

A Yearning for God

Hebrews 5:5

“So it is with Christ: He did not confer on himself the glory of becoming high priest: it was granted by God, who said to him, “You are my Son; today I have become your Father.”

The writer of this letter to the Hebrews makes use of the image of Jesus as a priest. This is not an image we would regard as central to us as Reformed Christians. We remember that the foundation of Reformed worship is a reaction to a view of religion that was centered upon a priesthood, which acted as a barrier to God, rather than a means to God. We do not need a human mediator in the office of priest. We talk instead about the priesthood of all believers. Our mediator is Christ.

Many religions seem to have some person or human functionary who acts as a go-between between man and God and I think that what is represented in this idea of a “priest” is a yearning for what lies beyond our human life and gives promise of contact with a realm beyond us in which we wish to dwell.

It is this yearning for the beyond that is characteristic of all religion and in thinking of this yearning I am reminded of the very first sermon I preached when I began as a student preparing for the ministry, more years ago than I wish to remember. The sermon was based upon an experience I had as a member of the Royal Air Force stationed in Hong Kong. One day while out for a drive with our Chaplain in the New Territories of Kowloon we came upon what appeared at first sight to be a Buddhist Monastery. It had all the symbols in place for Buddhist worship. One of the loveliest symbols in Buddhism is the Lotus flower with its petals open to the heavens. The Lotus flower was here in the center of the worship space. As a symbol it wonderfully represents the yearning in the human soul for a spiritual development beyond what we can find in human life.

In those days of a young man’s searching that was indeed a very powerful symbol - the yearning soul reaching out for some fulfillment. It is a universal experience, that longing for something, often we know not what, that lays beyond our experience and our knowledge.

What is that yearning, that longing, for? Often, I suspect, it is a yearning for a sense of completeness. It comes when we encounter that empty void within ourselves. The litany of our daily lives so often is one of empty and unfulfilling activity and at the end of the day we wonder what it is we have done. This is a time when we feel an emptiness within us, a void that seems to take over our lives and we ask, “Is this all there is to our lives?” We long for there to be more.

Also, there is a longing for some kind of moral wholeness. We know that there is a darker side of our lives. We do things that are hurtful and unseemly towards others because we think first of our own wants and needs, we think of ourselves as the center of things and so our view of others is distorted. We know this and in our better moments we want to escape it and all the meanness and hard side of our being. We long for the means by which we can live a more morally meaning-full life.

We also yearn for some deeper meaning to our lives. It is this deep seated yearning for fulfillment that is at the root of so much religion. There is this sense of dissatisfaction with ourselves and our lot and some god is created to give satisfaction to our yearning souls. Of course, some of the religions that we create are strange and wild indeed. Remember the Hare Krishna movement of the 60’s and then the Moonies. Look at the apocalyptic cults that dot the landscape, the James Jones like cults that still proliferate. From surfing to the New Age occultism, and the

worship of the curative powers of the hot tub and Jacuzzi we find expression of an unfulfilled yearning for a fuller life.

The gurus of our anarchic so-called spirituality culture are legion. They promise to put us into touch with the saving power that lies beyond us.

The priest in all its forms is important for so many because in the recognition of need we pay attention to the fact that we stand between two worlds. We stand in this world, and we want to reach out to that which exists in a realm beyond us. The priest takes us and acts as our mediator into the new and otherwise unreachable realm. And so the priest is the symbol of the bridge between the yearning open flower of our soul and the fulfillment of that longing.

We are conscious of our own failure to achieve all that we want to achieve and despair of doing anything ourselves. "We are beaten by the consequences of our own failures," says Paul Tillich. In the deepest failure in life, the failure to provide some meaning and purpose to our daily living, we want to find some way of erasing the defeat and failure. As I have noted, much of what we call religion – or the vogue word today, spirituality – is our human creation of a technology of mediation with some manufactured power which will do this for us, and at the heart of this technology is some kind of priesthood. Today our priests are the therapists and the social workers setting things right for us. There is a therapist of almost every kind of condition that can befall us. Therapists for broken marriages, therapists for the broken mind, therapists for the child not doing well at school; you can go on and on. We may not have priests of Baal, but we have priests of every other kind of thing you can think of. The priests of today are our therapists and our lawyers and even some of our doctors who promise a new face and body.

