

The Bible Challenge

Meditations Week 7 (February 17-23)

Day 43: Leviticus 16 – 18, Psalm 36, Mark 9

by Dr. Jenny Te Paa

Often seen as the definitive ‘law book’ of the Bible, Leviticus narrates how God separated and sanctified Israel to himself as a holy people, expecting them to reflect the nature of God’s holiness by separating from all that was unholy.

The holiness called for in Leviticus was not merely for individual or private piety but was a holistic and inescapable expectation covering all spheres of human activity. The people Israel were, however, prone to human failing just as we are today. It was for this reason that the Day of Atonement (Ch. 16) was implemented as a priestly responsibility intended to address the ‘impurities’, which potentially endanger community. While the impurities listed in the book of Leviticus provide us fascinating examples of what was once considered utterly profane, the march of scientific and moral progress since that time now leads us in some instances to very different understandings. As God’s 21st century Christian people we are nevertheless still challenged to discern and to act against the ‘impurities’ of our times, those things which create and sustain grave social disorder and which thus put distance between ourselves and God.

Mark’s Gospel provides some dynamic examples of how it is that we are to be as Christ’s witnesses in the world. He does so by highlighting the age-old universal impurities of superficial spirituality, of hungering for power, of insider arrogance, of the misuse of power. As with the disciples we too need constant reminding of the behavioral and attitudinal standards expected in return for our unconditional acceptance as members of the beloved community. Our task then is to act constantly and faithfully against those things, which are life denying, life diminishing or dishonoring of the God created humanity of any in the global village.

QUESTIONS

- What are some of the ‘impurities’ listed in Leviticus 16 – 18, which you feel can no longer be realistically upheld?
- How do you as an Anglican model in your day-to-day faith journey, your belief that ‘the first must be last and servant of all’?

PRAYER

“How precious are your steadfast loving O God? All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings . . . For with you is the fountain of life: in your light we see light. Amen. (Psalm 36)

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Day 44: Leviticus 19 – 21, Psalm 37: 1-18, Mark 10

by Dr. Jenny Te Paa

In today’s Leviticus readings are echoes of the Ten Commandments, those good and enduring rules for living an exemplary and obedient Christian life. I take Brueggemann’s point that God’s people Israel were here being enjoined to order their lives in such a way that they would be qualified for communion with Yahweh even as simultaneously they were also to practice justice for the sake of the entire community (p.428).¹ The call was not simply to passive obedience but to impassioned advocacy for the poor, the vulnerable, for those oppressed. It is surely the same for us in our time to ensure that it is by our good works and not simply our pious proclamations that our faith can be seen as authentic. The demands of doing God’s justice can often be very costly because they place us directly up against both people and systems, which are inherently wicked. The Psalmist however assures us that ultimately good will triumph over evil. We are encouraged to be patient, to refrain from anger, to simply ‘Trust in the Lord, and do good’! As a teacher I am often frustrated by my seeming inability to always make theology ever more accessible and profoundly understandable to students. In

particular I often encounter either indifference or opposition to my theological claim that all Christians are called to be instinctive activists for God's justice.

Today's Gospel reassures me that my struggle to be a more effective teacher of theology has its roots in the days of Jesus earthly ministry. Mark illustrates how even the disciples, those closest to Jesus himself, were frustratingly slow to understand the teaching of the One who came in order that we might have life and have it in abundance. Daily Bible Studies such as these provide us the chance of more readily understanding Jesus teachings. For in these precious daily moments of biblical reflection we are provided timely scriptural reminders; the opportunity to pray and time to develop the very necessary faith based discipline to be truly as servant disciples, especially with and for those who are the least among us.

¹ Brueggemann, Walter. Theology of the Old Testament. Augsburg Fortress: Minneapolis. 1997.

QUESTIONS

- How many of the Ten Commandments can you recite off by heart? How relevant/influential do you believe these Commandments to be in your life and In your context in the 21st century?
- What are some examples from your context where the church has been especially influential in advocating for social justice for those most vulnerable in your community?

