

The 20th chapter of Numbers is interesting. It records several incidents that took place in the 40th year after the Israelites left Egypt. The chapter begins with the sin Moses and Aaron committed when they struck a rock at a place called Meribah instead of speaking to it as God commanded them. They were told that they would not enter the Promised Land as a result.

So, when they came to a mountain called Mount Hor, Moses was told to ascend the mountain with his older brother Aaron and Aaron's son Eleazar. He was told to take the priestly garments off of Aaron and place them on Aaron's son, and then Aaron died atop the mountain and Eleazar became Israel's new high priest.

That same transition played out over and over again in Old Testament history. The historian Josephus lists the names of 83 high priests who are known to have served from the time of Aaron in the wilderness to the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in A.D. 70 when sacrifices ceased. It is that constant passing of the mantle from one high priest to another that the writer of Hebrews focuses on in our reading today, and as we look at his words we see still another reason why **Jesus** is our Great High Priest: **He is the eternal High Priest** who met all our needs for us and still intercedes for us.

Yes, Jesus is our Great High Priest and different from all the other high priests who had served at the tabernacle and later at the temple in Jerusalem. He is different, the author of Hebrews points out, in that he had no sin. The other high priests were sinners; that's why they died. Whether they were obviously wicked men like Annas and Caiaphas, who appeared in our readings of the Passion History, or whether they were good and decent men like Zadok (who supported King David) and Jehoiada (who sheltered Joash) and Joshua (who returned from Babylon to oversee the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem), they were all sinners.

That is why, as our reading states, they had to offer sacrifices first for themselves—for their own sins—and then for the sins of the people. The writer is referring here to the ritual God had prescribed for the Day of Atonement, when atonement was made for the sins of the whole nation of Israel.

Jesus was different. We saw it again and again throughout the past Lenten season. If there is anything that is clear about Jesus, it is that he did not deserve to be on trial for his life. He did not deserve to die; he clearly had done nothing wrong. Pilate flat out admitted it: **"I find no basis for a charge against this man"** (Lk 23:4). The Jewish Sanhedrin admitted it too by finding it necessary to hire false witnesses to testify against Jesus, but even they couldn't agree on their accusations. Finally, there was Judas, who confessed his sin with these words: **"I have betrayed innocent blood"** (Mt 27:4).

The writer of Hebrews brings out this truth when he says that in Christ we have **"a high priest [who] truly meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners."** Look at Jesus anyway you want—on the inside he is holy. The all-seeing God could testify of him: **"This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased"** (Mt 17:5). On the outside, he had no sin. Jesus once challenged his enemies with these words: **"Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?"** (Jn 8:46). Even those enemies who carefully watched Jesus' every move and asked him trick questions to trip him up in his words failed. That's why Jesus didn't have to first offer a sacrifice for his own sins before offering a sacrifice for the sins of the people.

And for that reason, the results of his sacrifice are different. Notice that the writer of Hebrews stresses the repetition of the sacrifices offered by the Levitical priests. Day after day, they were offered. There was a reason for that: those animal sacrifices couldn't take away sins.

The soul that sins is the one that must die, God says. The endless sacrifices of the Old Testament couldn't take away sin; they could only proclaim and foreshadow and point people ahead to the promised Savior who would pay for sin once for all. And that is exactly what Jesus did.

As the Great High Priest, he offered himself on the altar of the cross, and that sacrifice was sufficient to satisfy the justice of the holy God in heaven. It did what the Old Testament priesthood could not do—once for all it removed the guilt of sin from all of us whose souls were stained by sin and deserving of eternal death. How do we know? How can we be sure? Because Jesus our Great High Priest lives forever!

This is how we know that Jesus is God's Son and that our sins are forgiven. Jesus lives forever! On this Easter Day, we rejoice to know that God proclaimed the complete sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice by raising him from the dead and seating him at his right hand in glory. The one who was delivered over to death for our sins was raised to life for our justification.

