

Let's Get Levitical: The Sacrifice Challenge

Leviticus 1:1-17, Psalm 141; Romans 12:1-2; Luke 9:18-26*

I wonder how you felt listening to our Old Testament reading, with details of sacrifice, of flesh, blood and fire. Doesn't seem appropriate for a Sunday morning service. Why should we bother with Leviticus?

In part the answer is because Leviticus is perhaps surprisingly in the media quite a lot. Firstly I suspect unknowingly when people hold up the ethical ideal that we should love our neighbour as ourselves which is a direct quote from Leviticus 19.

Secondly there is a surprising amount of commentary on Leviticus in the media and how to interpret it especially in the area of sexual ethics. I doubt there is any other ancient text that is in the news so often, or certainly with such contradictory results, part hallowed, part howled down. But it is worth digging deeper.

But I hope that we will take up the challenge of seeking to understand this ancient and at times bewildering book. We should not avoid doing something simply because its hard, rather we should accept the challenge.

Further because in doing so we will be challenged in our own thinking about Scripture and sacrifice and what are we do to with flesh and blood.

THE SCRIPTURE CHALLENGE

AND GOD SUMMONED .. AND SPOKE

But the nub of the issue for us regarding Leviticus is in the first verse "The Lord, the creator God of Israel, summoned or called Moses and saying ..." This gives us the Leviticus it's Hebrew name "and he called" but means that Leviticus self consciously claims directly to be the word of God and I suspect that as heard what he said we are a little bewildered.

How are descriptions of ancient rituals relevant? How can this help us be disciples of Jesus? What use are they today?

If this the word of God, why did he say it and if it is what are to do with it?

We need to do some thinking about what we believe regarding the Old Testament Scriptures. We need to be clear of the claim of the book to have its origin in God. We shouldn't dismiss this simply because we don't like or understand what it says.

We should remember the words of Paul in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work." Paul is teaching us that all Scripture is God breathed and for our benefit and he would have been thinking about the Hebrew Scriptures which would include Leviticus. Furthermore, this is demonstrated for us in the New Testament in the book of Hebrews, which is almost a commentary on Leviticus. In fact, no other book of the Old Testament apart from The Psalms is referenced in the New Testament as much as Leviticus. All of this suggests it is worth our attention.

Now you may think this is circular arguing, we believe Scripture because Scripture says it is. But we can go deep for Jesus clearly understands his mission in terms of Leviticus. He not only quotes the second great commandment from it, he uses terms from Leviticus to explain his ministry, his life being given as a ransom for instance. Indeed, I

hope that as we go through you will see that understanding Leviticus will help us have a deeper, fuller understanding of all that Jesus has done for us.

This may seem still circular but this Jesus who saw his ministry as a fulfilment of Leviticus was raised by God to vindicate all that he taught, including his view of Scripture. The resurrection as an historical event breaks the circularity of trusting Scripture because it says its Scripture, rather we believe it to be Scripture because we follow Jesus on this matter.

We may struggle to see how this book helps us to be disciples of Jesus, but as disciples of Jesus we can't ignore it, because he didn't. Jesus never said following him was easy!

The challenge is will we let the Scripture challenge us or will we challenge it and simply dismiss it because it is hard?

THE CHALLENGE OF THE PASSAGE: HE SPOKE FROM THE TENT OF MEETING

Some of the difficulties can be dealt with by doing the hard work of understanding Leviticus on its own terms. It is the third book of the Bible part of what is known as the Pentateuch, the first 5 books. And part of the reason we are looking at it is that we have previously looked at the first two, Genesis and Exodus and Leviticus starts exactly at the end of Exodus

RECAP

When we left the story the people of Israel had been saved from being slaves in Egypt, brought to Mt Sinai, declared to be God's people - his royal priesthood, given the Ten Commandments and then instructions on how to build the Tabernacle, the Tent of Meeting. Before they could build it, they mucked everything up by worshipping the golden calf. Yet despite God having none of that bull, the tabernacle is built exactly as described by God and the glory of the Lord descends. God has saved his people and despite their obvious failure he still sets up residence with them.

Yet his presence is so glorious and holy that Moses can't enter, which explains our first verse, from the Tent of Meeting God summons Moses.

CONTEXT IS EVERYTHING

This context is fundamentally important. You may remember that when I preached on the Ten Commandments I made, I hope, the memorable if mundane observation that Exodus 19 comes before Exodus 20. The reason for this seemingly completely obvious truism is to reinforce that God saving his chosen people (Exodus 19) come before giving the Law (Exodus 20)

The similar, obvious but powerful observation is important here. Leviticus comes after Exodus, always does, in every Bible. The context of Leviticus is God's powerful saving grace.