These are the signs of the empty soul that, for all the therapy, still yearns for some greater fulfillment. We want to erase the emptiness but there is nothing that all our wonderful imagination and great inventiveness can do to fill the spaces of a heart that longs for the eternal verities.

But let me return to that first sermon delivered so many years ago. When we got closer to the monastery out in what was then a very quiet countryside the symbols were not as clear as we thought. Indeed, the Buddhist symbols were there, but when you looked closer you saw that they were superimposed with Christian symbols, and that most wonderful of Buddhist symbols, the Lotus Flower, was displayed with a cross arising from its open petals. It was saying that it is the Cross that fulfills the yearning of the soul. It turned out that the monastery was a Christian monastery working with the Buddhists traveling from the mainland of China.

However this new symbol distorts the true Buddhist meaning of the Lotus flower it does give us as Christians an interesting way of looking at the combination of the flower and the Cross. What does that cross arising from the heart of the Lotus tell me today? It tells me that the yearning of the human soul is a real longing, and the depth of that longing is such that no humanly manufactured remedy is going to work to satisfy it. That longing is for a real satisfaction of our human predicament. We straddle two worlds and the impulse to reach over the gulf between them is real – it is our means of reaching that fails. The priesthoods of our making will fail every time.

What the writer of the letter to the Hebrews wants us to know is that there is a mediating priest who can truly mediate for us. What then is it about Jesus that makes him the mediating priest who does take us into this new life?

He suggests three things that make this priest more than a cultic maverick.

1. Jesus Suffered with us. We are to look at the cross and see there a sign of God's unity with us. There is nothing in this life that we have to undergo that he has not undergone.

The cross becomes a vital symbol of his unity with us. The humanity of Jesus is not simply a divine gimmick that makes this a religion with human leadership. The suffering God on the cross was also a suffering human being and is one with us in our suffering.

2. But Jesus is also God's Son. The one who suffers on our behalf is also the one who can satisfy the longings of a heart looking for the fulfillment of the divine world. The unity of God and his Son are important elements of this priesthood. We do not manufacture Jesus as a mediator. The good news of the gospel is now given to us in this fact, that God has entered into our suffering and pain and has given us the one who will bring fulfillment to our longing souls. Here in the Cross we find God's movement into our humanity, bringing with him both his divine reality and the means by which we can recognize and accept that reality.
3. In the Cross we discover the real nature of our yearning. The technology of cultic manipulation depends upon our thinking that religion is an answer to our wants. The priest of popular culture all pander to our grasping needs. They play upon the demands of sex, money and just plain old greed. The cross with its heartrending gift of the person of Jesus points rather to our real needs. The need for truth-telling about ourselves, the need for the healing of our soul's sickness, the need for the recognition of our humanity, the need to accept that humanity. Jesus' acceptance of the pain and suffering upon the Cross gives us the courage to face up to our own reality, but in that recognition we are brought into a new relationship with the One who made us all.

We yearn for fulfillment in God, Jesus reminds us that it is only God who can give us that fulfillment, not ourselves. But the good news is that our yearning is fulfilled. Our real needs have been attended to.

Human yearning finds its response in the love revealed in that suffering upon the Cross. God's movement towards us gives us the reality of the nature of God, as does nothing else. But we are also reminded in this symbol of the Cross that our yearning is not for some far distant heaven, but for a change in this world. It is recognition of the needs that we have in the here and now. The fulfillment of God is a fulfillment in our present, in our here and now.

Let us then in our yearning reach out for the one who brings us into touch with the real needs of our life. We are assured of a hearing, but more than that, we are assured of his having reached down to us. To our outstretched hands he offers himself and through himself he has brought us into the realm of God's love. "For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, He is able to succor them that are tempted."

John S. Morris, Sermon preached on Oct. 18th.
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