It is this fact that leads St. Paul to rejoice as he does in 1 Corinthians chapter 15. There we hear his exultant cry: **"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ"** (vs. 55-57).

Paul understood what makes death so scary—it is sin. Unless something intervenes, death delivers sinners into the terrible punishment in hell that has been prepared for the devil and his angels. It is this knowledge, found even in the hearts of unbelievers, that makes death so fearsome.

But Jesus met our every need for us. By paying for sin, Christ pulled the stinger out of death and rendered it powerless to hurt all who find forgiveness of sin in the wounds of the risen Savior. Now far from hurting us as Christians, death serves to bring us into the glorious presence of our Great High Priest who met our every need for us.

In addition to this, by his resurrection, Christ broke the iron grip of the grave and promises that all who fall asleep in him will rise as he did to live forever with him in heaven. Now death cannot hurt us, and the grave will not hold us. When our risen Redeemer at his glorious return commands the graves of his people to give up those who sleep in them, those who sleep will rise to live forever. This is the promise of Jesus, who lives forever and who says, ***“Because I live, you also will live”*** (Jn 14:19). Truly, Jesus met our every need for us, has risen from the dead, and he still lives to intercede for us.

Our reading begins with the statement that ***“there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office.”*** The author is talking about Israel’s high priests and how death prevented them from continuing in office. The death of a high priest was a sad occasion in Israel. The nation mourned for 30 days when Aaron died. On the other hand, the anointing of Aaron 40 years earlier became a metaphor for joy. Having a high priest was a good thing. He made intercession for the people. He was the mediator between the sinful people he served and heaven’s holy God. But, Aaron died and couldn’t rise again like all the high priests after him.

But Jesus is the Great High Priest because he is an eternal High Priest. Yes, he died, but he rose from the dead and lives to intercede for his people. What does that mean? We get a look at our Lord’s intercessory work on behalf of his people already during his earthly ministry.

Jesus prayed for Peter after he warned him about denying him. He said, ***“I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail”*** (Lk 22:32). We heard how Jesus on the cross prayed, ***“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing”*** (Lk 23:34). And in the upper room he prayed, ***“I want those you have given me to be with me . . . and to see my glory”*** (Jn 17:24).

We see the compassionate heart of our Great High Priest on this Easter day. Mark’s gospel tells us that the risen Lord’s angelic messengers told the first visitors at Jesus’ empty tomb to make sure Simon Peter heard the good news of Easter. For three days, a burden of guilt weighed on Simon’s heart—he had denied his Lord! But on the third day, the risen Jesus through his angels said, ***“Go, tell his disciples and Peter”*** (Mk 16:7) all you have seen. Such is the tender concern of our Great High Priest for his sinful people.

“Tell Peter,” Jesus said, make sure he knows the joy of forgiveness and enjoys the peace of Easter. What a joy to have such a compassionate High Priest interceding with the Father on our behalf. With good reason we sing, ***“He lives to bless me with his love; he lives to plead for me above. He lives, my hungry soul to feed; he lives to help in time of need”*** (CW 152:3). May we who are now—the messengers of our risen Savior—go with that same compassion to others, telling them the good news of forgiveness and peace in Jesus!

To some, it might seem ironic that today is also called April Fool’s day. This is the day people traditionally try to trick someone else to believe something is true when it isn’t. Sadly, for many in our world the resurrection of Jesus is one big joke or lie. But we know it isn’t. We know that Jesus is that Great High Priest who fulfilled all of God’s commands because he is God himself.

Let us take to heart the message of the writer of Hebrews this Easter Day: Jesus our Great High Priest lives forever! Jesus’ resurrection assures us that he is able to save completely those who come to God through him. He is our Great High Priest who met all our needs for us and who still intercedes for us at the right hand of God.

Let our joy today never be diminished because our God saved us and is still keeping us safe because of his great love for us for Christ is Risen! He is Risen Indeed! Amen.