

Епископ Серафим (Сузруст). США **Melchizedek king of peace: a sign for our time**

Dear Fathers, brothers and sisters,

It is my intention to speak on the figure of Melchizedek, the Priest-King whose appearance to Abraham and blessing of him is recorded in Genesis chapter 14, and I wish to propose that in representing a union in Peace of all the ways of history, is a sign of special importance for our time. But surely if there is one figure in the Bible who expresses the mystery of the historical and the more than historical (or Metahistorical) it is the mysterious Melchizedek.

This will be a somewhat shortened version of a longer study on the subject, because of limited time here, but I will try to touch the main points.

But first let us put the Bible text: From Genesis 14 Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he was the priest of the most high God. 19 And he blessed him, and said, Blessed be Abram of the most high God, possessor of heaven and earth: 20 And blessed be the most high God, which hath delivered thine enemies into thy hand. And he (Abraham) gave him tithes of all (the goods captured in a battle which had just ended).

To which this from Psalm 110: The LORD hath sworn, and will not repent, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek.

And this from Hebrews 7 To whom also Abraham gave a tenth part of all; first being by interpretation King of righteousness, and after that also King of Salem, which is, King of peace; 3 Without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days, nor end of life; but made like unto the Son of God; abideth a priest continually. 4 Now consider how great this man was, unto whom even the patriarch Abraham gave the tenth of the spoils.

Melchizedek is King of Salem, which is also to say King of Peace, and it is the city of Jerusalem, which is now hardly a city of Peace.

I remember a Palestinian artist friend, Vladimir Tamari saying that it sometimes seems that to solve the problem of Jerusalem, we will have to solve all the problems of the world. He invented a device for stereoscopic drawing, Vladimir did, and for refining pictures from Space, but he could not see a way forward in the question of Jerusalem and I see his tall frame bent by the weight of it and the sadness of it...

Now we seem to feel this intertwined impossible problem spreading out through many paths of trouble to Chechnya and Baghdad and from Bali to the Sudan to Algeria and back again to Jerusalem. To "The City of Peace".

Fr Alexander Men at an earlier stage of this interlocking trouble — an upheaval of colliding cultures as if of clashing geotectonic plates as continents break apart and recombine — Fr Men wrote his brief reflection "Karabakh or Bethlehem" referring to the war of Armenians and Azeris for a small region, and also to the early stages of the

wars of Chechnya, and he said that for all the promise of history as conceived by a Bergson or a Teilhard, it still requires that humanity ratify the road ahead out of freedom and choose the star of hope rather than the long night of a new dark age.

Fr Alexander writes "If the most unnatural war is civil war [...] then shouldn't we finally admit that we are witnessing a world-wide civil war between all the 'children of Adam', a war that is tearing the body of humanity apart?"

We propose this meditation as a small parallel offering to that of Fr Alexander's

written also at a time, of standing at a historical crossroads. As he says "Karabakh stands in my mind as a collective symbol for ... innumerable tragedies" So we take Jerusalem as symbol.

We speak of the three great religions of Jerusalem, not to reduce everything to simply religious conflict, what can also be discussed in socio-economic, geopolitical and general cultural ways, but using them as representative of the human families.

So we start with a new millennium at a crossroads. It is here at this crossroad that I sense the figure of Melchizedek as a Sign for our day. A figure already significant for the three great monotheistic faiths, Christianity, Judaism and Islam.

For the Christian, Melchizedek's meaning is, as the author of Hebrews draws out, as a sort of prefiguration of Christ and of his priesthood and kingship which is prior to the Levitical priesthood and the throne of David, as it also fulfils them. It is only somewhat later, from the time of Clement of Alexandria that the offering of bread and wine is taken up as a type of the Eucharist and then of course the Psalmist "thou art a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek" is taken up and applied to the Christian priesthood and included in the ordination rite of the Catholic Church.

For Judaism the significance of Melchizedek is great but perhaps less simple. Melchizedek may be a heavenly priest and more than human king as he is among the Essenes and Qumran literature — even in one text acting as cosmic judge at the end separating the good from the evil. Perhaps in reaction to the Christian seeing of Melchizedek as a sort of preimagining of Christ and of Christ's role as Priest and King, later Jewish teachers

tended to identify the priesthood of Melchizedek with that of Shem the son of Noah which is finally superseded (for mainstream Judaism for example in Maimonides) by the priesthood of the sons of Abraham to whom then the Psalm verse is made to apply "Thou (Abraham) art a priest forever [succeeding the priesthood] of the order of Melchizedek. [because of the blessing of Melchizedek]".

So the central point is the problem of Melchizedek as before the Law.

My knowledge of what Islam does with Melchizedek is more limited still, but for one thing for the Shiite branch of Islam which recognizes a line of Imams, of leaders of faith who are a concrete if at times hidden, spiritual presence in the world, Melchizedek is a sort of hidden Imam. Further Melchizedek can be related to the mysterious wandering figure of Khidr one of four (with Jesus and Enoch and Elijah) who never in the ordinary sense died.

