

Our Heavenly Intercessor

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In thinking of the life and mission of our Lord, we must not make the mistake of those whose vision is limited to Bethlehem as the beginning, and the Ascension Hill as the end. The New Testament has a wider view than this, both in the Gospels and in the Epistles.

For instance, the second Gospel opens with the words: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God". Those words are significant enough, when we realize what they imply. The Fourth Gospel, however, is even more distinct than the second. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." St. John takes us back to a point before the beginning of time. His statement means that "the Word", whom he tells us became flesh as the Incarnate Christ, is the living expression of the mind of God. Although he uses a Greek term when he speaks of the Word, we know that he did not limit its use to that of Greek thought. What the Greek thinkers primarily had in mind, when they spoke of the Word, was the voice of reason. Moreover, they seem to have used it mainly in an abstract manner. Yet it was far different with the Fourth Evangelist. To him, the Word was no mere abstraction, but the living Word of God personified in Jesus Christ. He was the expression of the mind, the reason and the will of God within the confines of a human life. It is as Temple says: "From the outset we are to understand that the Word has its whole being within Deity, but that does not exhaust the being of Deity. Or, to put it from the other side, God is essentially self-revealing; but He is first of all a Self capable of being revealed."¹ So the Word who was made flesh was the voice of God speaking to men and explaining the ways of God to them.

From this, we have to realize that the relationship of the Word with the Godhead inevitably involved the essential unity of the Word with the Father. The Evangelist makes this plain by saying that "the Word was with God, and the Word was God". The Evangelist also points out that the Word was the divine agent in creation. "All things were made by Him; and without Him was not anything made that had been made" (John 1. 3). Consequently, this means that the world is God's world, and that in spite of sin it is still His world. So when we look at the life and mission of the Incarnate Lord, we have to see it in the background of the eternity of the self-revealing Godhead. Later in his Gospel, St. John reports our Lord as saying: "My Father worketh even until now, and I work" (v. 17). The Father was at work in creation, and He is still at work, upholding it. The Son was occupied as God's agent in creation, and He was busy in His world during the confines of His incarnate life. Moreover, His work still continues in heaven where He makes intercession for His people by appearing in God's presence for them. Of this work, the Epistle to the Hebrews says that He "entered not into a holy place made with hands, like in pattern to the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear before the face of God for us" (ix. 24). This is a most vital work from our point of view, and we may consider it from several aspects. These are in its relation to His sacrifice offered on the Cross, His High-Priesthood, His session at God's right hand, and His intercession on our behalf in heaven.

The Sacrifice of the Cross

In connection with Christ's sacrificial death on the Cross it will perhaps be well to confine ourselves to a consideration of some of His own words regarding it. We know that, at first, the disciples were stunned by the tragedy of the Crucifixion. Later, they understood it in the light of God's revelation of Himself in it and through it. St. Paul gives expression to this truth by saying that through Christ, "we have our redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace" (Eph. 1. 7). The writer of "Hebrews" speaks in the same vein, saying that Christ "through His own blood, entered in once for all into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us" (Heb. ix. 12).

Whilst Christ proclaimed the Kingdom of God, He knew that for Him it meant a spiritual reality, involving the fullest blessings of life. Entry into it demanded repentance, leading to forgiveness and the vision of God, as well as communion with Him, and eternal life. This being so, the whole subject of sin and its consequences had to be dealt with. It was for this purpose that He came to earth, and so we may be certain that when He first told the disciples of His approaching death, He had already reached a definite conclusion regarding Himself and His mission. His deep ponderings on the fact of human need on account of sin, together with the infinity of God's love for fallen men, seem to have led Him to see Himself as the Suffering Servant of Isaiah's prophecy, and to an interpretation of His own mission in the light of that prophecy. This matter had clearly occupied His solitary thoughts and silent meditations over a long period. Day by day, and month by month, the subject was ever in the forefront of His mind, so that at last, to Him its issues became crystal clear. This awareness is evident in His words: "The Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark x. 45).

