



Reflection: 28 December 2025

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Matthew 2: 13-23

Hebrews 2: 10-18

Trailblazers – Guided by the Grace of God

In the Book of Hebrews Jesus is described as a merciful and faithful High Priest. That idea made me think of an ancient man in fancy vestments slaughtering some poor sheep. I don't like to connect the man I believe Jesus was with that gory picture.

So what I am going to do is start by saying what biblical scholars who know more about these things say was the reason this book made it into our Bible.

Then I will say what that picture on the order of service is all about. For me that man is doing something like a High Priest or Jesus for that matter, but not in a Temple and not involving anything to do with sheep. I will then talk about some other people who have been trailblazers in my time as a parish minister.

As sermons have three parts, you can guess I will finish by saying how I think this could be relevant for us.

The Book of Hebrews says Jesus experienced people's lives, fought their temptations and made the ultimate sacrifice of sharing their death. Jesus had walked their path of life and he was their Messiah who they could trust to lead them to God. Jesus shows us the way, through his life and through his perfect sacrifice of himself, he eliminates the impediments of our sins and through him we can enter the eternal presence and love of God.

I must own up to having some personal difficulty with what is called the Doctrine of Atonement, that Jesus had to pay the perfect sacrifice on our behalf for our sins to be forgiven so we could approach God, but that would have made perfect sense to the Jewish hearers of the time.

We probably know the hymn:-

“There is a green hill far away, without a city wall, where the dear Lord was crucified, who died to save us all. There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin. He only could unlock the gate of heav’n and let us in.”

I do not like singing that. That’s my personal confession. I am not going to go down that path, just say that our faith in the way of Jesus brings us to God. The book of Hebrews does that in a way that makes sense to the Jewish people he was writing for.

Hebrews says that Jesus is the ultimate High Priest.

The High Priest was the trailblazer for Jewish people who tried to live according to the commandments but, being typical human beings, they failed. The High Priest cleared the way to God for them by making sacrifices on their behalf. I will come back to what the trailblazing High Priest means for us at the end.

So, what about trailblazers who have touched my life.

I will start with a very practical and completely worldly man. Leading the way, experiencing the pitfalls, and bringing us to our desired destination is the purpose of the man on the front of the Order of Service. His name is actually Mark Smith. You can see he is looking a bit happy and smug. He is sitting on a train. If you have travelled overseas on trains you may realise that it doesn’t matter that he is actually Mr. Mark Smith. What is significant is the seat he is sitting in. It is seat number 61 in First Class on the train. He is that mythical but very useful and reliable character - “The man in Seat 61.”

Mark Smith set up a website that would be a really detailed guide to travelling anywhere on a train. He even covers travelling on the few trains we have here in New Zealand. I don’t know where he found the time or the money to do so much travelling around by train. Apparently, he has made his career doing it. I guess there must be commercial sponsorship and other things like that that are the workings of another world but anyway, he is the High Priest of train travel. I don’t know what sacrifice he has made for us. I suspect it has been a good enough source of income for him, but he has experienced all the problems we could face and will tell us how to avoid them or overcome them. From experience, I can say he did that very well for Linda and me when we were travelling around in Europe some years ago.

So that’s a reliable guide who can mean you get the best deal on a ticket and end up on the right platform so you have a hassle-free journey on the train that delivers you to where you want to go. As we have just sung in that hymn, “you can find them on trains”, but reliable trailblazing guides can be found all through life.

When I told Linda what I was planning for this service, she said, “You talked about people you knew last time you took a service here, last year.” She’s right, but today I am going to talk about four different people who were in my first parish. This time I am reflecting on the different ways they were trailblazers, like the man in seat 61, and showed the way.

When I completed my formal and academic training to be a Presbyterian minister at the end of 1982, a parish based in Kaitaia was prepared to take me on. It was a Uniting Parish so the appointment was for five years which could be renewed if both they and I wanted to. By the end of the five years, we wanted to move to a city so our elder son Andrew could go to university and continue to live at home, and I had a call to St. George's/Iona here in Christchurch. So, we didn't want to extend our appointment. When I think, with some embarrassment, of the silly things I did, I am surprised that apparently, they would have continued to stick with me. I didn't realise it, but that parish taught me a lot about what it meant to be a parish minister by graciously putting up with my mistakes. Anyway, those four people I am going to mention reliably served as guides for life in their very different ways.