PRAYER

Loving God you call us your servants to model your holiness in all we say and do. Help us in our daily worship of you to become ever more humble, ever more willing to give freely of ourselves to meeting the needs of those who suffer so disproportionately in our communities. Amen.

Day 45: Leviticus 22 – 24, Psalm 37: 19 – 42, Mark 11

by Dr. Jenny Te Paa

Throughout the world, more especially in the United States there are many examples of so-called mega church leaders who have amassed obscene levels of personal wealth. This wealth has been made usually solely at the expense of their followers. I have never been able to understand how such leaders can reconcile their unadulterated greed, with Jesus insistence that such *'trade'* in the name of the Church whether in human or in strictly economic terms, nonetheless makes the Church itself into, *'a den of robbers'*. Today's Gospel confronts the reality that still too many in authority in the Church completely misunderstand the moral and ethical stewardship responsibilities inherent in their leadership. It also points toward what many still do when confronted with the challenge to be demonstrably and authentically Christ like. They will move first to remove the threat to their own hypocrisy.

In the reading from Leviticus Chapter 22, we are treated to a very stern reality check for those in church leadership about what might be considered a more proper use of holy offerings. While invoking a standard of no less than perfection for the offerings made to God we are left in no doubt whatever about what is expected. The overarching principles of excellence in our worship; proper observance of the holy days and our continued selfless offering of ourselves as servants for God's mission remain completely relevant in our time.

As frustrating as poor church leadership can be, the Psalmist provides a cautionary reminder. Patient waiting for the Lord to act is our proper attitude, not querulous anxiety!

QUESTIONS

- How does your church actively demonstrate its Gospel commitment to alleviating local and global poverty and suffering?
- What reasonable faith based standards of professional accountability does your Church have in place for those in church leadership?

PRAYER

Loving God you alone anoint men and women to positions of leadership responsibility. Help those whom you choose to always be people of deep faith and unquestioned moral and ethical integrity. Protect your Church from the unscrupulous and the greedy so that the needs of those who suffer are never ever to be compromised. Help us always to remember your house is only ever to be a house of prayers for all the nations. Amen.

Day 46: Leviticus 25-27, Psalm 38, Mark 12

by The Rev. Hillary T. West

As the Holiness Code of Leviticus 25-26 comes to a close, we're reminded that all that we are and all that we have is God's. We honor God's covenant promise with Sabbath rest for God; and the observance of a Jubilee year that frees and liberates establishing God's justice, creating something much greater than a second chance. God remembers, and so must we. The appendix of chapter 27 closes out Leviticus with vows, voluntary promises made to God. These chapters list option after option of God's desire for us to repent (change), to obey, to respond to God's holiness.

Psalm 38 laments that sickness, suffering and even death are signs of our true humanness and awaiting God is our only comfort and relief. Again, God remembers, and God saves. When will we remember God?

In Mark's gospel after his heroic entrance into Jerusalem, Jesus teaches in the age old rabbinic parabolic pattern to church authorities who fail to understand. Again, we're reminded from Jesus' words, "pay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God belongs to God," that all that we are and all that we have comes from God. We fail to recognize the power of God through Jesus Christ. An ever present, patient Jesus/God reminds us to trust by following the great commandment. Finally, we're reminded again of the reward given in our humble obedience to God through the vivid story of the widow's mite.

QUESTIONS

- What prevents us from receiving the freedom of God's love?
- God remembers us. Why are we not able to remember God?
- What price are you willing to pay in response to God's grace and mercy?

PRAYER

God of promise and passion, remember us as we disregard and distance ourselves; rescue us from our own selfishness and self assuredness; remind us over and over again of the miracle blessing of your saving grace. Amen.

Day 47: Catch up, Psalm 39, Mark 13

by The Rev. Hillary T. West

Mark 13 is the continuation of Jesus' journey to the cross, in the final week of his life with his eschatological discourse.

