

December 25, 2005

## **The Nativity of our Lord**

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The consideration of this rapport between Israel's kings and her priests is perhaps the best point at which to consider a proper Christian reading of Chronicles. Christians believe, after all, that the mutual concord and affirmation between hierarchy and monarchy, as affirmed in Chronicles, is rendered perfect in God's Word incarnate as both priest and king. We confess that in the person of Jesus the Lord perfect priesthood and complete kingship are forever joined. We further confess that the unity in Christ of these two institutions serves as the standard and model for interpreting their history as narrated in Chronicles.

First, kingship. Jesus is everywhere in the New Testament confessed as Son of David and the proper, eternal heir to his throne. As such, the early Christians believed, Jesus is the fulfillment of the covenant promise made to David that his Son would forever rule over Israel: "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:32-33). This is a standard and ubiquitous understanding throughout the New Testament (e.g., Matthew 1:2-16; 22:42-45; Romans 1:2-4; 2 Timothy 2:8).

Second, priesthood. Since no explicit covenant promise was attached to priesthood in the Old Testament, Christians needed a bit more reflection to arrive at an understanding of Jesus as priest. They believed, of course, that on the cross the Savior offered Himself in sacrifice, specifically as a "sin offering," the sacrifice of atonement. From the very beginning this fundamental soteriological thesis was transmitted regularly in the words pronounced at the very center of Christian worship: "this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins" (Matthew 26:28).

St. Paul used the same liturgical category, the sin offering, with respect to the cross when he preached, as a matter of primary importance (*en protois*), that "Christ died for our sins" (1 Corinthians 15:3). Paul returned to this image of sin offering in Colossians 1:14 and Ephesians 1:7, using in both places the same words, "we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins." In Ephesians 5:2 Paul used even more explicit liturgical language to say, "Christ also has loved us and

given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma."

But if Jesus offered sacrifice, they reasoned, then Jesus is a priest. The conclusion was inevitable, so it is not surprising to find two writers in the New Testament identifying Jesus as a priest. These writers are St. Luke and the anonymous author of the Epistle to the Hebrews. It is further significant to our study of Chronicles that both writers refer to Jesus' priesthood precisely in the context of His kingship. Let us look at these two authors in turn.

We may start with Luke, whose identification of Jesus as priest is studiously quiet and understated. First, Luke mentions, as though in passing, that Jesus' Mother is kin (*syggenis*-1:36) to the "daughters of Aaron" (1:5), a subtle suggestion, easily unnoticed, of Levitical blood in Jesus Himself. Luke's delicate hint is apparently compatible with his assertion that Jesus was a descendent of Judah (3:33).

Second, St. Ambrose draws attention to a literary *inclusio* formed by Luke's two references to the throwing of dice, both in the context of sacrifice. The first instance, which determines Zachary's liturgical task of offering incense in the Temple at the beginning of the Gospel (1:9), stands in correspondence to the later throwing of dice at the foot of the cross, the place where Jesus offers Himself in the supreme sacrifice (23:34).

Ambrose comments, "It was read in the dice which priest should enter the temple. . . . What else was signified but that there would come a Priest . . . who would not offer sacrifice for us in the temple made with hands, but would annul (*vacuaret*) our sins in the temple of His body? Perhaps on this account the soldiers cast dice for the Lord's garments. As the Lord prepared to offer sacrifice for us in His temple, the shaking of the dice before Him would also fulfill the precept of the Law" (*In Lucam* 1.23).

We likewise observe in Luke's second instance of dice rolling that Jesus offers His sacrifice under a sign identifying Him as the king (23:38), thus fulfilling the promise of royalty made at the beginning (1:32-33). Luke's Gospel, then, joins the hierarchy and monarchy of Jesus in the sacrifice of the cross, where He is portrayed as the sacrificing king.

We may turn now to the Epistle to the Hebrews, which treats the priesthood and kingship of Jesus very differently from Luke. This author

goes to considerable length to insist that our Lord's priesthood is of a completely different order from that of Levi. To describe Jesus as both priest and king, he reverts to the Bible's earliest example of Melchizedek, who served "God Most High" as hierarch and monarch at Jerusalem, centuries before the sons of Judah and Levi took on those responsibilities (Genesis 14:18-20; Hebrews 6:20-7:18). The priesthood of Jesus, prophesied in Psalm 109 [110]:4, was to be "according to the order of Melchizedek" (Hebrews 7:17), "in the likeness of Melchizedek" (7:16).

The priesthood of Jesus was not of the Levitical order, then, in which "every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins" (10:11). On the contrary, "our Lord arose from Judah, of which tribe Moses spoke nothing concerning priesthood" (7:14). His, therefore, is a royal priesthood, from Judah, the royal tribe of Israel.

The author of Hebrews illustrates this union of priesthood and kingship in Jesus in a striking way: the priesthood of Jesus is perfected *in His enthronement*. The sacrifice offered by Jesus, says this author, is rendered perfect by His entrance, once and for all, into the Holy Place not made by hands (9:11), in order "to appear in the presence of God for us" (9:24). This entrance into the heavenly sanctuary renders Jesus' sacrifice perfect, because "if He were on earth, He would not be a priest" (8:4).

But what did Jesus do when He entered the heavenly sanctuary? He did what no priest on earth would ever do in the earthly sanctuary. He assumed His throne. Jesus *sat down*. It is a mark of priests on earth, says Hebrews that they *stand* at the altar (10:11, *hesteken*). Not this Priest, however. This priest is the King, who "when He had by Himself purged our sins, *sat down* at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (1:3). To Him we proclaim, "Your *throne*, O God, is forever and ever" (1:8; Psalm 44 [45]:6). The same psalm that says, "You are a priest forever/ According to the order of Melchizedek," also says, "*Sit* at My right hand" (Psalms 109 [11]:1,4; Hebrews 1:13; 5:6,7,15; 10:12). As the King, this Priest is crowned (2:7,9). His is the royal priesthood, thus perfecting the concurrence of monarchy and hierarchy adumbrated in the Books of Chronicles.

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