

## **Without Father or Mother or Ancestry...**

*1 Peter 1:13-19; Hebrews 7:1-3*

The Bible teaches that ancestry is a mixed bag. It can be wonderful as we've just seen. A seed God plants in one generation can keep blossoming in children and grandchildren and then ripple out to God knows where. There was a whole decade when the Buil sisters were the life of the party in our Children's Lessons. When Emily finally got too old, I was tempted to pay her to keep bringing her smart answers and funny questions to the front pew, but I didn't think the Finance Committee would approve.

Do you know that, when I was a boy, I actually fainted in church on a hot Sunday morning? I so enjoyed being whisked out of the service and fanned with the bulletin and being given a drink that I decided to try it again the following Sunday. Much less sympathy the second time around! It was a gift having a mom who knew the value of getting us to a place where things as big as God and life, right and wrong, truth and lies were shared with people of all ages and sizes.

It was one of many, uncountable gifts that came with an Irish-Catholic upbringing my parents gave me. But, like everyone else's, it was a mixed bag, hot tempers and hard feelings. My father was determined that we would learn to work, but too cheap to buy us the proper tools. I shoveled snow with a dirt shovel that spun in my hands. A rake was good to use until more than half the teeth were gone. We were rich, but my parents were determined not to let it go to our heads.

So along with more gifts than I could count came frustrations and disappointments and heartbreaks and injustices, some of them serious and all too many of them my own fault, not that I would ever admit that until it was too late to fix. And then, when my own kids came, the whole process started all over, Nat and I wrestling over what to do with the kids, sometimes avoiding our parents' mistakes, sometimes repeating them and sometimes inventing mistakes of our own.

Of course, I think our kids are richer than they know. But ever since Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel, it's been a mixed bag. Wonderful gifts we ought to honor our parents for giving us, all interwoven with a legacy of sin. We've talked in months past about Abraham, whose adopted nephew Lot struggled for years in the city of Sodom and only barely came away with his own soul. We haven't really mentioned Ishmael, Abraham's oldest by an Egyptian slave girl, who had to leave home as a teenager because he was seen as a danger to Isaac, the child of promise.

A mixed bag! Even when God keeps his promise, it can lead to a broken heart. So what does Abraham come away with after all this struggle and intrigue and upset? Our passage this morning says that he comes away with an oath, a promise from God that all his struggles will eventually land him “*behind the curtain*”, our passage tells us. Now Abraham wouldn’t even have known what that meant. There was no curtain with a Holy of holies behind it until 400 years after Abraham was gone.

But what our author is telling us is that the destiny God swore to Abraham was that he and all believers after him would one day pass from this life with all its troubles into that secret holy place where God lives and all tears and heartbreak and sadness and injury are not allowed. And how can we know that we are bound for that place behind the curtain? Because that is where Christ has gone before us, our “*forerunner*” Hebrews tells us. Just as the high priest in Moses tabernacle entered the Holy of holies once a year and emerged announcing that all was forgiven, so Christ has disappeared to, as Jesus put it, “*prepare a place*” for us.

But Christ is not like one of those Israelite priests, about as flawed as everyone else, needing to be forgiven along with the rest of us. Every priest had a dad who knew where he was prone to go wrong. Every priest’s son had been disappointed or frustrated by what the old man couldn’t see or wouldn’t do. The priests Moses ordained were a mixed bag just like the rest of us. But not Jesus! He was not subject to the sins the rest of us inherited from Adam. He was not a man in a costume, offering a sacrifice that was a symbol.

The sons of Aaron could only mime in the temple a picture that was entirely beyond them. Only the best and the brightest of them really understood and was able to teach what the costume and the blood and the curtain stood for. But Jesus was different, not frail and flawed like Aaron, not as likely to come up with a golden calf as an honest sacrifice.

To the contrary, Jesus was like Melchizedek, that shadowy, mysterious figure who brought Lot and Abraham to table with all their sins and flaws and set them on a course where both their sins would be forgiven and both their lives declared righteous by God himself.

And what made Melchizedek different than the sons of Aaron? Three things. First his name. Melchizedek in Hebrew means “*Righteous King*”. Of course, none of Israel’s priests were righteous and none of them were allowed to be a king. Priests were from the tribe of Levi, kings were from the tribe of Judah. Second his title. He was the “*King of Salem*”, which in Hebrew would translate the “*Prince of peace*”. The only other time that turn of phrase appears in Scripture is a prophecy about Christ in Isaiah 9 which we read every Christmas Eve.

The third thing which distinguishes Melchizedek from Aaron is that, in a book that's obsessed with genealogies, Melchizedek appears with no reference to parents or children at all. You had to prove you were descended from Aaron to be an Israelite priest, but Melchizedek has no link whatever to the man who made the Golden Calf. And I think the point is that whoever it is who might have known about Melchizedek's sins, no father, no son, no one related to him at all is presented here as if to say that one day a priest will come whose ancestry and posterity is not a mixed bag.

Now you might be tempted to ask "Who cares if you're not shooting for a PhD. in Old Testament?" But the reason it matters is that all of us have been touched and many of us have been hurt by wiring and tendencies, habits and proclivities that have come down to us through the generations. There are not enough letters in the alphabet, not enough terms in the dictionary to describe all the ways our thoughts and passions and feelings and habits can take our lives out of balance.

And none of us is immune. There is something in all our DNA, something in each of our experiences that could overwhelm us and did overwhelm the people we read about in the Bible. But part of what our passage was meant to teach us is that Melchizedek offered a table and Jesus lived a life and offered a sacrifice whose power is enough to overcome those forces which sin has let loose in our hearts and minds and experiences and relationships.

It follows that nothing is wrong or has gone wrong around us or in us that Christ doesn't have the power to sort us through. Peter wrote in our Call to Worship this morning that we were all "*ransomed from the futile ways [we] inherited from [our] forefathers*". In other words, he died not just that we could be forgiven, but that we could be free from the sin and folly our wiring or circumstances might impose on us.