

The Bible Challenge

Meditations Week 6 (February 10-16)

Day 36: Exodus 40, Psalm 30, Mark 3

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This section of Exodus ends with details for setting up the tent of meeting with its vessels, vestments, and sacred objects of worship. “Tent of Meeting” is understood to be the later temple complex at Jerusalem. Some Episcopalians will especially appreciate the mention of the importance of incense in worship! For these writers, God’s divine presence was thought to physically dwell in the “Holy of Holies,” in the Temple. In our worship, God is not more present in church but we are more present to God. The Hebrew people trusted that God would be a constant presence in their lives, guiding and directing them we would say “24/7” as a “pillar of fire by night and pillar of cloud by day.”

Psalm 30 is a joyful outburst of gratitude for rescue from danger. How wonderful we feel when we are on the mend from an illness or when a crisis is past! Then it is easy for us to say, “weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes in the morning.” But this is not just a cliché that clouds often have a silver lining, but rather that deliverance belongs to those who actively call upon God.

Each of the sections of Mark 3 begins with a geographic location: synagogue, seashore, mountain, home. In the synagogue Jesus heals on the Sabbath. Some of us are old enough to remember when most stores and entertainments were closed on Sundays. Jesus’ actions remind us that doing the work of God is more important than following rules and regulations, no matter how well meaning. The narrative then turns to the Sea of Galilee where crowds seeking healing are so great that is forced to preach

to them from a boat offshore. Interestingly, it is the demons know who he is—the Son of God—and they are the first to confess him! This will not be the first time.

From the seashore, Jesus goes up on a mountain (mountains for Mark being the scene for important teachings and revelations). There he calls his Apostles—twelve of them (the same number of the tribes of Israel) and sends them out. It is an interesting list of names—many we don't hear much more about (Thaddeus and Simon the Cananean), but who clearly had a supportive role, just like those unsung members of the church who humbly serve. By the end of the chapter Jesus is again home, there to encounter the charge that he was crazy, charges made both by the religious leaders and by members of his own family. Jesus' answer to the scribes contains a mysterious allusion to "the (unforgivable) sin against the Holy Spirit." This probably means the sin of attributing evil motives to good actions, just as the scribes felt compelled to attribute the healing Jesus performs to satanic motives. In any event, Jesus' real family are not those who are related to him by blood, but "those who do the will of God."

QUESTIONS

- Do we spend too much time in our churches focusing on the externals of architecture, liturgy and vestments? How can the materials we use in worship be a means to an end, and not a distraction?
- Who are the people in our congregations who "do the will of God" and not just profess their belief? Are you one of them? Do you practice what you preach? If you were arrested for being a Christian would there be enough evidence to convict you?

PRAYER

Oh God, you have promised to deliver us from all our infirmities and to guide us into the paths you would have us walk. Give us

strength and courage to do your will and not ours in every aspect of our lives, trusting in your ever-caring care and goodness. Amen..

Day 37: Leviticus 1-3, Psalm 31, Mark 4

by The Rt. Rev. Kirk Stevan Smith

Today we begin a book which may strike readers as both strange and barbaric. Written late in the Old Testament period by a priestly caste, Leviticus contains the rules and regulations for temple worship. The first section focuses on procedures for animal and grain sacrifice. In today's section, three of these five temple offerings are described— 1) burnt (or whole) offering, 2) cereal offering, 3) and peace offering. The minutiae of butchering and burning animals we mostly likely find irrelevant to our contemporary needs; (one commentator points out that the temple in Jerusalem at this time functioned “as a gigantic slaughterhouse.”) What is relevant to us is that our sacrifices to God must come from our “first fruits” and reflect the true sacrificial giving of our time, talent and treasure.

Psalm 31. This psalm is generally labeled as a lament, but it sounds more like a desperate cry for help. It is very personal in nature, with the psalmist begging for help from God against personal enemies. Who at some time in their life has not felt like “a broken pot”, shunned and rejected by those who used to be friends? And yet there is hope for those who trust, and who wait upon the Lord.

Mark 4. This chapter begins with three parables, all of which have to do with seeds and planting, and ends with a miracle. Exactly what Jesus intended by his use of parables, and even defining that genre of story-telling has generated much scholarly debate. In verse 11, Jesus implies that he uses them not to be understood, which can hardly be the case! Most likely these words reflect

Mark's explanation of why Jesus' earthly ministry was not more successful—people just didn't 'get' his teaching. The parable of the sower (also found in Matthew and Luke) seems to stress that, like Jesus, our task is to preach the Gospel, realizing that our efforts may often fall on deaf ears (or in the language of the parable, on "bad soil"). Yet the promise is that enough of our efforts will bear fruit that there will be a miraculous harvest.