The issue in Leviticus then is not how to get into God's good books or create a relationship with him but rather how are they to live in the presence of a powerful and holy God.

They are to be holy as God is holy. As we read on we will see that this will be through a distinctive holy lifestyle but also in recognising when they fail to be holy they are put back in right relationship with God.

MANUAL

When we understand this it is easier (whilst certainly not easy) to see what is going on. God has given them the tabernacle, they are now given instructions as to what they are to do in it (sacrifice), who are to oversee this (the priests) and rules for when sacrifices are necessary.

What we have then is a manual for the use of the tabernacle, and like any manual it is not, for most of us, fascinating reading. I don't sit down and read the manual for my car, but when I need to change a head light out it comes, I turn to the right bit and have a go (although I usually end up with the mechanic). If we don't

understand the, for want of a better word, mechanical nature of this book we are very likely to not understand it.

It is in fact a very practical book as you'd expect a manual to be. It is perhaps ironic that people always want practical sermons, with lots of application. There is no more practical or applied book in the Bible than Leviticus yet people don't like being told what to do.

AN OPEN INVITATION

But it would be wrong to see it as a book only meant for those in the Tabernacle. Leviticus is an unhelpful title as it suggests that it is only for the Levites the priests but the opening words are addressed to all the people of Israel. All, men and women, rich and poor, each and everyone the invitation to come to the Tent of Meeting. In response to God's grace all can come and offer a burnt offering in thanks and for atonement, to reconcile them to God (see v4).

That all can come is emphasised by the different scale of sacrifice dependant on economic circumstances, a perfect bull, a sheep or a bird. And everyone was involved, it was not something that the priest did for you. Generally the worshipper both fully identified with the animal by the laying on of hands and then in the sacrifice, as they wholeheartedly gave the full animal to God. This was active, costly, messy and engaged worship that reconciled them to God.

That it works is emphasised by the start of the next book, Numbers. Leviticus starts with Moses outside the tent, unable to come in. But Numbers starts "The Lord spoke to Moses, in the tent of meeting" Leviticus works.

THE SACRIFICE CHALLENGE.

JESUS OUR SACRIFICE

Given the messiness of this form of worship we may be very glad that we are Anglicans rather than ancient Israelites and that sacrifice has been done away with. Yet it is not that simple. Sacrifice was not simply abolished, rather Jesus gave the one perfect and sufficient sacrifice. As in Leviticus this was done so that we could come into the presence of God and have atonement. It was costly, there was flesh and blood. The cross is just as gory as Leviticus 1.

We are reminded of this in every communion service. Leviticus helps us understand what Jesus was doing and helps us reflect on what Jesus has done for us on the cross and the cost.

And it can help us devotionally. As we take the bread and wine it is like placing our hands on the neck of the animal and saying "This is for me, he was given for me." Likewise we can know that it works, his sacrifice does bring us into God's presence and bring us atonement, reconciliation with God.

OUR SACRIFICE BECAUSE OF JESUS

But it should not only remind us of Jesus our sacrifice it should lead us to think of our sacrifice because of Jesus. The ancient Israelites were led to sacrifice because the grace and mercy that God had shown them in saving them and being with them.

I think Paul is thinking in these terms in Romans. Having spent 11 chapters describing the wonderful saving grace and mercy of God in Jesus and how nothing can now separate us from the love of God, Paul then says in 12:1-2 "in view of God's mercy offer yourselves as living sacrifices." We ourselves are flesh and blood sacrifices. The very physicality of Leviticus reminds us that Biblical faith is never just spiritual it is about how we live, and the totality of the burnt offering reminds us that it is to be wholehearted and comprehensive.

Christians haven't abandoned the practice of sacrifice, we are the living sacrifices.

Paul will go on to show that being living sacrifices impacts all areas of our lives: relationships, sex lives, politics, justice. All of these areas can be derived from Leviticus.

So I pray that the next time you read Leviticus 1, with all its flesh and blood you will be reminded that Jesus gave his flesh and blood for us, and we should give our lives, flesh and blood for him. Our hymns today flesh this out for us. Take my life and let it be, When I survey the wondrous cross – it demands my life, my soul, my all.

We have only just started to get Levitical, but as we hear the Bible talk we are being summoned, all of us to hear God's word, and in view of his saving grace to offer ourselves as living sacrifices. This is the start of our spiritual work out.