

STS General Chapter 2025 Pastoral Address  
Hebrews 5:1-10  
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It was probably one of the most difficult, certainly one of the most embarrassing, moments of my life.

I had gone for a job interview, a job I needed very much. It was 1972 and I had just left my Roman Catholic Religious Order after almost 10 years. Now I was out on the street, with little or no funds and resources. filled with all the uncertainty of what life held for me, but with just enough arrogance to believe that, if I raised my banner high enough, I could yet conquer the world. And the job was a good one, at a place that would have given me a big leg up in the market. I was excited, thrilled to receive an invitation to an interview. Impressive men dressed in well-cut suits sat across the table from me. Questions were asked and answered, and everything seemed to be going well. Until, that is, until they pushed that job description across the table to me.

Reading it caused me to go into some form of shock. I did not understand much of what they were asking of me in this position. In all honesty, looking back on it now, I didn't even understand much of what was written in the job description. I was in deeper than I knew and I realized that no amount of quick stepping on my part was going to get me out of it. I had two choices. Try to fake it or quit while I was ahead. I handed back the job description and, with profuse apologies, told the interview committee the honest truth – that this job was way beyond my capabilities and that I could not fulfill the expectations of the job description.

Chastened but summoning what dignity I could, I left the room. And from that day to this, job descriptions, for whatever type of work, have always had the ability to send a small shiver down my spine.

It is a form of job description that the Preacher of Hebrews lays out for us in this part of his letter today. Every high priest in the days of ancient Israel was required to perform certain functions, various tasks and responsibilities laid out clearly in the Scriptures and passed on from generation to generation of the priesthood. Chosen from among other men, the high priest was nevertheless called upon to serve as the mediator between his fellow human beings and God. Standing in that liminal role, the high priest straddled the threshold between the sacred and the profane, between heaven and earth, so that he might mediate the needs of the people before the very footstool of God. With sacrifice and prayer, through the offering of gifts, he prayed for the cleansing of the people's sins, so that they might be restored in the sight of God.

But there is always a danger when one is engaged in such a high ministry, such an important role, such a unique position. And the danger is that one could simply forget who they are and why they are there, eventually coming to believe that they are something special, someone who was better than those whom they served. But the

admonition laid upon the priests of old, as indeed it is laid upon all of us who serve in this ministry of Word and Sacrament, those called to be servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God, is not to forget that we are to be, if I might steal a phrase from the Bishop of Rome, we are called to be the servants of the servants of God. So, the high priest was not to be above himself but rather to deal gently with those whom he is called to serve for he must always remember his own human frailty and weakness.

And there was one other thing that the high priest was asked to keep in mind as he went about his duties and that is that he did not choose this role but rather he was chosen for it. Looking back, I now see how some of my own sense of self-importance may have harmed me that day and I learned the hard way from that interview that I was not choosing the job or the firm or the business. Rather they were choosing me, and the choice was theirs to define the job in a certain way rather than leaving it up to me to define it for them. I was not to choose whether this was for me but rather I would be chosen. So it is that the job description of the high priest is laid out, the duties and responsibility outlined - to mediate, to serve and to understand that he did not choose this role but rather was chosen from among others for this most important of responsibilities.

My sisters and brothers, as we gather for this, our annual General Chapter retreat, we shortly take the time, as we always do, to renew our vows of ordination. These vows are not our job description – after all they say nothing about all the important things we do such as committee and council meetings, the preparation of finance reports or dealing with wonderful plumbing, heating and air conditioning issues...always of course on a Sunday morning! But these vows we will shortly recite contain some of the critical duties and responsibilities of our office – duties and responsibilities that are not to be taken lightly – to teach and preach; to be a model of the godly life; to study the holy scriptures; to engage in a life centered on prayer and to be a faithful witness to the world. And we are to do these things until the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ when the days of our earthly priesthood will end.

Some, of course, have already gone before us and their faithful service to the Lord in this life has already ended. So, even as recall our own vows, we take time to remember those of our body who, in the past year, have entered the Church Triumphant - Pastors David Mielke and C. Lynn Bailey. For like the days of our flesh, the days of the earthly high priesthood and our own priesthood will surely come to an end. Who then will step in to fulfill that role and will they be up to the job?

