Christ in the likeness of Melchizedek

Text: Hebrews 7:15-17

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** Genesis 14:17-20; Hebrews 7

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 145, 110, 284, ‘The Power of the Cross’, 531+532

Series: Belgic Confession (Article 21)

Theme: The unique priest-king office of Melchizedek is a type of the high priestly work of Christ in presenting Himself as the perfect offering for sin.

Proposition: It is great gain to know that because Jesus Christ is our all-sufficient High Priest to whom Melchizedek points, and it is a great comfort to be declared righteous and to have peace with God through Him.

**Introduction**

Are you someone who has a fairly unusual name that some people find difficult to pronounce and to spell? I’ve met many Christians who either have Old Testament names themselves (as I do) or who, as a parent, have named a child after an Old Testament prophet, priest, king or Patriarch. However, personally I’ve never met anyone called “Melchizedek”.

The first part of this Hebrew name is derived from the word for ‘king’. The second part of this name is derived from the word for ‘righteousness’. As the writer to the Hebrews explains, the name Melchizedek means ‘king of righteousness’ and also ‘king of peace’.

The significance of this man in Scripture is not so much in who he was himself nor is the main thing that he has a unique name in the Bible. His importance is that he is a **type** of the Christ who was yet to come when Melchizedek lived on this earth almost 4,000 years ago. We’re going to focus in this sermon on the topic of Belgic Confession Article 20 “*The satisfaction of Christ our high priest*”. There are two points:

1. Melchizedek – a kingly priest like none other
2. Jesus Christ – a kingly priest like none other
3. **Melchizedek – a kingly priest like no other**

Melchizedek appears briefly in the Old Testament – all that we know about him historically is recorded in the 4 verses we heard earlier from Genesis 14:17-20. When Abram returned from defeating four kings and recovering his nephew Lot with his possessions, Melchizedek went out to meet Abram, bringing to him bread and wine. It’s clear from the historical account in Genesis that Melchizedek worshipped the Lord God; the One who had made covenant promises to Abram. Melchizedek was a ‘priest of God Most High’, the Possessor or Creator of heaven and earth (Gen 14:19). Melchizedek also recognised that the victory over Abram’s enemies has been won by the Lord God (Gen 14:20). He understood that the sovereign power of the Lord had acted on behalf of his covenant people.

Abram then gave Melchizedek a tenth of all that he had (Gen 14:20). The “king’s tithe” was a common practice in the Ancient Near East, predating the tithe regulations in God’s law given through Moses (Lev 27:30-33; Num 18:21-32). However, it is clear from the words of the writer to the Hebrews that Abram presented an offering which recognised the high office of Melchizedek as a priest of the true God.

In the book of Hebrews the writer makes the case that Melchizedek was of higher standing than Abram because ‘*the inferior is blessed by the superior*’ (Heb 7:7). He goes further and suggests that Melchizedek was greater than any of the priestly line descended from Levi because the Levitical priests all had Abram as their ancestor whereas Melchizedek ‘*is without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life*’ (Heb 7:3). The point here is not that Melchizedek was a man who was never born in this world. Neither is the point that he never died. Rather the significance is that Melchizedek appears in the historical narrative of Scripture without any revelation of his ancestry or record of his birth or his death.

This has led some to conclude that Melchizedek is a pre-incarnate theophany (or more specifically Christophany – Christ appearing prior in history to becoming human). It’s worth noting that: the inspired writer of the book of Hebrews refers to Jesus being ‘*in the likeness of Melchizedek*’, rather than that he was actually Jesus. In virtually all theophanies, the person to whom God reveals Himself has some awareness that they are in the presence of the divine. High priests were men chosen to represent other people before God. If Melchizedek was an appearance of the pre-incarnate Christ, he was not (yet) human. Christians do hold different views on the identity of Melchizedek. There is liberty of conscience in this matter. Personally, I am persuaded by the Biblical evidence that Melchizedek was a historical person, not a Christophany.