When Christ said that He had come to earth to give His life as a "ransom", we have the clue to the purpose of His incarnate life. Of course, the image of a ransom does not appeal to modern minds as it did to the first disciples. We are not familiar with it. They knew it only too well. Yet when prisoners of war are exchanged, as they have been in our own day, we have in the action, a kind of ransom which is paid. In the same way, we are not familiar with slavery as were the people of Christ's age. They would well know that ransoming was one of the means by which slaves gained their freedom. There was another aspect of ransoming under the faith of the Old Testament. With the Jews, the theory was that the first-born male of every household was liable to be a priest. Even so, those who were not of the priestly tribe could be redeemed from the office back to the family. Our Lord was actually bought back to the family in this way, even as others could be bought back, or redeemed, by the payment of a price to the actual priesthood, which, as we know, belonged to a single tribe. Then again, under Jewish law, there were other ways of ransoming men and women who had sold themselves into slavery. In a similar way, when a person had been gored by an ox, the animal's owner was held responsible for the fatality, and he had to be redeemed from the vengeance of the dead person's family. It is as Dr. Dale says: "A ransom, when given for persons, rescued them from slavery or from death: it averted divine judgments: it cancelled the claims which deprived them of freedom, or the crime by which they had forfeited life".² It was in this sense that Christ gave His life as a ransom for many. So ransoming is a triangular transaction. It involves the one to be ransomed, the giver of the ransom, and the one who accepts the ransom price.

Our Lord came to earth for us men and for our salvation; so we see that we are those who need to be redeemed; and sin, together with its penalty, death, is that from which we need to be saved. It is obvious that this was in Christ's mind when He spoke about giving His life as

a ransom. Further, it is possible that when He spoke these words, Psalm xlix was in His mind. “None of them can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him” (v. 7). Even so, it has to be remembered that the death which is sin’s penalty is not physical death, but spiritual death. This is clear from our Lord’s words, “What doth it profit a man, to gain the whole world, and forfeit his life? For what should a man give in exchange for his life?” (Mark viii. 36, 37). It is terrible to contemplate spiritual death, and the only way in which we can be ransomed from it, is by the removal of its cause, which is sin. No man can ransom himself or his brother from this dread state; but the Son of God came to do that which man could not do for himself. Christ is the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world. This was the truth concerning Christ which John the Baptist proclaimed, and regarding this aspect of the Lord’s mission, Temple says, “By bearing it He removes it”.³ Moreover, of this reference to Christ as the Lamb of God, Dr. Lampe says: “It seems fairly clear that St. John is interpreting Christ’s mission as the removal or carrying away of sin, and so as the fulfilment of what had been adumbrated in expiatory sacrifices”.⁴

Our Lord plainly pictured the primary purpose of His life as ransoming mankind from sin and death. However, it is well to notice that He always spoke of giving His life. It was not to be taken from Him. “No one taketh it away from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again” (John x. 18). His death had to be His own voluntary act. If it had been necessary to take His life away from Him, that would have been a mark of slavery, not of greatness. Consequently, when He submitted His body to the implements of the Passion, and particularly to the nails of the cross, He did not endure it as a martyr, but as one who; willingly gave His life as a ransom for many.

When we consider the One to whom the ransom was paid, we are confronted by various theories. Dr. Plummer says plainly that “the ransom is paid to God, into whose hands the dying Messiah surrenders His life.”⁵ It was clearly in regard to the divine view of sin, and because of the great cost of the forgiveness which God wished to give to men, that Christ looked on His life as an equivalent of the lives of the “many”. Moreover, this “many” obviously means the same as the “all” of which St. Paul speaks. “There is one God, one mediator also between God and man, Himself man, Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all” (I Tim. ii. 6). So whilst it may be said that unforgiven sinners invoke God’s just doom on themselves, we know that it was from this very thing that our Heavenly Father wished to save them and all mankind. To that end, He sent His Son to die for us, so it is the divine point of view in Christ’s atonement which is of importance, rather than the human. So what we have to consider first is the effect, if we may so use the term, of Christ’s death on the divine mind. Our Lord made His offering as man on man’s behalf. This did not make God love mankind more than He did before Christ died, but it made the outflow of His love to man more free. Christ’s death brought sin to its death, and that is what is implied in the idea of a ransom. Regarding this, we may well quote Temple again. “First, the Lamb of God is the victim whom God provides, as He provided the ram in place of Isaac; and secondly, this Lamb Himself beareth away the sin of the world. In the coming of Christ, God Himself is active; He not only accepts an offering made by man, but He provides (for indeed He Himself is) the offering, and He Himself makes it.”⁶

Another outstanding feature of Christ’s death is its uniqueness. The New Testament speaks of it as an offering made “once for all” (Heb. x. 10) and we know that there is always something awe-inspiring about anything that is done “once for all”. This phrase, “once for all,” is a well-known expression used by the writer of “Hebrews”, which J. B. Phillips translates as follows, “He is dispensing with the old order of sacrifices, and establishing a new order of obedience

to the will of God. And in that will we have been made holy by the single unique offering of the body of Christ” (Heb. x.10). This means, as Bishop Westcott says, that “the sanctification of all believers is completed on the divine side”.⁷ So we can say that when Christ died He fulfilled all that sacrifice had previously signified, and He did this just because He fulfilled its true meaning in both its Godward and manward aspects. Sacrifice, in its strict sense, was consummated in Him, so that kind of offering for sin was ended for ever because it had attained its desired end. That is why the writer of Hebrews could say, “Where remission of these is, there is no more offering for sin” (Heb. x. 18).