Writing to the people of God gathered in those difficult days of the early Church, the writer of Hebrews answers with a fervent cry that yes there is someone who will step up and He will be more than capable of filling the role. For this Jesus, this Christ, is the One qualified for the job, simply because He was chosen by God Himself for the role of High Priest. This One who came from God, indeed the One who is the Son of God and Himself God from very God, this One has now been appointed to the role of priest. And not just any priest, but a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek, that great and powerful priest and king who came from the mists of time in Israel's ancient history to

bring gifts to Abraham. What better qualification is there than to be God's own chosen One, to be His anointed, to fulfill this role of being the great High Priest.

For this is no ordinary applicant who has come to fill this job. Rather this Jesus is not only chosen of God but He is also God Himself. But coming from God and being with God, can this High Priest relate to those whom He is called to serve? Can He relate to humankind in a way that we can grasp? Again, the answer is a fervent yes! For "in the days of His flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears..."

My sisters and brothers – many of you gathered here have spent years if not decades in service to the Lord and His Holy Church. And from your care of the flock, you know that there is no more human way to identify with one another than through our suffering. We have our joys at times, our moments of strength drawn from mutual pleasure, smiles to be shared with all around us. But it is in our suffering that we come to know the humanity of each other. It is in our tears that we plumb the depths of our darkest fears and pains, going to that place where there is no hiding from the reality of our humanness which will one day bring us to the very edge of the grave itself.

Jesus knows our suffering for He has suffered before us. With loud cries in the garden, He begged for the cup to be taken from Him. With supplications, He prayed beseeching to know where His God was as He hung on the cross. With spit on His face, thorns in His head, stripes on His back, He had endured to the fullest the suffering of humankind. But His suffering is not for His own good but in His suffering, He unites Himself with all His creation, humbly taking upon Himself the sin of the world and so, "by His stripes" we are healed. It was because of His obedience to God that His prayer, endured in suffering, was heard by God, bringing God to heal the breach that had divided Him from His creation. It is through Christ and Christ alone, that we are made one again with God. It is through Christ and Christ alone that we have been given the gift of eternal salvation. It is through Christ and Christ alone that the pain of our suffering is overcome and the promise of joys everlasting are given to us.

My sisters and brothers, I am grateful that, before I started my time in ministry, I was not given a job description for this ministry, this priesthood, to which I was called and in which I have now served down through the decades. True I had a list of expectations and responsibilities. But if I had been handed a real description of just what this job entailed, I might once again have been tempted to get up and leave the room knowing that, as on that day many years ago, I could not fulfill the expectations of such a job description. For just as I knew on that day so long ago that the job was beyond me, in all honesty, I know that this one is as well. I came to understand then, and understand even more fully today, that I was not qualified then for that role nor indeed am I qualified for the role I now hold.

Thanks be to God then that the description of work to which the writer of Hebrews refers today, is for Christ to be the High Priest, indeed the great High Priest. Like those earlier high priests of old, the one who fills this new role still serves as mediator; chosen as He is of God but also fully human so that He would be able to relate to those whom He is

called to serve. But only Jesus could fulfill the fullness of that role, for only Jesus could be a high priest who would not just offer sacrifice for sins but rather for the sin of the whole world, the sin which had caused the breaking of the relationship between God and His creation, the sin which could only be erased through the shedding of the blood of the Son of God who would freely offer Himself for the eternal salvation of all.

And only Jesus could fulfill that role, for only Jesus had been chosen by God in this way, declared beloved by the voice of God as He rose up out of the waters and the Spirit descended upon Him. And in His suffering, He lifted all our suffering to God His Father knowing that He would be heard because of His reverent submission. Thanks be to God that this is not our job or job description for this is the work that only One can fill, so that the great work of salvation is brought to completion and humankind is redeemed in Christ Jesus Our Lord. In gratitude then, and with our own reverent submission using the words of our renewed vows, let us say again and again Thanks be to God – thanks be to God for His call upon our lives; thanks be to God for the ministry that has been entrusted to us; thanks be to God as we seek to be faithful servants of the servants of God...for there is no better job description than that.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen