

04. Hebrews 2:17-18



Hebrews 2:17-18

Part Two B



Part Two A



so that he might be a merciful and trustworthy high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement (ἱλάσκειν) for the sins (ἁμαρτία) of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

- Cultic language because the author is interested in our prayer, our communion with God, our opening our hearts to receive God's gift and our responding in love to God.

From the outset our author has wanted to focus our attention on the special place of Jesus in our lives. He has demonstrated the unique place of Jesus as the mediator of God's word, superior to the prophets and even to the angels. Since one's 'name' is indicative of the role one has been given in God's providential design, he has concentrated through use of scripture on the names that God has given Jesus. He began with the most intimate name, for Jesus is God's 'Son', and he has progressed through a number of divine and human names, each of which demonstrates Jesus' closeness to God and to us.

He now reaches the climax towards which he has been building and comes to the name that is the link between the divine and the human, the name that speaks of Jesus as the perfect mediator between God and humankind. It constitutes the central theme of the oration.

The remainder of the work will be spent drawing out the implications of Jesus being our ‘**high priest**’.

As observed earlier, this oration is ‘a word of exhortation’ (13:22). The author wants to remind us of the intimate communion which God offers us through Jesus, and, since he is speaking to a community that is steeped in Jewish cult, he chooses to do so in terms that are most sacred to them and that speak of this communion.

He prepared the way when he spoke of Jesus making ‘**purification for sins**’ (1:3), when he spoke of him being crowned ‘**with glory and honour**’ (2:9), and being ‘**made perfect**’ (2:10); also when he referred to him as ‘**the one who sanctifies**’ (2:11).

As just noted, the rest of this oration will be given over to drawing out the implications of Jesus being our high priest. However, since it is likely that we are not as familiar with the significance of this ‘name’ as were those who are being addressed by our author, we should pause here to gain an initial understanding of what the name ‘**high priest**’ would have meant to them. We will see later the importance of noting that he speaks of Jesus as a ‘high priest’ and not simply as a ‘priest’. However, since the high priest is a priest we need to begin by looking at the role played by a priest in the Jewish cult.

1. The priest carried out his ministry in the sanctuary

‘The priests officiate in the sanctuary and approach the Lord to serve him’ (Ezekiel 45:4).

