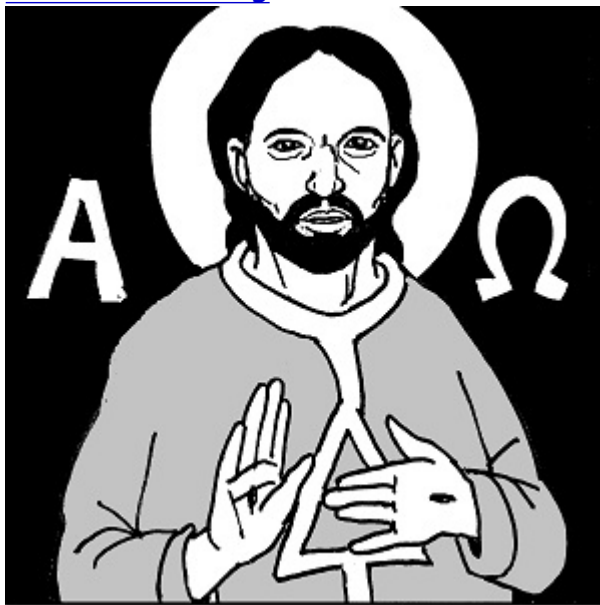


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“Demonstrate the same eagerness for the fulfillment of hope until the end”
(Hebrews 6:12).

Heb 6:10-20; Mark 6:23-28

Whether by coincidence or intent, today’s reading from Hebrews addresses the importance of oaths and promises. In religious and civil ceremonies like the one on the steps of the U.S. Capitol on January 20, leaders will promise to perform their duties of office with God as their witness. A solemn oath is intended to guarantee institutional stability and the fidelity of the office holder.

The author of Hebrews assures believers that God keeps promises and that Jesus is the pledge of this blessed assurance. Because of this, we are to “hold fast to the hope that lies before us. This we have as an anchor of the soul, sure and firm, which reaches into the interior behind the veil, where Jesus has entered on our behalf as forerunner” (10:20). Jesus is later called “our pioneer, perfecter of the faith” (12:2) and believers are encouraged to keep their “eyes on the prize,” one of the enduring mantras of the Civil Rights Movement.

Establishing genuine authority is not always easy. Jesus, God’s emissary to the world, is resisted and undermined by other claimants who see him as a threat to their legitimacy. In today’s Gospel, the Pharisees accuse his disciples of breaking the sabbath by picking heads of grain to eat while walking through the fields. Jesus defends them with the assertion that such rules are secondary to human need. “The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath.”

Jesus then cites a provocative example to support human lordship of the sabbath. David once allowed his hungry men to eat the ritual bread reserved for priests in the temple. Jesus' critics knew the story and would not have missed the point that at the time of this incident David was a fugitive from Saul, who wanted to kill him out of jealousy and as a rival to the throne. Wasn't this precisely what the Pharisees were plotting against Jesus?

The temple establishment in Jerusalem joined with the Herodians and the Romans to destroy Jesus, only to be confronted with the claim that he was the promised messiah. He was crucified and mocked as "king of the Jews," but then raised in glory and worshiped by the church as the new Adam, the first born of the dead, the Son of God. He is the anchor of our hope, having already passed through the veil of death as our pledge of future glory.

Human life is a fragile affair, and even the most impressive of human institutions come and go. History is the record of the rise and fall of empires and kingdoms thought indomitable. Yet, in the end, the most powerful force is a promise that endures in the human heart, passed on from generation to generation. Jesus is that promise, our hope of eternal life.

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