The High-Priesthood

In His atonement for human sin, Christ is seen as God’s way to man and man’s way to God. Bishop Westcott reminds us that “the offering of Christ on the Cross was a High-priestly act, though Christ did not become ‘High-priest after the order of Melchizedek’, that is, royal High-priest, till after the Ascension”. He also stresses the fact that He “is High-priest after a new and higher order”.⁸ As a result of all this, His High-priesthood stands out above all others on the ground that in His offering He was both priest and sacrifice. He had no offering to make for Himself before He could make an offering on behalf of His people, as was necessary in the case of the Aaronic high-priest. We also know that when the sacrifice on the Cross was completed, the Lord cried out in victory: “It is finished”. He was then able to take up His High-priestly office in His exaltation when He entered into heaven itself through His own blood. He offered Himself, that “somewhat” which He had to offer, mentioned in Hebrews viii. 3. He presented to the Father the offering of a perfect obedience in a life of perfect sonship. He did this when, identified with His people and His people with Him, He entered into the heavenly sanctuary to begin His work as the High-priest of humanity.

Perhaps it will be well to look at some of the characteristics of Christ’s High-priesthood, noting where it differs from that of the Aaronic line. First, it is a new priesthood. We know that by divine direction the priesthood of the Old Testament was vested in the tribe of Levi, and the High-priesthood in the line of Aaron. The writer of Hebrews recognizes this fact, saying, “It is evident that our Lord hath sprung out of Judah; as to which tribe Moses spake nothing concerning priests” (viii. 14). Yet even though the Levitical priesthood was of divine order, it pointed forward to a fulfilment of that which it had failed to realize. “If there had been a bringing to perfection” (Heb. vii. 11, Westcott’s trans.) in the Levitical priesthood, there would have been no need for another priesthood. But the need was there; and this being so, the old order had to give place to the new. The new was a perfect priesthood which was based upon an order that was superior to that of either Levi or Aaron. Secondly, Christ’s High-priesthood is indestructible. It cannot pass away because it is eternal. The priesthood of the Old Testament was subject to the conditions of succession and change. In contrast, Christ’s High-priesthood rests upon His own inherent nature “after the power of an indissoluble life” (Heb. viii. 16). Because of this our Lord’s High-priesthood rests upon a permanent foundation. The Father sealed it with His own oath, which stamps that to which it is applied with the element of eternity. “The Lord swore and will not repent Himself, Thou art a priest for ever” (Heb. vii. 21).

In this world of change and chance, men are able to experience the sense of security in Christ’s unchanging High-priesthood, knowing that human reconciliation with God is secured for ever in the ever-availing efficacy of the Cross. Cranmer has stressed this fact: “Because Christ is a perpetual and everlasting priest, that by one oblation made a full sacrifice for sin

for ever, therefore His priesthood neither needeth nor can pass to any other”.⁹ Thirdly, on the grounds of its permanence, our Lord’s High-priesthood is absolute and unchangeable. It is His alone, and is not open to any rival claim. Neither is it liable to any invasion of its function. It is because of this fact that our Lord is able to save men unto the uttermost of their needs, being able to meet every want. Through Him, each human soul can reach up to the Father Himself. This is possible because our Lord ever lives with the loving desire to intercede for His own people. Consequently, such a unique High-priesthood perfect and absolute, subject to no rival claims, must mean that our Lord can have neither successor nor vicar in His unique office. From its very nature it abides for ever, reaching out to us from eternity. In this connection it might be well to quote some vital words from Dr. Lampe’s book: *Reconciliation in Christ*. “The reconciling work of Christ is ‘finished’ in that it is unique and all-sufficient; but each Christian believer is brought within its scope so that by the sacramental sign he is made, as it were, contemporary, across the passage of time, with the event itself, and enabled to share in Christ’s dying-to-live” (p. 80).