2. From the sanctuary they mediated God’s word, God’s will, God’s blessing, God’s forgiveness

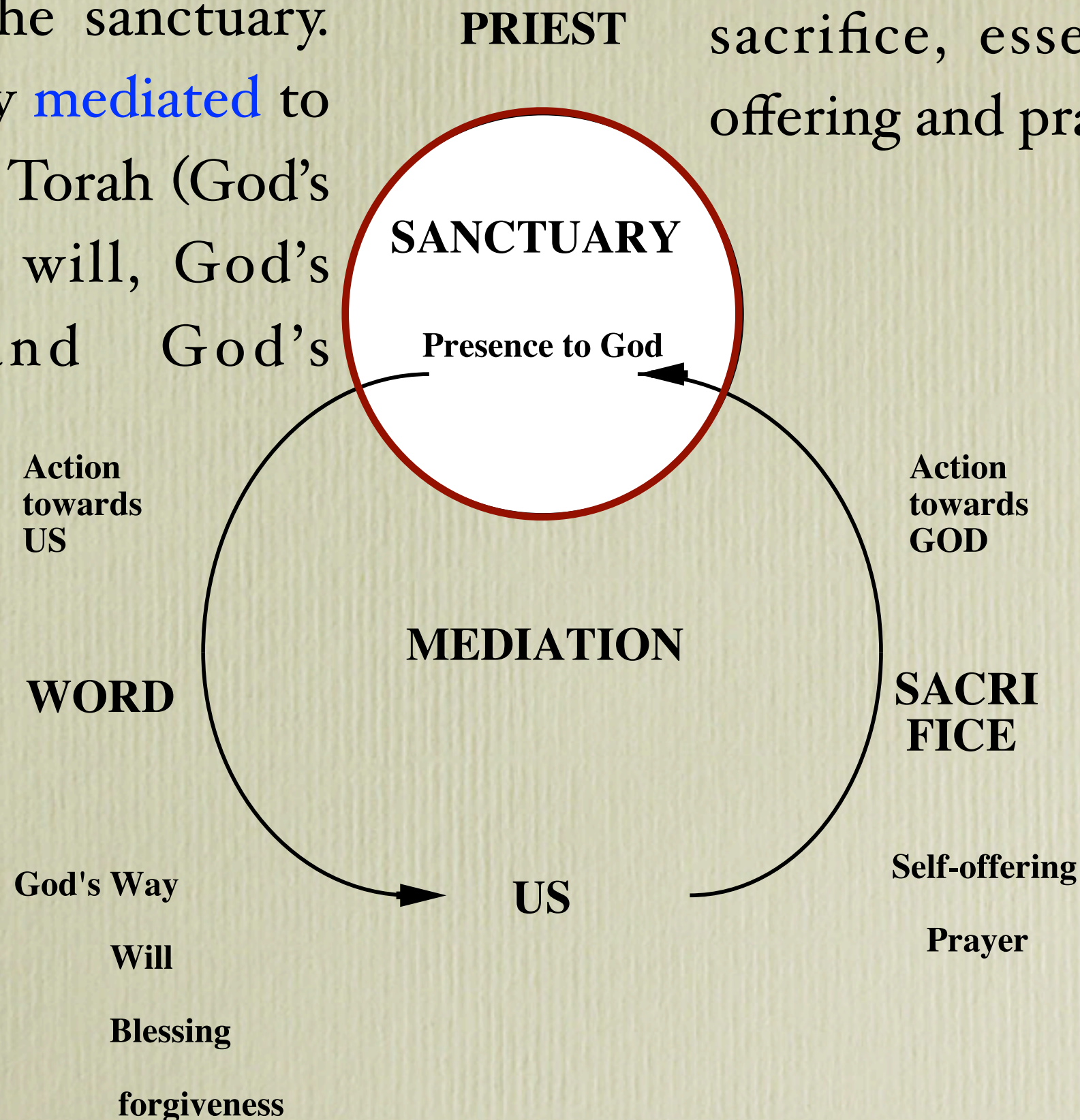
‘The Lord set aside the tribe of Levi ... to stand in the presence of the Lord, to do him service, and in his name to pronounce blessing’ (Deuteronomy 10:8).

3. They received the sacrifices of the people and offered them to God.

‘Moses consecrated Aaron ... to bless his people in the name of the Lord ... to offer sacrifice to the Lord ... to make atonement for the people. He entrusted him with his commandments, committed to him the statutes of the law, to teach Jacob his decrees and enlighten Israel on his law’ (Sirach 45:18-21).

In the Jewish cult, priests exercised their ministry from within the sanctuary. From God they **mediated** to the people the Torah (God's 'way'), God's will, God's blessing, and God's forgiveness.

They **mediated** back to God the people's response of sacrifice, essentially self-offering and prayer.



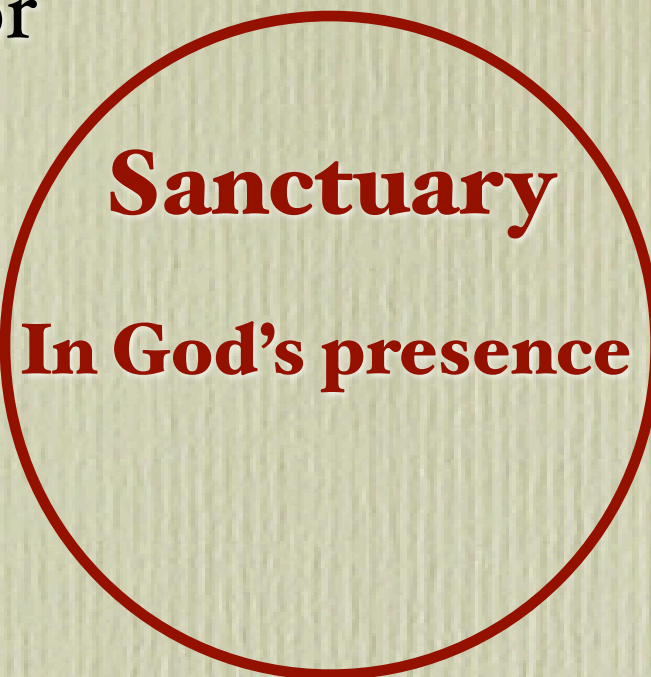
Priest

Priest = Mediator

Priest = Mediator

trustworthy

merciful



WORD

- Way
- Will
- Blessing
- Forgiveness

SACRIFICE

- Self offering
- Prayer

People

High Priest

¹⁷to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people.

