

In so many ways we are really blessed to be living in Ireland. There are many reasons of course for this. But one of them is our health service.

- We have doctors and nurses who are incredibly devoted to caring for their patients, as we saw during the pandemic.
- We have hospitals that are full of incredible technology to analyse and assess all our issues.
- Our pharmacists stock thousands of different medicine to help with a huge range of diseases and conditions.
- And our emergency departments are open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year to treat people in their times of greatest real difficulty.

We are truly blessed to have this medical help available to us. However, the situation is not as great as we would like. Both government and opposition spokespeople tells us that our health service is completely over-stretched.

- Over 900,000 people are on waiting lists for hospital treatment or assessment by a consultant.
- According to the INMO trolley watch, last year over 70,000 patients went without a bed in our hospitals.
- And waiting times in emergency departments have rocketed. The average waiting time to access an emergency department in May was over 11 hours. In Cork, that figure was nearly 20 hours. And if you are over 75, that figure was over 27 hours in one hospital.

So we're blessed to live in Ireland. Access to healthcare is so much better than in many other parts of the world. But that access is limited and doesn't always meet our needs.

In a way, the people of Israel in the Old Covenant had a similar issue. As God's people, Israel had the incredible privilege of access to God. The tabernacle and then later the temple provided them a place where they were able to approach God to worship him and petition him for forgiveness, for help and for direction.

But there was a problem. The people could only come so far in approaching God, but no further.

The Jewish women could come only as far as the Court of Women. The Jewish men could only come as far as the Court of the Israelites. Even the priests were restricted to only some parts of the temple.

And so God provided them a high priest, one man who could enter the Most Holy Place in the temple, where the ark of the covenant was kept, to represent them before the God who was enthroned between the cherubim.

But even this privilege was limited. He could do this once a year on the Day of Atonement when he made a sacrifice to pay for his sins and the sins of the people.

Israel had amazing privileges that other nations didn't have. But that access was limited and didn't fully meet their needs.

And so the writer of Hebrews wrote his letter to encourage his readers to see that although Judaism had offered them incredible privileges, what they had in Christ was far better. Because Jesus is a better high priest he can provide them full access to God and all the help they can ever need.

Hebrews 4:14-16: "Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."

1. The Person of Jesus

This passage introduces a long section of this letter where the writer will show in great detail how Jesus is a greater high priest than any that went before him. We'll see in later weeks how he is greater because his priesthood is eternal, because he introduced a superior covenant, because he made a greater sacrifice and that sacrifice will never need to be repeated.

But as the writer here introduced us to Jesus as our "Great high priest" Hebrews 4:14, he told us three amazing truths about him and then two ways that this should impact our lives.

a) His Identity

Aaron, Moses' brother, was the first high priest in the nation of Israel, and his sons served as the first priests. Moses was told: "Have Aaron your brother brought to you from among the Israelites, with his sons Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar, so that they may serve me as priests." Exodus 28:1.

And down through the centuries, all the priests and high priests were descendants, were sons, of Aaron. This was an essential part of their qualification, their claim to have the right to represent the people to God.

But our high priest is greater, because he is not the son of Aaron, he is [“Jesus the Son of God.”](#) Hebrews 4:14 This is his true identity, as chapter 1 of this letter declared so clearly. He is fully God and fully man.

And because of this he is uniquely qualified to mediate between God and human beings. As Paul wrote to Timothy: [“There is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.”](#) 1 Timothy 2:5

Nobody else has the qualifications to adequately represent us before God. So nobody else can fully bridge the gap caused by our sin. Nobody else can rescue us. Jesus alone can be our Saviour.

b) His Location

That’s also because of the location of his ministry. Aaron and all his descendants after him served in the tabernacle and the temple. They were amazing places that were carefully constructed according to God’s plan and design.

But as we’ll see in chapter 9, they were just [“copies of the heavenly things.”](#) Hebrews 9:23. These earthly sanctuaries were not the real thing.