Melchizedek is a highly unusual individual who appears in the Biblical record as a somewhat ‘shadowy’ figure, making only one brief appearance when he goes out to meet Abram and receives a tithe from the Patriarch. It’s a little like a movie during which a famous person of high standing makes a very short ‘cameo’ appearance. If you’re not watching closely, you’ll miss it! As we’ve already observed, there is no indication in Scripture that Melchizedek was without human ancestors, or that he wasn’t born or that he didn’t die.

The Biblical significance of Melchizedek is not really in himself, but in the way in which he foreshadows Jesus Christ. Melchizedek was a **type** of the Great High Priest who was yet to come when Abram met him. We can see this from the reference made by David in Psalm 110:4 "*You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek*." which is quoted in our text from Hebrews 7:17. You may already know that Psalm 110 verse 1 is the most referenced Old Testament Scripture in the New Testament. The reason for so many references back to this psalm is that it so clearly and powerfully points forward to the promised Messiah.

David, the inspiredauthor of this psalm is overhearing a conversation between two persons: *‘The LORD says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool"’* (Psalm 110:1). Jesus quoted this verse to the scribes and Pharisees (Matt 22:41-46). These experts in the law knew that the promised Messiah would be the son of David, but they could not explain how David could call him Lord because the descendant would surely be of less standing than his ancestor. That is the way Jewish genealogical reasoning went.

We know that Jesus Christ is both the ‘*root and descendant of David*’ (Rev 22:16) and the ascended exalted Son of God (ref. Acts 2:34-35). Psalm 110 not only reveals that the Messiah is king David’s Lord and King, but that he is also an eternal high priest ‘*after the order of Melchizedek*’. The priesthood of the Messiah does not derive from the line of Aaron through the tribe of Levi, but from Melchizedek who predated Aaron. Melchizedek was **both** the ‘king of Salem’ and ‘priest of God most high’ (Gen 14:18). **He was a kingly priest**.

In contrast, whilst David did engage in some activities associated with the priesthood e.g. eating the bread of the presence (1 Sam 21:1-9), wearing a linen ephod (2 Sam 6:12-23, 1 Chron 15:27), he was **not** a Levitical priest, but was a descendant of Judah. In the Old Testament nobody could rightly hold the office of **both** king and priest. When king Uzziah tried to usurp priestly role by burning incense in the Temple the Lord struck him with leprosy (2 Chron 26:16-21).

The writer to the Hebrews notes that perfection could not be attained through the Levitical priesthood. They were not able to provide free access to God, but had to continuously make sacrifices both for their own sins and for the sins of the people. Yet these offerings did not deal with the root problem of man’s rebellion against God, because, as the writer to the Hebrews explains, “*it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins*” (Heb 10:4). Not only were the offerings of these priests insufficient, but their term of office was also always limited because ‘*they were prevented by death from continuing in office*’ (Heb 7:23).

I understand that the historical person called Melchizedek did die – going ‘*the way of all the earth*’ (1 Kings 2:2). He foreshadows another kingly priest, who although He did die, yet continues to live as a priest forever. This ‘Melchizedek-like’ person is Jesus Christ who brings us to our second point.

1. **Jesus Christ – a kingly priest like no other**

The uniqueness of Melchizedek points forward across time to the infinitely greater distinctiveness of Jesus Christ. Whereas the Levitical priests could hold their office because of their genetic ancestry (‘bodily descent’ as the writer to the Hebrews describes it in 7:16), the Messiah revealed in Psalm 110 was a priest by the irrevocable oath of God. The writer to the Hebrews explains this by quoting Psalm 110 verse 4: ‘*The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind, "You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek."’* Whereas all the priests who had come before Christ were only able to serve in their office for a time, death always preventing them from continuing beyond a certain age, in contrast, the Messiah is a ‘priest forever...*by the power of an indestructible life*’ (Heb 7:16). Jesus Christ lives forever. He is indestructible, permanent, unchangeable.