First there was Grace. She was the chair of the Parish Council when I started there. She and her late husband owned a local store and I was told how they had helped people through hard times through their generosity. Grace was wise. She had a huge heart for people who were suffering and I never saw her lose her quiet self-control. It is fair to say the parish was socially conservative - most of them were against the legalisation of homosexuality. Grace was not, and being respected as she was, nobody would challenge her enlightened attitudes that were way ahead of her time, especially as it was in the Far North back then. Grace quietly showed a different way of being Christ-like. Her life said, this is how you make Jesus' compassion and she did so in real terms of practical dollars and cents while you are a person who commands real respect. She was a trailblazer for enlightened and practical social justice.

The second person was Lyla. I reckon Lyla showed Jesus' compassion, but in a different way to Grace. Lyla seemed to be a thoroughly unworldly lady. I was only just over 40 back then and I thought she was rather funny, but I liked her. I don't think she would bring cakes for a church stall or help in the kitchen. I think that some of our more obviously respectable and conventional people didn't take Lyla seriously. She would do things like sit down on the pavement with the people who may be begging or were just homeless. Lyla was a trailblazer for seeing the value in unappealing people. I guess she showed how to be humble and not prejudiced. She could be described as Mrs. Scruffy, but she was a saint.

There are parts of the world today that would cease to be hotbeds of cruelty, oppression and injustice if they allowed their Graces and Lylas to show them the way. I reckon there was a lot of Jesus in those two ladies.

Then there was John and Karen. They were a young couple and John had arrived in the town as a teacher. They came from a very committed Methodist background in Auckland. John and Karen turned up one Sunday and I found out where they lived. I was soon off to visit them at their home. I said to them that our parish couldn't match the lively, young people centred approach of the dynamic Baptist Church in the town. I don't know what led them to respond as they did, but they said, "You need a first young couple and we are going to be them." They were and we came to have a Youth Group and some other young people came amongst our

grey headed congregation. Later, I had the honour of being asked to baptise their first child in their home church of Mt. Albert Methodist. That child was the first fifth generation child of that family to have been baptised in that church. John and Karen were trailblazers for our parish to become more relevant for younger people.

I think you can see where this is going. Ordinary people - the man in seat 61, John and Karen, Grace and Lyla, were all very different people whom I wouldn't have said were High Priests in the way the first century Jews would have understood that role. But just as the High Priest opened the way to God, these people either opened the way for young people to find a spiritual home in my parish, or for our community to be shown how to be compassionate, accepting and wise.

Actually, I could have come up with a much longer list of people who have been like that for me. I would be surprised if at least some of you did not look back and thank God for someone who became a trailblazer for you at some time in your life.

Very different people, very different gifts. That's a church congregation.

On the last Sunday of the year, looking back, you may not realise it but you will have served someone during this year and you will do so next year. That is what comes of being followers of Jesus. We are part of the team that is the Body of Christ: the World's Great High Priest.

Finally, I am going to be specific and get back closer to the purpose of the High Priest, what the Book of Hebrews and our faith is all about. If we are part of the team of Jesus' followers, the team which continues the work of that Great High priest; our job is what he did, ensure that people were forgiven so that nothing stood between them and God. Achieving forgiveness and acceptance was the High Priest's business. It was what Jesus' ministry was all about and so it is our business. Forgiveness and acceptance are essential parts of inclusion. You can't forgive and accept someone unless you include them as they are. The Gospel is all about forgiveness. Forgiveness and including just go together. Our priestly purpose is to not exclude anyone. If we ourselves are alienated from anyone, to be inclusive means to be open to the healing of that relationship.

I believe we are all here because we are seeking what is good. We are to help anyone who is seeking to find the goodness they seek. As a community we are trailblazers like the man in seat 61 so people don't get lost in their lives. We are there to show how to be compassionate like Grace and Lyla or bringing new vitality like Karen and John. Being a trailblazer in the Jesus way is assuring others that they are forgiven and accepted and nurtured and loved on the journey of life. And also, to accept that is equally real for ourselves. To live knowing that we are forgiven, accepted and nurtured is to live within the Grace of God.

Amen