The Epistle to the Hebrews is one of my favourite NT books. I find its symbolic language very inspiring. But there is no doubt that it is in many ways a difficult and mysterious work. No one knows who wrote it, it was certainly not Paul. It concerns itself not at all with the importance of Jesus to the gentiles. Rather it concentrates on the details of Jewish religious observances, with the details of OT prophecy and seeks to show how Jesus fits in with those, as well as superseding them.

The subject of the passage we have heard is about an almost mystical figure from the Hebrew’s past: Melchizedek, someone you may well not of heard of. The writer says that Jesus has become a high priest forever, in the succession of Melchizedek. Just what does this mean, and why is it so important? It certainly was important; one of the key arguments to convince the Hebrews of how special Jesus was. Melchizedek appears in Genesis 14, where he is called priest of the most high God. He blesses Abraham after a successful battle against the local kings and receives a tithe of all the plunder. That is the last we hear of him directly, but there is another reference in Psalm 110 where the future Messiah is told by the Lord: “you are a priest forever, in the succession of Melchizedek.” This indicates that Melchizedek is a much more important figure than his brief appearance in Genesis might suggest, and this is the passage that the writer of Hebrews quotes.

It is not easy for us to see why this should be such a convincing argument, that is, why is the identification of Christ with Melchizedek such a key point? This is interesting, because it does not just rely on what is said in Genesis about Melchizedek, but also what is not said. There is an important principle of Hebrew society involved in what is said about him. That is the hierarchical principle. As I have said, in Genesis we hear that Melchizedek blessed Abraham and also received a tithe from him. Now the person who blesses is greater than the person blessed and the person who receives a tithe is greater than the one who gives it. So there are two indications here that Melchizedek was greater than Abraham. That is very significant, as Abraham was the first of the Patriarchs and was blessed directly by God: “I will make you into a great nation; I will bless you and make your name so great that it shall be used in blessings.” So anyone who blessed Abraham must be close to God, or a direct intermediary between Abraham and God, that is a Priest, or **the** Priest.

What did I mean about what was not said about Melchizedek? The key point here is that he appears from nowhere, as it were. The OT reflects Hebrew culture in that it regards ancestry and genealogies as very important. Yet, in spite of Melchizedek’s clear importance and superiority to Abraham nothing whatever is said about his ancestry. The implication here is that Melchizedek did not have an ancestry, that he was some semi-divine intermediary between God and man. Furthermore, ancestry was particularly important for the priesthood in Israel. As you may know, priests were descended from the family of Levi, the third son of Jacob, the most famous priest being Moses’ brother Aaron. So, by emphasising that Jesus was a priest after the order of Melchizedek, who had no ancestry, the writer is showing that the old Levitical priesthood of the Jews had been superseded by a wholly superior one. A priest who could connect man with God directly without the need for an ordinary human priesthood.

That was a very important idea to the Jewish Christians this book was speaking to. It showed that the old law and way of sacrifice had been superseded by a new and direct relationship with God, not though ordinary priests who died, but by a priest like Melchizedek who was forever. Jesus Christ. This may have been important to the Jews, but why is it of any importance to us? This sounds like an impossibly complicated OT history point of no relevance to modern life.

Well access to God is still a very important idea for us. It was one of the key issues of the Protestant reformation. A loosening of the authoritarian role played by the Roman clergy. This is something that we ought to think about, as this year is the 350th anniversary of our BCP, produced by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer in 1662. The role of priests in allowing the people access to God is a continuing theme today, played out in the different emphasis placed on receiving communion between different Christian denominations. But I think the message for us here is more fundamental than a different understanding of the role of priests and sacrifice.

The essential message for us is that Jesus changed our relationship with God forever. No longer can anyone stand between us and God. We do not have to rely on the blessing of any man to receive the grace of God. We have free access to God for full and complete personal salvation. This is a great liberation for us, but a danger as well. We may be tempted to “go it alone” on our salvation journey. That would be risky. The message from Hebrews does not mean that there is no need for the institutional church, its sacraments and its priests. These are important ways of achieving a corporate as well as a personal salvation. Being the body of Christ is not just about being an individual person, but also a body of people supporting each other in seeking salvation, a church.

Corporate worship needs people to play various key roles and it needs leaders. There is an important message here about that as well. The writer stresses that every priest is taken from among men and is able to intercede with God for people because he (or she) is also beset by weakness and needs to make sin-offerings for himself no less than for the people. And nobody takes the honour for himself; he is called by God. This is old language expressing something important for ministry today. Priests and other ministers are chosen by God and appointed by the successors of St Peter, as we saw in Gloucester Cathedral when David was licensed as a Reader. We still need to take seriously those who have been called by God, and we need to consider what ministry God may be calling us to.

There is, though, also a danger that we, like the first Hebrew Christians, rely too much on the clergy and the rituals of the church to avoid seeking our own personal relationship with God. That such a personal relationship is available to us is a cornerstone of our Protestant faith, as highlighted by Bishop Michael in his sermon at the licensing service. As so often in life, we need to find the right balance between the corporate and the individual and to frequently re-assess our position on this. We will get it wrong at times. But the great thing to hold on to is Jesus, who in the words of the writer of Hebrews is like an anchor for our lives, an anchor safe and sure… a high priest forever.