Khidr-Melchizedek is said to have spoken with Moses at the time of the dividing of the Red Sea. Khidr can correspond then also to the Jewish legends of Elijah wandering the world.

Murat Yagan compares the meeting of the great poet and spiritual master Rumi with Shams al Tabrizi (a mysterious wanderer whom Rumi accepted as master) to that of Abraham with Melchizedek. "Shams was burning and Rumi caught fire." In both cases — direct transmission by "a messenger from the Source".

The Chinese saying I love. "Outside all tradition a direct transmission pointed straight to the heart".

Now the meeting point of the views of Melchizedek, the possible present common understanding of Christian and Jew and Muslim, cannot be simply and immediately the Christian idea of Melchizedek as a prefiguring of Christ—Priest and King whose offering is bread and wine and who mysteriously is the full humanity prior even to Adam or Abraham — but it need not of course in any way foreclose that understanding. However we are seeking the vision of Melchizedek as a Sign of Peace which can be received at once within all traditions.

Fr Robert McMeekin, an American Orthodox priest whose ministry has included in Afghanistan praying simple Islamic prayers for dying Muslims writes this: "The image of Melchizedek in Genesis points us to a truth beyond particularity, a priesthood that in the estimation of the writer of Hebrews is superior to any which

came after. It is a priesthood that predates all our notions, Jewish and Christian alike, and moves us to a deeper understanding that the God who loves us has always done so and always will."

The question of who was "the historical Melchizedek" brings us deeper into understanding how Melchizedek goes beyond each of the historical traditions. There are three main possibilities: One that he is not a historical figure at all but a record of an appearance of the Divine, a Theophany, this clearly is outside the ordinary historical development.

Second is that the story goes back to an early time and is of a historical priest who met Abraham and blessed him, but if so obviously this priest is a Canaanite and completely outside the Jewish tradition and it is an absolutely unique event.

Third is that if we allow the story to be later, it again seems to serve, and perhaps be included in order to serve, the purpose of going beyond ordinary tradition. Suppose it to be of the time of David, and then it can legitimize his appointment of a high priest who was not of Levi. Or if, as has been suggested, it is of the time of the Persian government, then it serves to show that the priesthood goes back before Levites and even before the temple in the Holy City, perhaps of course to gain respect and influence for the priests of that time but precisely by breaking through their own tradition.

Living religion in fact, and this can be one conclusion, always has the possibility of going beyond itself to new understanding, and if this is true of Judaism and of Islam, then how much more ought it be true for Christians whose faith is based on the guidance of the Holy Spirit who "will lead you into all truth."

So a first conclusion is that Melchizedek represents a going beyond the previous history and understanding and this is one reason why we see him as a sign of what is necessary for the beginning of a new reconciliation, new opening to reconciliation and Peace.

Melchizedek gives his blessing to Abraham and history begins and he is father of Ishmael to whom the Arabs trace their origin as well as of Isaac. The children of Abraham will go their separate ways and struggle among themselves and again in our time too, they go out to war...

Now as Fr McMeekin says if Melchizedek is at the beginning of the history of the nations and faiths, he is also outside of it. In Melchizedek we see that there is an authority within history which set all of our journeys into motion and yet which is prior to them and will remain after them. It is before and beyond the authority of the Jewish Law or of the precepts of Islam, beyond the authority even of Christian monastery or palace, beyond that is the world of "Christendom".

Each spiritual family and each human family has entrenched itself within its own history which then is felt to be closed and complete. From the historical philosopher Eric Vogelin the warning "Don't let them immanentize the Eschaton". And in fact the supposing to be within our history, that which is outside it, the Ends of things, is precisely what these closed systems become. And of course any conflict between closed and complete systems is irreconcilable for no such system can admit an outside to itself, to other possibilities than its own.

And yet each faith contains within its world the figure of Melchizedek who is also before and beyond and outside — he is an opening in every closed system.

So now it seems the nations need again the blessing of Melchizedek to resolve our journeys set in motion so long ago by that first blessing.

Melchizedek both inaugurates and brings an end to each separate way... would not his blessing received anew allow the three ways to flow together?

He offers Bread and Wine in his role as Priest-King of course (speaking now on this more than historical level) he merges here with Prester John, and perhaps with a greater yet, in the offering of the Christian Eucharist. Let this be the most primordial level of all and yet is it not also the Messianic Banquet of Israel? And how does it differ from the great night banquet of the final Eid—the Festival ending the last Ramadan?

Melchizedek represents this end, in which history and metahistory converge. In him all the histories that come after live in harmony with each other ground together in the bread he divides without disunion, mingled in his wine.

We have proposed an image of Peace which is not a program of course and has no special path of implementation and yet which is dynamic and complete and already accepted within all of the historical families.

While the acceptance of the Peace of the King of Peace may wait, as the news of the world continues to be of troubles, we have in Melchisadek the promise that deeper than all and already accessible in every human family and on every human path is the harmony of the Kingdom of Peace.

May it be speedily realized.

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