The high priest carried out his special function on the feast of Yom Kippur (the ‘day of the cover’). It came as the climax of ten days in which the people, through prayer, fasting and almsgiving, sought forgiveness for their sins.

‘Once a year Aaron shall perform the rite of atonement on the horns of the altar. Throughout your generations he shall perform the atonement for the altar once a year with the blood of the atoning purification offering. It is most holy to the Lord’ (Exodus 30:10).

The high priest took the sins of the people into the inner sanctuary of the temple to the ‘mercy-seat’, the golden altar cover of the Ark of the Covenant, which was seen as the throne of God at the heart of God’s holy city. The author of Hebrews is referring to this action when he speaks of the high priest ‘**making a sacrifice of atonement**’ (ἱλάσκειν). This is translated a number of ways in English: sometimes, as here, ‘to atone’; sometimes ‘to expiate’; sometimes ‘to propitiate’.

It is important not to think of it as ‘appeasement’: God does not need to be persuaded to forgive. Rather, sin is understood as a pollution which alienates us from communion with God. The action of the high priest is to bring sinners into contact with divine mercy, and in this way to annihilate sin, for nothing impure can survive in God’s presence. Once he has made ‘**purification for sins**’(1:3), we are, once again, at one with God (hence ‘**at-one-ment**’).

As will become clear later, our author can speak of Jesus as a ‘**high priest**’ because Psalm 110:4 speaks of a special priesthood that belongs to the king, and so to the royal Messiah who is ‘a priest according to the order of Melchizedek’ (Psalm 110:4; see Hebrews 5:6). Melchizedek was the priest-king of Jerusalem (Genesis 14:18).

The priestly role of the king transcended that of the Levitical priests, for his sanctuary was not just the temple, but the ‘Holy Land’. He was a sacrament of God and was to bring about God’s reign, firstly in Israel, but then throughout the world. He was to do this by governing the people according to God’s Law and in such a way that they would be faithful to the Covenant and ‘be holy as the Lord God is holy’ (Leviticus 19:2).

Though of the tribe of Judah, and therefore not a Levitical priest (see 7:4), Jesus brings to perfection the functions carried out imperfectly by the cultic priests of the Old Testament. He brings to perfection each of the three aspects of their priesthood.