But our great high priest [“has gone through the heavens.”](#) Hebrews 4:14 After he died on the cross and rose again from the dead, he ascended through the heavens, through our atmosphere and through what we call space and he entered right into the very presence of God in heaven, where he sat down at the right hand of God!

And so heaven is the location of his ministry. [“For Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God’s presence.”](#) Hebrews 9:24

Today our great high priest is in God’s presence in heaven for us. He is there to represent us, to sanctify us, to advocate for us, to intercede for us. That’s so much better than having someone serve us here on earth!

c) His Temptation

But the third truth that makes Jesus such a great high priest is possibly even more incredible. That is his temptation. He [“has been tempted in every way, just as we are.”](#) Hebrews 4:15

I think most of us struggle to get our heads around this, and we need to be careful in how we think about this. But the Bible declares that the temptation of Jesus was real and it was comprehensive.

That doesn’t mean that he was tempted by every specific thing that we might be today. Our world is very different from the world when Jesus was here and so he didn’t need to face the temptations of TV, the internet, social media for example.

But it means that in some way Jesus experienced the full range of the temptations that we face!

i) Its Source

Of course in many ways his temptation was different from ours. First of all the source of it was different.

James tells us that when we are tempted, [“Each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed.”](#) James 1:14 We experience temptation because of our sinful nature and the wrong desires that this stirs up.

Our sinful nature rebels against God’s rule in our lives. And our self-centred desires pull us away from what God wants and what honours him.

Jesus did not have a sinful nature and he did not have any wrong desires. So his temptation did not come from within him.

Instead, the gospels describe how Jesus was severely tempted, not from his own evil desire, but from the evil one. Just after his baptism, [“Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil.”](#) Matthew 4:1

ii) Its Result

But it is not just the source of his temptation that was different. It is also the result.

Our temptation often leads to sin and its devastating consequences: [“After desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and](#)

sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.” James 1:15

But for Jesus, his temptation never did. He was tempted, just as we are, “Yet was without sin.” Hebrews 4:15 Never once did he slip up. Never once did he fail. Never once did he give in to the temptation.

iii) Its Strength

But that doesn’t mean that his temptation was less than ours. In fact, it is the very opposite of this. Only one who has fully resisted temptation can know the full extent of its force. The fact that he was tempted without sin, means that he endured the full weight of that temptation.

In his book Mere Christianity, CS Lewis put it like this: “A silly idea is current that good people do not know what temptation means. This is an obvious lie. Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is... You find out the strength of a wind by trying to walk against it, not by lying down. A man who gives in to temptation after five minutes simply does not know what it would have been like an hour later.”

So “Christ, because He was the only man who never yielded to temptation, is also the only man who knows to the full what temptation means.”

In the face of all his temptations, Jesus never lay down. He endured all our temptations and testing without ever giving in. He therefore knows the full strength of it and its cost more than any of us!

iv) Its Effect

But why does that matter? What difference does it make that Jesus was tempted? Well it is because “We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses.” Hebrews 4:15

Yes our great high priest is the Son of God, the exalted one who ascended into heaven and sits at the Father’s right hand. But he is not the remote one. He is not aloof or unaffected by our struggles and difficulties and weaknesses.

Instead he sympathises with us. This word sympathise is a compound word formed from the prefix meaning “with” joined to the verb “to suffer”. So to sympathise means to suffer with.

Jesus is not cool and detached from us. Instead, because he knows what it is like to be human, he knows what it is to suffer in temptation, he knows what it feels like to be overwhelmed with sorrow and to feel completely alone, he suffers with us in our weaknesses. He feels our pain. He shares our suffering.

There is someone in heaven today who knows what we are going through and suffers with us!