Eschatological means end times. The chapter is marked by language around the end of things: the destruction of the temple (where God is housed in Judaic tradition), wars, famines, and earth quakes. Falsities will prevail and trust will be violated. Hatred will ensue and families will disband. Disgusting and destructive things will stand where they should not. Suffering will endure and darkness will spread throughout. All this will happen and then the Son of Man will appear with great power and splendor and gather his people from the four corners of the earth. This passage is also referred to as the "little apocalypse" as compared to the "big apocalypse" in the book of Revelation.

In Googling "end times", 177,000,000 posts appear to tell us of the causes of our evil and destruction and to tell us most importantly of the date of our demise, even though Jesus clearly states, "but nobody knows when that day or hour will come." For most of us, I imagine Tim LeHaye's fast paced, action packed Left Behind series is the most popular fictionalization of the end times. Most likely, this is not what Jesus is preaching in Mark 13.

Historically, we remember the gospel of Mark is written just after 70 AD and the siege of Jerusalem, and the fall of the temple by Roman armies under the leadership of Titus and Tiberias Julius Alexander. Terror, and horror are fresh in the author's mind.

Jesus, in typical Markian form, is painting a picture of God's splendid saving grace in the midst of our struggles and troubles. He cautions us, to stay alert, watch out. God saves, no matter what, over and over again.

QUESTIONS

- In times of despair, how have you reached for hope?
- What must you release in suffering to know Jesus' saving grace?
- Jesus says, watch out, stay alert, get ready. How do you want to equip yourself for Jesus' love and mercy?

PRAYER

My God, here I am, my heart devoted to you. Fashion me according to your heart. Amen. (Brother Lawrence 1611-1691).

Day 48: Numbers 1-3; Psalm 40; Mark 14

by The Rev. Hillary T. West

If we're going to say anything about the beginning chapters of Numbers, we would say they are about divine holiness: the holiness of God, and our response to God's holiness as God's holy people. Holy means, set apart. In Numbers, God first identifies God's holy people, setting them apart with a counting, a census, numbering some 600,350 plus. Next, in the abundance God equips each and every person in their mission as God's holy people.

Consider how God has set you apart and named you as God's holy one. What does God expect of you?

Psalm 40 reminds each of us of our devotion to and trust in God. We're always grateful for the blessing of God's saving grace. But, another thing comes along, a new obstacle, a calculated threat;

and there we are, once again, on our knees, begging God. What an amazing God we have, who patiently, lovingly listens to our words, and our pleas, and in our need, gives us full life with all its ups and downs, loving us in the midst of it.

Mark 14 is an emotionally heart wrenching full chapter that leads us to the climax of God's purpose for us, holy life in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The ambiguity of our ability to honor our holiness is truthfully told in the vivid tale of the devotion of the wasteful, anointing woman, the deception of greedy Judas, the denial of pitiful Peter, the naked desertion of faithful followers, the frightened falseness of the religious authorities, as Jesus is led away in verbal and physical abuse.

Always, we are challenged in Mark's gospel with the glory of God's salvation shining through in the pain of struggle, and suffering. We finish the chapter recognizing all too clearly the thinness of our faith. And yet, it is Christ who believes so fully in us. The words, "take, eat,...drink this..." are Jesus' words, for us, to not just remember, but to know fully, that the very holiness of God, given to us at creation, and promised us in the Exodus, is holiness in us, with us, and through us in the institution of the Lord's holy meal.

QUESTIONS

- Who are you in Jesus' story in Mark 14? What do you want to say to Jesus? What do you hear Jesus saying to you?

PRAYER

Glorious Lord of all, we pray and give thanks that you call us to be your holy people. Fill us with all truth and peace. Where we are corrupt, purify us; where we are in error, direct us; where in any thing we are amiss, reform us. Where we are right, strengthen us; where we are in want provide for us; where we are divided, reunite us; inspire us and guide us that in all things and in all places, we will glorify your holy name. Amen.