Priest

Priest = Mediator

trustworthy

In God's presence

WORD

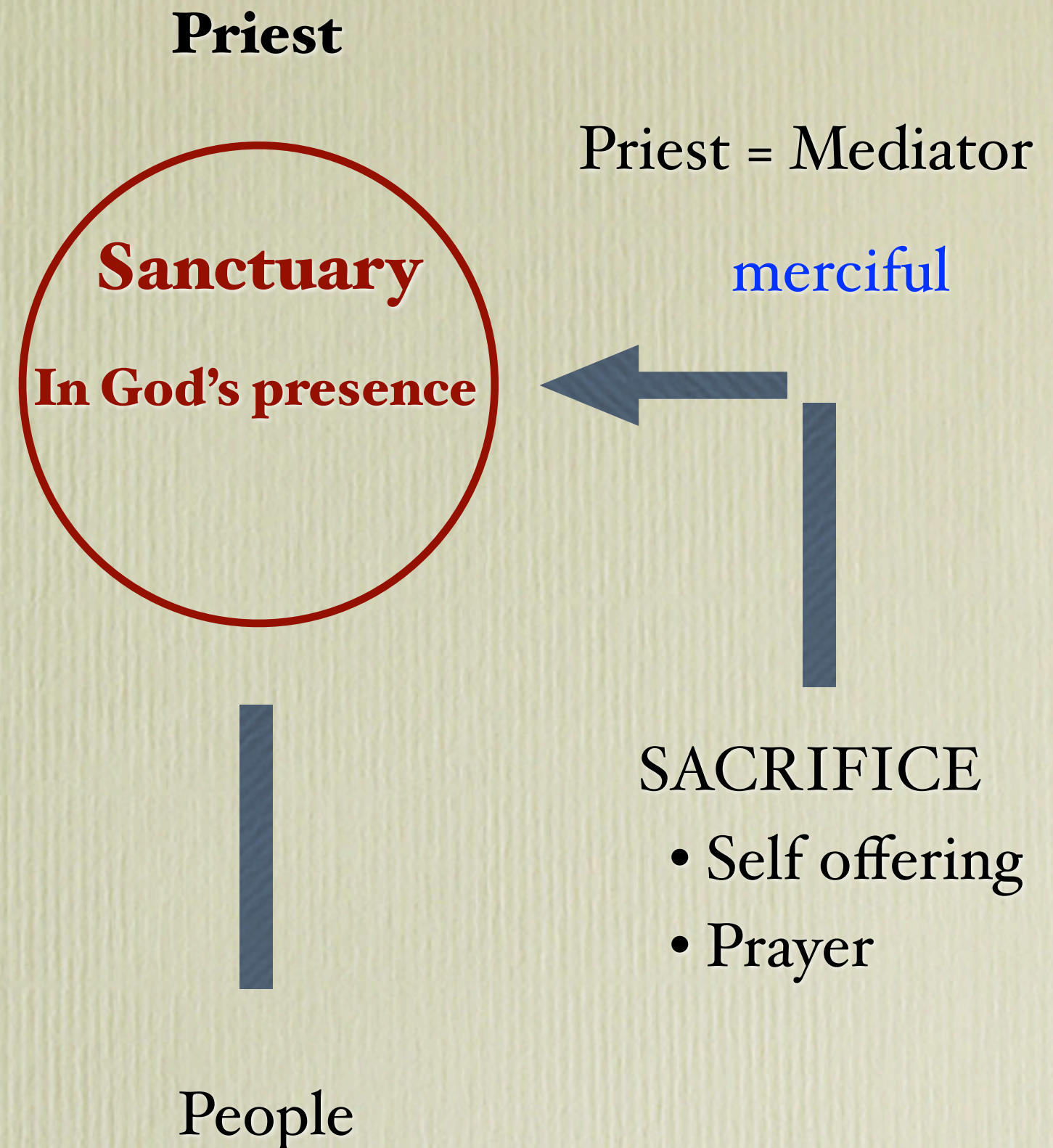
- Way
- Will
- Blessing
- Forgiveness

People

1) They carried out their mission in the sanctuary. Jesus has gone into the sanctuary of heaven (see 1:6) where he sits 'at the right hand of the Majesty on high' (1:3).

2) They mediated between God and the people when they spoke God's word from the sanctuary and when they declared God's will as inscribed in the Torah. Our author has already demonstrated how superior is the mediating of God's word through Jesus.

3) They mediated between the people and God when they received gifts from the people and offered them to God as sacrifices. Jesus welcomes us in love, ‘**sanctifies**’ us (2:11) and, through his victory over sin and death, he achieves for us ‘**so great a salvation**’ (2:3). As our author will say later: ‘**he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him**’ (7:25).



John

John speaks of Jesus as ‘the one whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world’ ‘For their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth’ (John 17:19). John refers to Jesus as God’s Word who ‘became flesh and pitched his tent among us’ (John 1:14). He refers to Jesus’ body as a ‘temple’ (John 2:21). Some suggest that the seamless garment which was stripped from Jesus on Calvary (John 19:23) is an allusion to the tunic of the high priest.

John

Jesus is our mediator: 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me' (John 14:6).

'If anyone sins, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous' (1 John 2:1).

Christ brings us into communion with God by sharing with us his own communion. 'He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world' (1 John 2:2; also 4:10).

The Book of Revelation

‘I saw seven golden lamp stands, and in the midst of the lamp stands I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force’ (Revelation 1:12-16).

Paul

‘It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed **intercedes** for us’ (Romans 8:34).

‘Through him we have **obtained access** to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God’ (Romans 5:2).

‘Through him both of us [Jews and Gentiles] have **access** in one Spirit to the Father’ (Ephesians 2:18).

‘We have **access** to God in boldness and confidence through his faith’ (Ephesians 3:12).