The task of a priest is to represent the people to God. This is what Jesus does continuously for all God’s people. He intercedes for all those who draw near to God through Him (Rom 8:34; Heb 7:25). He is perfectly qualified to be our high priest because He is like us, a man of flesh and blood, able ‘*to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin*’ (Heb 4:15). He is our high priest who has ‘*passed through the heavens*’ (Heb 4:14).

The Old Testament priesthood repeatedly presented blood sacrifices to God, but Jesus Christ has, in the words of Belgic Confession Article 21: “P*resented himself in our place before his Father, appeasing God’s wrath by his full satisfaction offering himself on the tree of the cross, where he poured out his precious blood to purge away our sins*”. Not only is Jesus Christ a perpetual sinless High Priest, He is also the completely unblemished sacrifice to whom all the Old Testament animals (whose lives were cut short in order for their blood to redden the altar) pointed. Jesus, unlike the Old Testament priests, had no need to make sacrifice for His own sins, because He had none. He satisfied all the requirements of God’s law, rendering perfect obedience at all times during his life on this earth.

As we’ve heard, Melchizedek’s name means ‘king of righteousness’ and this parallels one of the names of Christ ‘The Righteous One’ (Acts 3:14; 7:52). His satisfaction was by means of His substitution of Himself in the place of others. This truth is emphasised when the Belgic Confession quotes 1 Peter 3:18 ‘*He died as “the righteous for the unrighteous”*’.

As we’ve also heard, Melchizedek’s name means ‘king of peace’ and parallels one of the names of Christ ‘Prince of Peace’ (Isaiah 9:6). Jesus is the priest who has brought peace between God and His people (Rom 5:1) and who enables the bond of peace in the unit of the Spirit between those who believe in Him (e.g. Col 3:15, Eph 4:3). As the Belgic Confession reminds us ‘*the angel of God called him Jesus, that is, Saviour, because he would save his people from their sins*’.

Melchizedek was a kingly priest and so is Christ Jesus. He is the Lord of King David, the author of Psalm 110. He is the great King whose reign will never come to an end, in fulfilment of God’s promise in the Davidic Covenant: “*I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever*” (2 Sam 7:13). The Belgic confession emphasises the great gain of knowing that because Jesus Christ is our all-sufficient High Priest to whom Melchizedek points and the great comfort of being declared righteous and to have peace with God through Him.

These are the words which Guido de Bres, the author of the confession used to express this gospel gain and precious comfort: ‘*Therefore we justly say, with Paul, that we know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2). We “consider every­thing a loss compared to the sur­pass­ing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus [our] Lord” (Philippians 3:8). We find comfort in his wounds and have no need to seek or in­vent any other means of reconciliation with God than this only sacrifice, once offered, by which believers are perfected for all times (Hebrews 10:14)*’. De Bres himself suffered much loss for the gospel, he was a martyr for the faith in 1567. De Bres experienced the comfort and assurance which come wonderfully into the lives of those whose kingly priest is Christ Jesus.

How about you? Where are your riches to be found? What (or rather who) do you value above all else? What is your only comfort in life and in death? “*That I am not my own but belong – body and soul- to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil*”.

You may be glad that your name is not Melchizedek. It’s not so easy for an English-speaking culture to pronounce or to spell. However, so much more importantly, brothers and sisters we can be glad and praise our Lord for Melchizedek because this Old Testament character who makes such a brief appearance in redemptive history helps us – through the illumination of the Holy Spirit - to understand the person and work of Jesus Christ more fully.

In Christ we can be truly content, counting as gain the surpassing greatness of knowing King Jesus our Lord and finding comfort in His High Priestly work in which He has offered up himself so that all who have faith in Him are ‘*perfected for all times*’ (Hebrews 10:14)’.

AMEN.