

Aim of lesson

For the young people to understand what it means when we say that the Lord Jesus is our mediator, or high priest, and to appreciate how he has made it possible for us to come to God.

Bible background

Leviticus 8:5-9, 21:17-23; Numbers 18; Hebrews 5:1-3.

Preparation required

Familiarise yourself with the lesson material so that the main points are clear in your mind. Try not to get so bogged down in symbols that the real lessons of the priesthood of Jesus are lost.

Suggested outline of lesson

Why do we need a mediator?

The nation of Israel were told in no uncertain terms that they did not have direct access to God. At Sinai, Moses was told to prevent them from even touching the mountain (Exodus 19:12), and the people, terrified, asked Moses to act as a go-between for them. (This was mentioned in Lesson 12, so you could ask the young people whether they remember!).

In Leviticus 10, Nadab and Abihu offer 'strange fire' to the Lord, and are slain. We do not know exactly what they did wrong, but we should take the lesson that we should not be casual in our approach to God, or take him for granted. God says 'Among those who approach me I will show myself holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honoured' (Leviticus 10:3). Approach to God must be on his terms.

All this happened to the Jews - God's chosen people. The Gentiles were even further away from God - 'excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world' (Ephesians 2:12).

So we learn from these passages that on our own we are cut off from God because of our sins - just as Adam and Eve were, literally, when they were excluded from the garden of Eden.

What we need is for someone to bring us to God, to change the fact that we are estranged from him.

The Priesthood of Aaron and his sons

The law of Moses provided priests who would do what the common people could not.

- Aaron and his descendants were appointed as priests, and only they were allowed to serve at the altar and inside the tabernacle. Anyone else who did would be put to death. (Numbers 18:7).
- No physical defect was allowed - they had to be physically perfect (Leviticus 21:17-23).
- The priests were invested with special clothes - 'for glory and for beauty', put on in a particular sequence (Leviticus 8:5-13). You may like to think with the young people of the significance of the way the priests were washed and then covered in white; finally the high priest was dressed in his fine robes.
- Despite these conditions, access to God was still strictly limited and controlled, and in this way the weakness of this dynastic order was exposed (Hebrews 7:23).

Look at Hebrews 5:1-3, and see the summary of their task:

1. They were to represent the people in matters related to God. So when the high priest carried out his duties, he was acting as a representative of the people. It may be helpful to draw a comparison with the way an elected politician, in theory at least, is supposed to represent the people who elected him.
2. They were to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. First they had to offer for themselves (as in Leviticus 16:6, for example); only then were they in a position to make an offering for the people (Leviticus 16:15).

The Priesthood of Jesus

Consider with the young people how the Lord Jesus Christ was the fulfilment of these characteristics of Aaron and his sons; like them, to be a true representative, he had to be human (Hebrews 2:14-18; 4:14-15). However, there are some significant differences brought out in the book of Hebrews:

- The high priests died, so there was a need for a succession of priests; but 'because Jesus lives for ever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.' (Hebrews 7:24-25).
- Because Aaron and his sons were sinners, they had to keep offering sacrifices for themselves, but the Lord Jesus has been made perfect for ever (Hebrews 7:25-28).

- Once a year, the high priest was able to enter the most holy place, but Jesus (Hebrews 9:12) 'entered the Most Holy Place [heaven itself] once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption'.
- The sacrifices under the law were able to some extent to bring forgiveness, but they did not make anything perfect - they did nothing about our human nature. The sacrifice of Jesus, however, is able to 'cleanse our consciences' (Hebrews 9:14).

So how does the priesthood of Jesus help us?

This is the real point of the discussion. Left to ourselves we are still cut off from God. The need for a mediator still exists. There is 'one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus' (1 Timothy 2:5) and so the role of Jesus as mediator is crucial to satisfy our needs and to secure our salvation.

- Ephesians 2:12-15. Jesus has broken down the 'dividing wall' so that those who wish to do so may come to God through him.
- The Lord Jesus 'brings us to God' (1 Peter 3:18). It is almost as though because Jesus is in God's presence, he is able to introduce us, so that we can speak to his Father.
- Through Jesus our sins are forgiven, so that the reason for our exclusion from God is removed (Hebrews 9:15).
- Hebrews 10:19-22. The veil has been taken away.
- The Lord Jesus is our 'advocate with the Father' (AV) (1 John 2:1).

Some find comfort in the thought that Jesus acts as an intermediary when we pray, so that we do not pray directly to our Father, but that Jesus presents our prayers to his Father on our behalf. Others are confused by the idea that the Almighty needs in some way to be persuaded to listen to our prayers, or to have them explained.

The epistle to the Hebrews refers to Christ as the mediator of a new, or better, covenant (Hebrews 8:6; 9:15; 12:24), meaning that he was instrumental in bringing about the change from the pattern of the law. He intercedes for us (Romans 8:34, Hebrews 7:25) because it is by our association with him in his perfect sacrifice that we are enabled to come to God. In John 16:26-27 Jesus says '... I am not saying that I will ask the Father on your behalf. No, the Father himself loves you because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God'.

The Greek word in 1 John 2:1 is *parakletos*, which is translated 'comforter' in the gospel. It simply means someone who helps us. A related word, *paraklesis*, is quite common in the New Testament. It is translated in various ways, but the best meaning is probably 'encouragement'. The Lord Jesus, helps and encourages us.

In this way he is continuing the work that he began in his earthly ministry - helping individuals to come to God, and on God's behalf providing forgiveness for their sins.

What about before we are baptised?

To be accurate, we can only pray 'in the name of Jesus' once we have put on his name in baptism, but this lesson should not give the impression that unbaptised people cannot pray to God, or that their prayers are not heard. Cornelius prayed to God regularly, and his prayers came up 'as a memorial offering before God' (Acts 10:2-4). The Lord who said 'suffer little children to come unto me' was surely, as in everything else he said, speaking on behalf of his Father, to whom praise is perfected 'out of the mouth of babes and sucklings' (Matthew 21:16).

The difference the Lord Jesus makes is that through him our relationship with God is changed, and through our faith and baptism we are adopted as children of God, with the assurance that so long as we continue faithful, our salvation is assured.

Relevance to our lives

Prayer is not easy for any of us but it should be if we really understand Jesus' role today.

We now stand in an even more privileged position than the High Priest under the law. This gives us a deeper appreciation of what Jesus has done (Hebrews 13:10).

Prayer

Think about Hebrews 4:14-16 for a while and then get the young people to think about a prayer of their own asking for forgiveness.

Other suggestions for activities

If the young people would benefit from a consideration of the symbolism of the High Priest's clothes you could obtain a colour picture and discuss the meaning of them in greater detail, and their fulfilment in Christ.