‘There is one God; there is also one **mediator** between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human’ (1 Timothy 2:5).

Paul

‘The life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me’ (Galatians 2:20).

‘Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant **offering** and **sacrifice** to God’ (Ephesians 5:2).

‘All are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption (ἀπολυτρώσις) which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an **expiation-sacrifice** (ἱλαστήριον) by his blood’ (Romans 3:24-25).

The fact that our author can introduce the name ‘high priest’ in this way, prior to offering an explanation, indicates that the idea of a Messiah-Priest was familiar to his Hebrew audience. The following from the apocryphal Testament of Levi is offered as an example:

‘Then shall the Lord raise up a new priest ... He shall execute a righteous judgment upon the earth. And he shall open the gates of paradise. And shall remove the threatening sword against Adam. And Beliar shall be bound by him. And he shall give power to his children to tread upon evil spirits’ (Testament of Levi 18:10-12).

We also have the following promise: ‘I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who shall do according to what is in my heart and in my mind’ (1 Samuel 2:35).

¹⁷a merciful and trustworthy high priest

Our author describes Christ the high priest as being ‘merciful’ and ‘trustworthy’. He is echoing an expression frequently used of God in the Scriptures where God is called *hesed we ’emet*. These key words prepare us for the next steps in the development of the oration. A priest is a mediator, and, as such, must be able to be in communion with both God and us. Our orator will demonstrate firstly that Christ is ‘trustworthy’ in relation to God. He will go on to show that he is ‘merciful’ in relation to us. He is the perfect mediator.

¹⁸Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

In verse eighteen he once again demonstrates that his aim is a pastoral one. The community is ‘being tested’. His ‘**word of exhortation**’ (13:22) is aimed at encouraging them by reminding them that Jesus, too, was tested, but that he is now enjoying eternal communion with God, a communion which he is already sharing with us now, but which we will experience perfectly when we, too, are with him in ‘**the coming world**’ (2:5).

Sharing in Jesus' priesthood

Though the author of Hebrews to this point is focusing on Jesus, he is doing so in order to show us what we are called to be, for we are called to share in the communion of love which Jesus has as God's Son and it is Jesus' life and Jesus' mission that we are to share. Jesus' disciples are graced to share in Jesus' priesthood. Jesus said: 'I am the vine, you are the branches' (John 15:5). His life, the life of the vine, is the Spirit of love that binds him in intimate communion with God, his Father. The branches share this Spirit and so share in Jesus' communion of love. Paul can say: 'It is Christ who lives in me' (Galatians 2:19). Disciples share in Jesus' life according to the special grace each is offered, and according to the way in which each responds to this grace. In the community of the Church we are the Body of Christ carrying out his mission in the world with all the creative power of God, through his Spirit poured out into the community.

The Christian community is a priestly community. We are ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people’ (1 Peter 2:9). ‘Jesus made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father’ (Revelation 1:6).

The community is priestly because we are living the life of Christ the priest. We are with him in the presence of God sharing his Spirit. We are mediating God’s word and God’s blessing to the world. We are offering prayer and offering ourselves with Christ to God and drawing the world into communion with God.

Our priesthood is royal, because we are sharing the priesthood of the king whose mission it is to bring about the reign of God in the world. God mediates his love to the world through those who share in Jesus’ life.

The divinely powerful and effective grace-gift from Christ is realised in different ways in each disciple and together we contribute to living his life and carrying on his mission: 'There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone' (1 Corinthians 12:4-7). Each disciple shares in his or her own way in the priestly mediation of Jesus. We are not mediators independent of Jesus. We are not separate vines. It is Jesus who mediates through us, as the vine bears fruit through its branches.

There are as many different ways of carrying out Christ's priestly mediation as there are disciples of Jesus in the Christian community. From her communion in the life of God, a wife and mother lives out the priestly mediation of Jesus by mediating God's love and God's word to her husband and children, and by welcoming their loving response she helps draw them into the communion of love which is Jesus' life. Likewise a husband and father for his wife and family. One can think of teachers, nurses, politicians and public servants. One can think of all the many simple ways in which we are a sacrament to each other of God's love. Jesus is carrying on his priestly mediation through and in us, sanctifying the world through the holy lives which we live, lives which he makes possible by sharing his Spirit with us.