The Session

When we turn our thoughts to Christ’s Ascension and His Session on God’s right hand, we are painfully aware of the limitations which are ours in the spheres of thought and expression. We find ourselves using the terms of locality when we speak of heaven. Then in much the same way we realize that we are using anthropomorphic expressions when we speak of Christ as being seated at God’s right hand. Even so, God visits the locality of earth and blesses it. He also gives His grace to men under the terms of time and space. So while we acknowledge our limitations we know that there is something truly helpful in thinking of heaven as God’s throne, or as that spiritual sphere from which all His graces issue. No doubt Dr. Milligan was right when he said that “heaven is a state rather than a place”¹⁰. So when we speak of our Lord’s Ascension into heaven “we have to think less of a transition from one locality than of a transition from one condition to another. A change of locality is indeed implied, but it need not be to a circumscribed habitation like that of earth; it may be only to a boundless spiritual region above us and encompassing us on every side.”¹¹ This conception is in line with Pauline thought, when the Apostle speaks of “the heavenly places” (Eph. i. 3). Armitage Robinson has described this phrase as meaning “the heavenly sphere” which is “the sphere of spiritual activities: that immaterial region, the ‘unseen universe’ which lies behind the world of sense”¹² and in which great forces are at work. Yet our Lord is enthroned over and above all these forces, and, as the Ascension Day collect directs us, we are able to pray that “we may also in heart and mind thither ascend, and with Him continually dwell”. Perhaps A. J. Tait has given us the best guidance as to the meaning of “heaven” in his book, *The Heavenly Session of our Lord*. After examining the various ideas of heaven offered by Christian scholars throughout the ages, he concludes that “Heaven is no longer a distant kingdom whose boundaries are determined by space and the pathway to which lies in the region of the Intermediate State, but it is a spiritual kingdom the entrance into which lies open before men in this life, though the full enjoyment of its privileges and blessings is only attainable hereafter” (p. 221).

We are still under the same limitations of thought and expression which have already been mentioned, when we speak of Christ’s Session at God’s right hand. Yet the New Testament uses such terms to teach the truth of a great spiritual reality. It seems clear that the thought underlying Christ’s Heavenly Session is that of a finished work, and this is particularly prominent in the Epistle to the Hebrews. That work, finished “once for all”, has been

accepted by the Father in its fulness. This fact was made plain by the Resurrection and Ascension. Moreover, when Christ returned to heaven, He took His rightful place, and is now “seated at God’s right hand”. As Westcott says, “His glorified humanity is the eternal pledge of the absolute efficacy of His accomplished work. He pleads, as older writers expressed the thought, by His presence on the Father’s Throne. Meanwhile, men on earth in union with Him, enjoy continually through His blood what was before the privilege of one man on one day in the year.”¹³ Consequently, on the ground that Christ’s offering is a complete, an accepted, a vindicated, and a perpetually effective work in its utter completeness, there can be no further sacrificial offering for sin. What is more, it can neither be extended, re-offered, nor re-presented to the Father. It stands effective for all time as the one unique and effective offering for the world’s sin. This is stressed in another way when we recall that no priest is seated when at his sacred task. And in every instance where Christ’s heavenly Session is mentioned in the New Testament, He is described as seated. It is true that He is pictured as standing to welcome the martyred Stephen, but no mediatorial or sacrificial work is hinted in this case. Then again, when the Seer of Patmos tells of the Lamb in the midst of the throne, it is still the sign of a finished work. Of this vision, A. J. Tait says: “It is a scene of triumph and victory. The marks of the sacrifice remain, but the sacrifice itself is over, and its purpose has been achieved.”¹⁴ Moreover, the Lamb is depicted as the object of worship on the part of the living creatures, and the elders, and the assembled angelic host. Any conception of continuous propitiation would be entirely alien to the spirit of the vision. The same truth is stressed when Christ is portrayed as entering into heaven, of which the Holy of Holies was the symbol, and in which there was no altar. The true picture of Christ’s place in heaven is that of the Throne, where on the basis of His complete and ever-effective work as Redeemer, He is now the Source of all grace to those who truly believe on Him.