QUESTIONS

- What can ancient temple sacrifice teach us about our own "sacrificial giving" to God, to the church, and to others?
- What are the obstacles that stand in the way of God's purposes? What is the "bad soil" that you encounter in your own life and in the life of your community? How might these obstacles be overcome?

PRAYER

Oh God, you so generously sow your blessings in our lives. We thank you for the gifts of life, love, and laughter which we enjoy every day. Help us in turn to live generous, outwardly focused, lives, giving to others of our whole being in thanksgiving and gratitude to you. Amen.

Day 38: Leviticus 4-6, Psalm 32, Mark 5

by The Rt. Rev. Kirk Stevan Smith

Leviticus 4-6: More instructions on sacrifices offered at the temple, specifically the sin offering and the guilt offering. The first is to be performed when anyone, priest, ruler, or common person "sins unwittingly in any of the things the Lord has commanded." This could include such omissions as failing to give testimony in a court case, or having contact with unclean objects (5.1-4). There is no provision for sins done deliberately. In addition to the ritual of sacrifice, confession is expected (5.5). Guilt offerings are similar to sin offerings but require that restitution be made to the injured

party. Note how atonement—the reestablishment of a right relationship with God and the community— is always done through the agency of a priest, an idea which carries over in our church’s hierarchical structure and specifically in the sacrament of penance, which must be performed by a priest. In Anglican theology, only God forgives sins, but priestly absolution is the means through which that occurs.

Psalm 32. A song of thanksgiving for healing. There is a clear connection for the psalmist between sin and disease, a “mind-body connection” which is increasingly recognized by modern medicine. The psalmist has been healed from infirmity because of a willingness to confess his or her sinfulness.

Mark 5. This chapter contains three vivid healing stories, that of the Gerasene demoniac, the daughter of Jairus, and the woman with the flow of blood. The first of these strikes us as the quite odd, a man possessed by thousands (“my name is legion”) of demons raving among the tombs, whose tormenting spirits Jesus exorcises into a herd of pigs who then jumping into the sea—unclean spirits end up in unclean animals! Especially interesting is the fact that the same evil spirits who possess the man are the first to recognize Jesus as the Son of God (5. 7), a reminder that simply recognizing Jesus as divine is not enough, one must follow him as well. In contrast to this rather bizarre account are the tender and compassionate healing of a poor woman who dares only to touch Jesus’ garment and the little daughter of the ruler of the local synagogue. In an especially vivid touch, Mark even quotes Jesus’ healing words to her in Aramaic, the language Jesus would have spoken, “Talitha cumi.”

QUESTIONS

- One commentator writes of the ritual temple sacrifice described in Leviticus: “Behind all these regulations there lies the conviction that repentance is not enough. Something must be done and must be seen to be done. The ritual is not to

please God, who requires only repentance and faith, but for man's sake so that repentance shall be real and not submerged in a wave of undefined sentiment." (N.H.Snaith in *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*, p. 243). Do you agree?

- What, for you, is the difference between believing in Jesus and following him?

PRAYER

Oh Lord, we know that your wish for us is health and wholeness. Take away those infirmities of mind and spirit that keep us from loving you with all our heart. Amen.

Day 39: Leviticus 7-9; Psalm 33; Mark 6

by Bishop James Tengatenga, Bishop of Southern Malawi

I have just finished reading Kierkegaard's *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*. This book talks about the importance of preparation for confession. Preparation for an encounter with God. Putting oneself in the right kind of frame of mind desiring nothing but God. Putting oneself in a position to receive the one thing that is needful. However, the readings for today go to town in the preparation for delivering God's mercy, in fact delivering God, to his people. We talk a lot about the recipients of God and seldom talk about the preparation to be the vessel through which the means of grace flow. Think of all the things that Aaron has to go through in his ordination – clothing, cleansing, anointing with both oil and blood and then seven days in the presence of God. All this to make him fit to be the priest that he is called to be. On the eighth day more happens. Aaron is commanded to make sacrifices for himself and for the people. As he was to offer the sacrifices for his people he also needed to make offerings for himself. Only then was he worthy to be the vessel through which the grace of God flowed "he blessed the people and the glory of the Lord appeared to all people". Those of us whose calling and "job" it is

to bless others have a tendency to get used to it all that we neglect to follow the orders and directions and all the “pain and trouble” it takes for us to be truly worthy of that calling. Not that we can make ourselves worthy by “works” of obedience, but that a little care and a little preparation and lots of obedience makes all the difference – accoutrement and all. In Mark 6, Jesus’ disciples put themselves in a position to be used of God through obedience. Very different from Aaron and his sons: they were ordered to take nothing save the clothes on their back. No accoutrement; just obedience! As Marks tells us “they drove out demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.”

