

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## You Are A Priest For Ever

These words are spoken by God to the Messiah in Ps 109 (helpfully chosen as the psalm for today's Mass). This psalm was sung in the Temple at the anointing of a new King, and on his royal anniversary each year. We can imagine the new king being enthroned to the right hand side of the Temple; we can imagine the awe as the people heard that God was going to put the King's enemies beneath his feet; they would have wondered at God's "adoption" of the King (*You are my son: today I have become your Father*) and they would have heard him called "a priest for ever, like Melchizedek of old".

### Melchizedek

is "king of Salem" (which means *peace*), and "a priest of God Most High"; a mysterious figure. He comes to Abraham at his victory over the four great kings, and presents him with bread and wine. Any Christian reading this would find his radar lighting up; and the Church has always seen him as an archetype of Jesus. The fathers of the Church saw Salem as *Jerusalem*, making him also an archetype of David, who was the first Jewish king to reign in Jerusalem. It is as if Abraham is meeting his future in meeting Melchizedek. The letter to the Hebrews points out that he pops up in the story, with no previous mention and no second; it is a mystic encounter that cannot be explained.

### The Last Supper

When Jesus picks up the bread and the wine at the last Supper he is behaving in a similarly mysterious way. It always amazes me that the apostles took such careful note of what he did, and that they kept his commandment, *Do this in memory of me*, with such solemn obedience: despite the fact that they not only failed to understand what he meant by it, but were almost completely blind to his whole mission at its most intense and serious moment. There have been many attempts to explain what he meant by it; but there are some things which cannot and should not be forced into explanatory speech or writing, and this is one of them. The Eucharist can only be apprehended, experienced: it can't be satisfactorily explained, even by the cleverest of theologians. When they try to do this, they feel their inadequacies very keenly. Because they are trying to put into words a central

deed of Jesus. God didn't address the world in sparkling prose. He addressed his creation by sending his Word in human form, and we can only receive him as a human being who is divine. That puts him well beyond our power to describe or explain.

### We've Tried

Of course, great thinkers haven't been silent about the Eucharist. Thomas Aquinas was huge on the subject in the thirteenth century, and his theory of Transubstantiation got a whole hatful of Oscars from people who thought every thing was made out of substance and accidents. As a matter of fact, that isn't how we do think about anything, so Thomas's attempts to speak of the Eucharist don't cut too much mustard today. We know that there's no physical change in the bread and the wine, we know it isn't Chemistry or Atomic Physics; we know a lot more about change of meaning, and we know that the Eucharist belongs in the heart of a community, wherever two or three are gathered in Christ's name. We know that in the broken bread Christ is truly and certainly and fully present to us, and this is because he has attached to this sign his own divine power, which is to say his enduring love. But if you say that the Church has been doing something central to its life for twenty centuries without having an exhaustive theory of what it means, then you're right. This is a divine command, and its resonance can only be totally known by God.

### The Incarnation Endures

Christ remains with his Church as he promised he would. The physical bread which is lifted up to be the Church's eternal food is the place where we find him most certainly and definitely. That is why we surround the consecrated host and cup with such veneration. Of all the food we will ever eat, this is the absolute bread, the nourishment which puts all other into shade; this cup is all that Jesus suffered and all that we suffer who drink from it; and because he has promised to be with those who suffer, we meet him when we drink from it. Our communion with him is not a matter of feeling close, or remembering him very powerfully. The whole Christ is with us; we know him in this broken bread, and this shared cup.

*Fr Philip*