

## **October 27 2024 Rev Jo Smith**

But which day of the year do Jews celebrate above all? What is the holiest day of the year for Jewish people?

Maybe you're wondering why I'm asking this. We all know that understanding our faith is important. But why am I asking about Jewish holy days? Isn't it enough to know the basics of our own faith? Ah, but here's the thing: Without at least some understanding of the Jewish world to which Jesus came, and from which the Church was born, we'll have blind spots regarding our own beliefs and practices, including what happens here in Holy Communion and what God is saying to us in the readings from Hebrews that we have been hearing from and will continue to hear for some weeks to come in the second reading of the day.

the sacred writer explores one supremely important topic: the high priesthood of Jesus.

### **Jesus, Our Great High Priest**

If you are familiar with the letter to the Hebrews you will know that in the chapter before this one we read that in Jesus, we have "a great high priest who has passed through the heavens," who is able to "sympathize with our weaknesses," having been "tested like us in every way, yet without sin." Today we hear how every high priest is called to represent the people before God and to offer sacrifices for sins. But the typical high priest has to offer sacrifices first for his own sins and then for those of the people. And

he has to keep offering new sacrifices year after year, because these sacrifices don't actually take away sins. And new high priests are always needed, because men are mortal and they die.

Jesus' high priesthood, Hebrews tells us, is different. He has no sin to atone for. He offered one sacrifice, himself on the cross, once for all — and that was enough. While the Jewish high priest entered year after year into the Temple sanctuary with the blood of animals, Jesus has entered the true sanctuary, heaven itself, where he lives forever to intercede for us before God. Jesus' priesthood surpasses the Jewish Levitical priesthood. He is a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek. (What does *that* mean? Hold that thought.)

This is what we hear in Hebrews concerning Jesus our high priest. If we know nothing about the Jewish Levitical priesthood, all of this will go right over our heads. So what's going on in these five readings? Why does this matter?

What's the holiest day of the year for Jews?

### **Holy of Holies**

Maybe some of you are thinking of Passover. Good guess! Not only is Passover a very important Jewish holy day but the readings from Hebrews point us elsewhere.

The holiest day of the year for Jews is not Passover, but Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Yom Kippur, the Sabbath of Sabbaths, a day of repentance, fasting and prayer — the climax of the Jewish High Holy Days beginning with the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah, sometime in September.

Yom Kippur, in ancient Israel, was that one day of the year when one person, the high priest, was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies, that inner sanctuary of the house of the Lord — of the Tabernacle in the desert in Moses' day and the Jerusalem Temple built by King Solomon, the son of David, and rebuilt by the Jews after their return from exile in Babylon. According to Hebrews, the house of the Lord represented all of creation, and the Holy of Holies represented heaven itself.

The Holy of Holies was the traditional resting place of the Ark of the Covenant, the sacred box with the two stone tablets of the Ten Commandments that Moses brought down from Mount Sinai. The Holy of Holies was kept in total darkness, partitioned off from the lesser Holy Place by a heavy curtain. This is the curtain that was ripped in half at the moment of Jesus' death.

So on this one day of the year, Yom Kippur, they would sacrifice a young bull for the sins of the high priest and his household and a goat for the sins of the people, and the high priest would enter the Holy of Holies to burn incense and offer prayer, and to sprinkle the blood of the sacrificed animals. And then the next year they would do it all over again.

## Atonement in Christ

Yom Kippur is the background for most of what we hear in the second readings from Hebrews in these coming weeks. Jesus is our high priest. His sacrifice — not for his own nonexistent sins, but for our sins — is not the blood of animals, but his own flesh and blood, offered once for all on the cross. He gave his life as an offering for sin, as the prophet Isaiah says in today's first reading. This is the "cup" he told James and John he had to drink in the Gospel, and the "baptism" he had to be baptized with.

Having made this sacrifice, Jesus didn't go into the Holy of Holies in the Temple, where the curtain was torn in two. He ascended into the true Holy of Holies, heaven itself, where he offers, not incense, but what incense symbolizes: prayer and intercession, for us, to God the Father.

The book of Hebrews argues that Jesus' high priesthood is superior to the Jewish Levitical priesthood. The Jewish priests were always from the family of Moses's brother Aaron, from the tribe of Levi. Jesus wasn't a Levite. He was a descendant of King David, from the tribe of Judah. So he wasn't even eligible to be a Levitical priest. That's why Hebrews looks back to the mysterious figure of Melchizedek in book of Genesis, in the days of Abraham, long before Moses and Aaron. Melchizedek was both king and priest — a royal priesthood foreshadowing the royal priesthood of Jesus. I wish I could say more about Melchizedek, but this is already too long, and I have to wrap it up.

So I'll leave you with this: What's the point for us? Why does the sacred writer to the Hebrews make this argument in these readings?

### **Hold Fast (percy - vere!)**

Hebrews was written first of all for Jewish Christians — Jewish believers who accepted Jesus as the Messiah — but were tempted to go back to the Jewish sacrificial system that **our** faith teaches has been fulfilled by our Lord. Maybe understandably: Imagine growing up with this magnificent temple and hereditary priesthood spilling the blood of animals according to the law God gave to Moses on Mount Sinai, and then joining a new sect where they don't do any of that, but they meet in people's homes and have a ritual meal with bread and wine that they say is far more powerful than the bloody sacrifices on the altar that you can see. On top of other factors, maybe there's a temptation to return to what was at the time the more impressive-looking religion.

The book of Hebrews argues that everything good about Judaism is perfected in Jesus. He's not trying to convert non-Christian Jews here; he's trying to encourage Jewish Christians not to abandon their faith in Jesus. And this is something very relevant in our times. So many who inherited the Christian faith have abandoned faith in Jesus — not for something more impressive-looking, but in many cases for no religion at all.

Their reasons are many and complicated, but often their grievances include actions of clergy or of the hierarchy. And while it's never a reason to leave the faith, often their grievances are valid, and may God have mercy on those, especially those in Holy Orders, who put obstacles between people

and God. For instance, clergy who are more like the Gentile rulers Jesus talked about, making their authority felt, than the servants he calls them to be.

The writer to the Hebrews wants to redirect our gaze away from what we see on earth to our high priest in the heavens, Jesus Christ. That's why I hope you are not here today for my sake (as fond as I am of you). I'm not here for this magnificent building or for the music (much as I appreciate them every week). I'm not here for our traditions or history or the bishop. I'm here for Jesus. By the grace of God, May I always be here for Jesus.

Lord Jesus, our great high priest, give us all the grace to hold fast to that .  
Amen.