QUESTIONS

- In what other ways do Biblical characters (and in the tradition of the Church) prepare to be the vehicles for God’s grace?
- How do we prepare for blessing others?

PRAYER

Oh God of grace, prepare me to receive your grace so that I can be fit to share it with others; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Day 40: Leviticus 10-12, Psalm 34, Mark 7

by Bishop James Tengatenga

Yesterday it was “no haggis” and “no uwende” (This is a special dish [perk!] of blood, belly fat and some organs that those who slaughter animals, in some of our cultures, boil and eat while they skin and quarter the carcass) and today the list has grown long! What’s with food anyway? All over the world there are all sorts of prohibitions of one food or another. Delicacies in one part of the world make some on the other side of the globe want to puke! Whole foods, organic foods, GMO, vegetarian, vegan ... and the list goes on! We seem to be obsessed with foods and the kinds of food we eat. Well-being and wholeness and (dare I think it)

holiness are closely connected. God cares about what we stuff ourselves with. It seems Jesus comes along and says that that is not the case! As is often the case Jesus, in Mark 7, raises the stakes. It's not just the food or what we stuff ourselves with that matters. In fact, (notwithstanding) in the scale of things, it's neither here nor there. It is what comes out of us that matters: it's what you harbor in your mind and heart, what you say. Words people use say a lot about them. "Killing me softly with his words..." one popular song says. Language (words) is a big deal in our age to the degree that sometimes we go over board and prize political correctness above all else. We can either build people or destroy them by our words. God created through the spoken word; Jesus is the Word Incarnate. I suppose it is time to mind my Ps and Qs!

QUESTIONS

- Search through the Bible for the use of the words "word or words", "speech" and find out what they mean and how they are used. It may also be helpful to look for "curse", "blessing" and even the concept of naming.
- Apart from Hate Speech in what way do words dehumanize people?

PRAYER

Only say a word, Oh Lord and I shall be healed! Amen

Oh Incarnate Word grant by your gracious Spirit that I may speak a blessing to all I meet today and always so that I may please you and in the life to come enter into your kingdom where you, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, live and reign forever. Amen.

Day 41: Leviticus 13-15, Psalm 35, Mark 8

by Bishop James Tengatenga

By the end of reading these chapters in Leviticus I am left wondering what they are saying to me. A kind of check up guide

for states of holiness or rather ritual cleanliness. More like a check of one's state to find out whether one is in clean or unclean, ritually. By the end I get curious as to whether some healing would be administered. To my surprise nothing of the sort is given. One is only pronounced either clean or unclean and some instructions about what to do about one's status. One lot is even required to go about calling out "Unclean, unclean". What a humiliation! To what end I wonder. Ritual purity was important and the possibility of "contaminating" others all too real and thus affecting the wholeness/health/purity of the community which in turn had an effect on their relationship with their God. This lot that has to shout "unclean, unclean" is of particular interest to me in my Malawi context of HIV and AIDS and the consequent imperative to know one's status for one's own good and that of one's neighbor.

It may sound immoral to require people to test and broadcast their HIV status, however I am convinced that each one of us has a moral duty not to infect another (willfully or inadvertently). We have an obligation towards ourselves, our neighbor and God to know our sero-status and our conscience should move us to declare the same. These biblical sections are talking about people who suspect that they may have a skin disease. Testing for HIV does not necessarily mean that one suspects that one is positive but I believe that knowing is better than not knowing because not knowing does not mean that one is clean. I would take it as a religious duty to test and be declared one way or the other. Once I know I also know what I ought to do.

QUESTIONS

- What can give us a status of uncleanness before God and our neighbor?
- What benefits would it be to us if we were to "come clean" with our neighbor on whatever matter there is between us?

PRAYER

*O most holy God of life and wholeness grant me the desire to know how I stand with you and my neighbor so that I may hear your word to me and so seek salvation in this life and the next; Through Jesus Christ our Lord by whose stripe we are healed.
Amen*