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Hebrews 4,14-16

Lent 1 — 14 February 2016

Greeting: To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you. Amen.

We hear a portion of the Epistle lesson from the Letter to the Hebrews, which was read earlier:

For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weakness, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.

So far the reading. Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Introduction: Flyers from the electronic stores push High Definition television sets – and those flyers were in abundance before last Sunday, that is, Super Bowl Sunday. The promise is a much better and sharper picture than an ordinary TV. One of the problems is not the TV set but the better picture they deliver. And the problem is not for those who are watching but for those who are being shown on TV.

For ordinary shows on regular TVs, actors can get by with regular make-up. Regular make-up is good enough to cover up wrinkles, splotches, and even acne of the faces of the stars. But on Hi-Def TV, the picture is too good. Regular make-up no longer is adequate to cover up all the imperfections. The little faults that we couldn't see are now clear and sharp. Suddenly that gorgeous star may appear to be a bit less gorgeous.

This, however, isn't new. As I've gone through the checkout line at the grocery store, I often hope it will be slow. That will give me enough time to scan the tabloids and entertainment magazines that I

ordinarily would never purchase. I'm always amused when there are photos of celebrities when they are not in celebrity mode — that is, when they are shopping or swimming or doing something quite ordinary. At times, the contrast between a celebrity with his or her make-up on or covered up and a celebrity just being normal without make-up or cellulite showing can be quite startling, as well as rather unflattering.

This brings me to a question. How does Jesus look at us? Does He look at us the way others look at us? Others can only see how we look on the outside. Jesus, however, can see both how we look and how we feel. He sees us outwardly and inwardly as if we are on a cosmic, spiritual Hi-Def TV screen. Nothing — and I mean nothing! — is hidden.

But instead of being disappointed with us, Jesus tells us that He understands and sympathizes with us. This brings me to today's sermon theme: "**Jesus Understands Our Weaknesses.**" I'll develop this theme in three points:

- 1) Jesus Is Our High Priest Forever;**
- 2) Jesus Is Like Us But Without Sin;** and,
- 3) Jesus Boldly Invites Us To Come To Him.**

1) Jesus Is Our High Priest Forever. To think about Jesus as our High Priest, we first have to understand the Old Testament background on which this concept is based. God instituted the day of Atonement while the children of Israel were still in the wilderness and God's glory still shone over the mercy seat atop of the ark of the covenant.

In the wilderness the people of Israel built the tabernacle, where sacrifices would be made to the Lord. The tabernacle was an enclosed area of about 150 feet by 50 feet, and in its midst was the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies.

The Holy of Holies was separated from the Holy Place by a curtain.

Only the high priest and only he alone could enter the Holy of Holies, and then only one day a year, on the Day of Atonement. On the Day of Atonement, instead of wearing his bejewelled and spectacular clothing, he would only wear white linen clothing, even plainer than the ordinary priests, and look more like a slave than a high priest.

On the Day of Atonement the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies to make atonement for the sins of the people (Leviticus 16). Before he went in, he would choose two male goats, both of whom had to be without blemish.

One goat would be the sin offering and be killed and his blood would be used to sprinkle the mercy seat, which is on the ark of the covenant.

The other goat would be the scapegoat. The scapegoat would be presented live before the Lord, have the sins of the people transferred on its head, and then the goat would be driven into the wilderness (Leviticus 16,21-22).

In addition to this, the high priest would also slaughter an unblemished bull to make atonement for himself and his household (Leviticus 16,6). Before the high priest would go into the Holy of Holies, he would prepare incense to shield him from the glory of the Lord, lest he see God's glory and die.

For God, the Day of Atonement and its sacrifices, were but a picture of the Messiah, His own Son, whom He would send, when the time would be right.

Every year on the Day of Atonement, the High Priest would enter the Holy of Holies. He would go through the veil of the Holy Place and then through the veil that separated the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place.

Jesus, as our High Priest and also as the Sacrifice, would go through the veil but once.

He went through the veil of death for us, and as our Sacrificial Victim, paid the price for sin once and for all with His death on the Cross.

When Jesus died, the veil in the temple in Jerusalem was ripped in two (Matthew 27,51; Mark 15,38; Luke 23,45), indicating that now only through Jesus was there to be access to God for the forgiveness of sin. As the letter to the Hebrews says:

Since therefore, brethren, we have confidence to enter the Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh. (Hebrews 10,19-20)

Good Friday has replaced the Day of Atonement; but while the Day of Atonement was repeated yearly, Good Friday happened but once, never to be repeated.

After having paid the price for the sins of the world, Jesus rose from the dead. After having shown Himself to His disciples, Jesus then ascended into heaven, “He passed through the heavens” once and for all. He now sits at the right hand of God the Father, there to intercede for us. And Jesus can successfully intercede for us because

2) Jesus Is Like Us But Without Sin. Jesus is our High Priest, but He is also the Son of God. In Jesus, God the Son took on our flesh and was “born of a woman, born under the Law, in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law” (Galatians 4,4-5).

Jesus took on our flesh so that he could “sympathize with our weaknesses.” The word sympathize comes from the verb, “to suffer with.” Jesus, according to His human nature, suffered with us, with our humanity. Jesus was tempted as we are, but there is an important difference: Jesus was without sin.