The Intercession

The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews says that our great High-priest “is able to save to the uttermost them that draw near to God through Him, seeing He ever liveth to make intercession for them” (Heb. vii. 25). The idea of intercession is prominent in this Epistle, and we know that one who intercedes for another appears as his representative. He does this because he either feels with him or for him in his plight. Christ is our Intercessor, and He is well fitted for this office, because He is perfect Man. He is also perfect God. So being seated at God’s right hand, He is able to present us to the Father in Himself on the ground of His Eternal Sonship, and as our representative. In Him, God meets with us, and we with Him. However, this work of intercession does not mean that He is pleading our cause with One who is ill disposed towards us and needs to be placated; or that He is requesting blessings for us from One who is unwilling to bestow them. Even in His earthly life He made His requests to the Father, not as an inferior, nor yet as a suppliant, but as an equal. We see this in His High-priestly prayer, through which we notice two dominant themes. They are the personal out-pouring of the Son to the Father, and the intercession of the Priest for His people. In praying for His followers, and for those who should follow Him in the ages to come, He says, “I make request for them”. Of this feature Temple says: “The word used of the Lord’s prayer to His Father is that which suggests enquiry rather than petition, as though, not venturing to make request of the Father, He rather consults Him on their behalf”.¹⁵ Of this prayer, Bishop Moule says: “We hear in it the accent of a voice, speaking for us in the ears of supreme Holiness and Love, which is the voice of One whose place is not that of a suppliant before the throne but of its co-eternal occupant”¹⁶. Consequently, we cannot think of our Lord’s intercessions in the terms of pleading speech. There is no demand for conversations,

consultations, transactions, or influence between Christ and the Father, so as to keep God graciously disposed towards His creatures. We may be sure that the Father does not need to be reminded of the Son's self-offering for sin. The Ascended Lord still bears the imprints of His passion, and His presence at the Father's side in His own eternal glory, and in His glorified humanity, is His own effectual intercession. Moreover, Christ's sacrifice was planned in heaven, and so whatever Christ did the Father willed. We may thus rest assured that Christ's work on earth has its full efficacy in heaven, and that He is perpetually making it effective in still bringing men to the Father. Dr. Swete has said: "The intercession of the Ascended Christ is not a prayer, but a life. The New Testament does not represent Him as an *orante*, standing before the Father, and with outstretched arms, like the figure in the mosaics of the Catacombs, and with strong crying and tears, pleading our cause in the presence of a reluctant God; but as a throned Priest-King, asking what He will from a Father who always hears and grants His request. Our Lord's life in heaven is His prayer."¹⁷ In much the same vein we can quote Bishop Moule: "Scripture represents Him as interceding, not as a suppliant, but with the majesty of the accepted and glorified Son once slain. He does not stand before the Throne, but is seated on it." Then he goes on to say: "It is vain, of course, to ask how in detail He thus acts for us. The essence of the matter is His union with His people, and His perpetual Presence, in that union, with the Father, as the once slain Lamb."¹⁸ From these considerations we are led to the conclusion reached by Dimock in his book, *Our One Priest on High*. "We disclaim for the sacerdotium of Christ any continuation or iteration of sacrifice or oblation. . . . To do otherwise would be to break up and destroy the perfection of the work on which His perfect sacerdotium rests for its very foundation. But we claim for the Priesthood of Christ all that the needs of sinful humanity can ask or desire from the past or the present" (p. 85).

When we have said all that we can about this important matter, we have to confess that what St. Paul said in another connexion is true of this: "For now we see in a mirror, darkly" (I Cor. xiii. 12). Yet in it all, our Lord holds firmly His relation to humanity, as well as His oneness with the Father. We cannot know the fulness of His offering, His High-priesthood, His Session, or His Intercession, while we are on this side of the grave. Even so, all of these are parts of our redemption, and of its results in our souls. We have experience of them through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit; for they are of the certainties and blessings of the Gospel which He mediates to us from our Lord.

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Endnotes:

- 1) *Reading in St. John's Gospel*, p. 5.
- 2) *The Atonement*, p. 136.
- 3) *Ut supra*, p. 24.
- 4) *Reconciliation in Christ*, p. 49.
- 5) *St. Matthew*, p. 280.
- 6) *Ut supra*, p. 24.

- 7) *Hebrews*, p. 313.
- 8) *Hebrews*, p. 197 and p. 164.
- 9) *On the Lord's Supper* (P.S., p. 363).
- 10) *The Ascension and Heavenly Priesthood of our Lord*, p. 25.
- 11) Milligan, p. 26.
- 12) *Ephesians*, p. 27.
- 13) *Hebrews*, p. 230.
- 14) *Ut supra*, p. 24.
- 15) *Ut supra*, p. 316.
- 16) *The High Priestly Prayer*, p. 67.
- 17) *The Ascended Christ*, p. 95.
- 18) *Outlines of Christian Doctrine*, p. 103.