing splendour and power. The restored community of Judah was more a church than a state. No longer a monarchy, it became a hierocracy (community led by a priest). The high priest therefore acquired much of the dignity that had formerly belonged to the king. For a time there was a double rule. When the double rule came to an end with the disappearance of the house of David, the high priest became the undisputed head of the Jewish state supreme in the civil as well as in the ecclesiastical realm” (TDNT 3 p898).

So it is that in the time of Jesus, the High Priest was the most powerful Jewish person around. At the time of Jesus’ death Caiaphas was the High Priest and Annas, also a some-time High Priest, was his father-in-law. Though the High Priest was appointed annually, members of the family of Annas and Caiaphas were often reappointed in the first century (internet article).

4. The priests and Levites strutted around

In the New Testament the priests seemed to always be strutting around finding fault with other people. They seemed to be like some sort of moral police.
5. The absurdity of a high priest who suffers

The idea that a high priest might suffer was like suggesting that the Queen should suffer, or any leader, such as the Prime Minister of Australia or the President of the United States, might suffer. The high priest was to be honoured and respected and treated well.

But Jesus is described as a high priest who suffers. Listen!: "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, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" (vv7-9).

6. Humans are accustomed to leaders who demand comfort and ease

Humans are accustomed to leaders who demand comfort and ease; fancy meals, private jets, the best hotels, planes flying over, chauffeurs, people carrying their luggage, bodyguards.

7. God is impressed by Jesus' willingness to suffer

God is impressed by Jesus' willingness to suffer. He is so impressed that he declares him to be the High Priest of all time. Psalms 2 and 110 are thought to have been used when Israelite kings were enthroned. Now they are applied to Jesus: “You are my Son, today I have begotten you” and “You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.”

We have heard some of the biblical readings about Melchizedek today. After winning an important victory over his enemies, Abraham met the mysterious priest Melchizedek and gave him a tenth of his booty. In the same way as Melchizedek, Jesus has appeared on earth in a mysterious fashion by way of the virgin birth. His origins are unseen like the origin of Melchizedek.

8. Jesus Christ is the source of eternal salvation

The sacrifices offered by the priests and high priests could never completely take away sin. But Jesus Christ offered himself as the perfect sacrifice to take away the sins of the world.

So the old hymn that I found so monotonous and dreary makes a good point when it says that Jesus was:

“Offering himself for greatest and for least
Himself the victim and himself the priest!” Amen!