Jesus suffered with us in enduring the temptations that are common to all people.

At the beginning of His ministry, we see the devil trying to tempt Jesus and divert Him from His mission to go to the Cross, where He would redeem mankind from its sins.

First, the devil wanted Jesus to distrust His Sonship, to presume on His Sonship, and to repudiate His Sonship. To turn stone into bread would be to gratify His own wants, and therefore to distrust His Sonship.

Second, To leap from the precipice of the temple would be to deliberately put Himself into danger, to tempt God Himself, and thus presume on His Sonship.

Third, to worship the devil, to exchange a spiritual, eternal Kingdom of Grace for a worldly kingdom of power and wealth which is limited by time and whose end is death, would be to repudiate His Sonship.

These are still the temptations that face mankind. The temptations can be bold or subtle. But ultimately every temptation is a temptation to place our judgment above that of God's. This is what Adam and Eve did. They defied God's "No."

God offered life – but they chose death.

God offered eternal companionship with Him – but they chose the path of separation and alienation.

God offered holiness – but they chose sin.

God spoke – but they chose to listen to the voice of the devil.

If we were on high definition TV would we look more like Jesus, or Adam and Eve? I think we'd look more like Adam and Eve.

All of our spots and blemishes and weaknesses would show up, and not all the make-up in the world could cover us up so that we would look good enough to be in Jesus' presence, in the presence of He Who

sits at God's right hand, in the presence of He Who is holy and without blot or blemish or sin. What do the Scriptures say about us?

There is none that is righteous, no not one. (Romans 3,10)

and

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3,23)

But if we search the Scriptures, we see that only Jesus was without sin. Peter writes of Jesus that he "committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth" (1 Peter 2,22). Peter is citing the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 53,9). Both the Old and the New Testament bear witness to Jesus' sinlessness, His holiness.

Peter also writes of Jesus as the final sacrifice for sin: we were redeemed "with precious blood, as of a Lamb unblemished and spotless, the Blood of Christ" (1 Peter 1,19). To be unblemished and spotless is to be without fault, without sin.

If the high priest on the Day of Atonement wore clothing that a slave might wear, then on the Cross Jesus was stripped, as befitting a criminal and slave. In the agony of death Jesus did not call down fire from heaven on His tormentors and persecutors, but rather asked God the Father to forgive them! Jesus remained obedient to the Father's will to the end — and was without sin.

But even without sin, Jesus endured all that we did. He knows our weaknesses, which are not hidden from Him.

Indeed, God the Son came to us because we could not come to Him. He died for us "while we were yet sinners" (Romans 5,8). Christ died for us "while we were still helpless" (Romans 5,6).

Christ was without sin so that His death would be the perfect and final sacrifice for sin, perfectly acceptable to God as the payment for all sin. To all who believe that Christ died for them to win forgiveness for

them, then

3) Jesus Boldly Invites Us To Come To Him. In spite of our sin, Jesus has forgiven us. His invitation to boldly come to Him rests on this forgiveness which He has won for us.

When we recognize our sin and repent, we are assured that for Jesus' sake God has forgiven us our sins. As Paul writes:

Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, and whose sins have been covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account. (Romans 4,7-9)

Any make-up we might use cannot cover our sins, our shortcomings — but the make-up of Jesus' forgiveness can and does cover our sins.

Thus Jesus invites all forgiven sinners to receive mercy and grace in times of need. We need mercy to cover our sins of the past. We are assured that once forgiven, our sins are forgotten by God for Jesus' sake. We also need grace for times of need.

Jesus says we are to ask for this grace, this assurance that He is with us even in our weakness. Jesus calls us:

Come unto Me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give your rest. (Matthew 11,28)

He knows our weakness and assures us that He will give us rest. Rest from the burden of sin. Rest from the guilt of sin. Rest to be forgiven and strengthened to continue in life. Rest to be assured that in health or sickness, in wealth or poverty, in youth or old age, Jesus forgives us and is with us. Rest to know that life has meaning, for He has first served us so that we might serve Him. He has first loved us so we might love Him. Rest to know that even death cannot separate us from Him, for He has triumphed over death.

We are to come to Him daily, to repent of our sins and be assured

that we have been forgiven. John says:

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1,8-9)

There is no need to pretend that we are something that we are not before Jesus. He understands and sympathizes with our weaknesses. And He invites us to boldly come to Him who stands at the throne of grace to forgive us.

Conclusion. The cosmetic industry is big business. People put on make-up to look better to those around them and to themselves. But before God we appear like those actors on high definition TV — all of our blemishes are now visible.

But we do not stand before a merciless God.

God sent His Son to be our High Priest and our Sacrifice for sin.

Jesus is like us in every way, but without sin. Because He is without sin, He made the perfect sacrifice to pay for our sins. He is like us and can sympathize with our weakness.

So, weak as we are, Jesus invites us to repent of our sins and taste of His forgiveness — hear the proclamation of forgiveness, be washed in the flood of Holy Baptism, and receive His true Body and Blood in which He gives us forgiveness — so that each and every day we may receive the help and life which we need. Amen.

Now, may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

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