

CHRIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, SPARTA, NC  
FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT, MARCH 29, 2009  
The Rev. J. Barry Kramer  
Lenten Sermon Series - Part V: Divine Union  
“Melchizedek”

*“...you are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.”* (Hebrews 5:6  
NRSV)

Melchizedek, nicknamed “Mel”, was the name of a car that I owned when we moved to Valle Crucis. It was a sporty machine that was supposed to run *forever*, so I named it Melchizedek, after the Old Testament Priest mentioned in our lesson this morning. It may seem silly to some, but to me, giving a thing a name in this materialistic world somehow helps to lessen its impersonal nature. It becomes more real. It brings together the human and the machine, the creator and the created, into a bond that, while not inseparable, certainly mimics the bonds that we attempt to form in our relationships with other human beings. Some of these bonds go beyond the casual, the loosely connected, and they become more like a union. Some of these unions even try to copy the one given us in God’s Son Jesus Christ. We call this one the “Divine Union” and it is the subject of our fifth and last in a series of sermons on the Great Biblical Themes.

The real Melchizedek was and is a mystery. He is first mentioned in Genesis 14:18-20, where he is called both King of Salem (Hebrew *Shaloom*, which means “peace”) and a “priest of God Most High.” This priest from nowhere brings out bread and wine, blesses Abram and tells him that his enemies will be defeated. Abram then gives Melchizedek one tenth of everything he owns, apparently in return for the blessing. This is the first mention of the Biblical concept of the “tithe”, and ever since clergy have wondered how to best use this idea to run their churches! The purpose of mentioning Melchizedek at this point in the Genesis story is unknown, except that it establishes the role of a priest as a mediator, the one who stands between God and humans and facilitates the Divine Union.

Melchizedek is mentioned again in Psalm 110, the one quoted by Jesus in answer to a question about his authority. But by this time something new has been added to the Psalm: “The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, ‘You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.’” (vs. 4) Most scholars agree that this verse indicates an understanding among the ancient Hebrews that was passed on to King David, who authored the psalm, that the priesthood is somehow indelible. It is related to God’s efficacious blessing; once given it cannot be erased, transferred to another, or given back! Like a Divine Union, it is forever!

Beginning with Aaron, the brother of Moses, there developed a tradition among the Hebrews that there should be a “High Priest” who exercised privileges and authority beyond other priests. For example, it was the High Priest alone who could venture beyond the veil into the Holy of Holies, where the Ark of the Covenant was kept, and, like Moses himself, enter into the very presence of God.

This was done only once a year on Yom Kippur, the “Day of Atonement, when all of Israel had confessed its sins and became “at one” with God. It was the function of the High Priest to bring God and the “chosen people” back together. It was his job to help re-establish the Divine Union. He was of the order of Melchizedek.

But since the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D., the Jews have not had a High Priest. They believe that the Divine Union has been broken, and that only Messiah, the “Anointed One”, can re-establish it. Precisely! Enter the Letter to the Hebrews and our text for today. It proclaims that Jesus *is* the Messiah. It also proclaims that he is the new High Priest, and that he will be forever! It says that the order of Melchizedek is restored, and so is “The Divine Union!”

In the Greek it is called “*u*postasis” (Hupostasis), which means “substance”. Theologians call this the “Hypostatic Union”, which indicates the *substantial union* of the Divine and human natures in the one person (“*u*postasis”) of Jesus Christ. This description of the Divine Union was developed by Cyril of Alexandria and was formally accepted by the Church in the year 451 A.D. at the Council of Chalcedon. In fact this decision is considered to be so important that it is included among the historical documents section of our Prayer Book, found on page 864 (candidates for Confirmation please make a special note!).

It sounds like more jargon, but this is a really important doctrine for all Christians. Even though we don’t understand how, the Divine Union says that Jesus is fully God and fully a man *and at the same time one substance*, a person. This person lived an earthly life, died, and was resurrected, thereby making himself *fully present* to anyone who calls him into their life. It is this union that we “call into effect” at Holy Baptism. It is this union that we experience through consecrated bread and wine. It is this Divine Love, this “charge of power”, that we can feel when we ask to be healed through oil, prayer and the laying-on-of-hands. The Divine Union means that each of us, because of Jesus Christ, can be “in the very presence” of God, forever. In effect, *each of us* can become a “little Melchizedek.”

Obviously, “Mel” the car did not last forever. After a solid 150,000 miles, Mel decided not to stay in the mountains - something about the sudden changes in altitude - his computer couldn’t handle it. So Mel went back down the mountain and fell in love with a sweet young thing who treated him much better than I ever did! The union was dissolved. Unions between humans and machines are like that; they get dissolved because *one* always outlasts the *other*. Sometimes it’s like that between humans, also. Sometimes human unions are dissolved and, like Humpty Dumpty, can’t be put back together again. But then human unions, also like Humpty Dumpty, are not Divine, are they?

But it’s not like that with the Divine Union. Starting with our Old Testament lesson from Jeremiah, where God promises to write the Law on our hearts, through the Letter to the Hebrews where we learn of our eternal salvation, to John’s Gospel where Jesus promises each of us who follow him a life in eternity - in these and many other lessons we learn that *God never breaks the union!* Furthermore, every time we try to weaken, twist or break this union of love, there

stands a Great High Priest, who is after the order of Melchizedek, who will mediate our sins and re-establish the union once again.

What more could a divorce prone people ask? All we have to do is to accept God's gift, and join the union!