2. Our Privilege

So our high priest is great because of his identity, his location and his temptation. But how should this impact our lives? Well, first of all, it means that we can come close. “Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence.” Hebrews 4:16

a) To Come Close

As we thought about at the start, the tabernacle was a place of restricted access. Only the high priest could come into the Most Holy Place, and only once a year on the Day of Atonement, with a blood sacrifice for his sins and the sins of his people!

As the writer of Hebrews wrote later, “The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle was still standing.” Hebrews 9:8

But when Jesus died on the cross and rose again, he opened up the way into God’s presence. As Hebrews 10:19 says, “We have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus.”

Through his sacrifice we can be declared right in God’s sight, dressed with the righteousness of Jesus, sanctified as God’s holy people, adopted as his children and given complete and full access right into the very innermost presence of God.

And so we don’t need to hold back. We don’t need to keep our distance. We don’t need to stay away. We can come close to God anytime that we want. We can come into his intimate presence. Into close communion with him.

b) To Come Confidently

And v16 says that we can do this, “with confidence.” Hebrews 4:16

Our God is an awesome God. When God gave the ten commandments to the people of Israel on Mount Sinai, Exodus 20:18 says that “When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance.”

And they were right to be afraid. He is holy and powerful, mighty and majestic. He is not to be taken lightly.

i) In God's grace

But we don't need to stay away in fear. That's because, if we have trusted in Jesus, then we can be confident in God's grace.

If we come to him today, we know what we will “receive mercy and find grace.” Hebrews 4:16

- Mercy means that God will not give us the judgement that we do deserve.
- Grace means that God will give us the blessings that we do not deserve.

That's not because of anything we are or have done. That is because if we are in Christ, then we have been saved by his precious blood and “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” Romans 8:32

If the Father loved us so much to give us his one and only Son, we do not need to fear that he will ever turn away from us. Through the cross he has once and for all declared his love for us, his commitment to us and his acceptance of us. If we are in Christ, his throne will always be a throne of grace for us!

ii) In Christ's Sufficiency

But secondly we can be confident in Christ's sufficiency. We can come to him, “to help us in our time of need.” Hebrews 4:16

There are many people who might want to help us in our times of need. They love us and care for us. But sometimes they just can't help. Our problems often are bigger and more serious than they can deal with.

But that will never happen with Jesus. As he said to Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you.” 2 Corinthians 12:9 No matter what we face today, Jesus is enough.

3. Our Perseverance

And so that means, secondly, that we don't ever need to give up. “Since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.” Hebrews 4:15

It seems like many of the original readers of this letter felt like giving up. Things for them were getting too difficult. Maybe they didn't think they had the strength to keep going in the face of increasing persecution. Maybe they thought the cost of following Jesus was too much. Maybe they didn't think that it was worth it.

But they could hold firmly to their faith. They could keep living for Jesus, right to the end. That's because they had such a great high priest.

And it is the same for us too. All of us at times are tempted to give up. We too can be tempted to walk away. Say that we've had enough. Feel like we just cannot go on. Think that the cost is too great.

a) We're Not Alone

But we can keep going because we're not alone in this battle. Jesus' last words to his disciples just before he ascended were “Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” Matthew 28:20

We have a great high priest, who is the Son of God, who is in heaven for us, who understands our struggles, who feels our pain and who is ready and able to help us whenever we need it.

Yes the Christian life is a battle. It is often difficult and demanding. But we're not alone! Our great high priest is with us and he is working for us. And so we can keep going. We can keep trusting in Jesus and living for him because we can say with Paul, “I can do everything through him who gives me strength.” Philippians 4:13

Conclusion

The nation of Israel had a great privilege as God's people. The temple and priesthood and sacrifices gave them a limited access to God.

But our great high priest is better.

- Because of his unique identity, his exalted location and his experience of temptation, he can provide us with all the help that we need.
- So let's take full advantage of our privilege and keep on coming close to the throne of grace with confidence.
- And let us stand firm, hold onto the truth of the gospel, be committed to live for Christ, persevere in our faith right unto the end, for his honour and for his glory.

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