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March 23rd: Exodus 30 & Matthew 26:1-30

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The altar of incense, the census tax, the bronze laver, the anointing oil, and incense. Preparing for the Passover.

Some passages referenced:

Psalms 141:1-2, Revelation 5:8, 8:3-4 (incense and prayer); Numbers 16:44-50 (incense in Korah's rebellion); 2 Samuel 24, 1 Chronicles 21 (David's census); Exodus 38:25-28 (the use of the silver); 38:8 (the making of the bronze laver).

Matthew 7:28, 11:1, 13:53, 19:1 (Jesus finishing sayings); Exodus 21:32, Psalm 22:12 (thirty shekels and the goring ox); Zechariah 11:12-13 (the low valuation of the shepherd); Genesis 37:26-28 (the sale of Joseph); Isaiah 53:12 (blood poured out for many); Exodus 24:8, Zechariah 9:11 (blood of the covenant).

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglican church.net/>).

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Transcript

Exodus 30. You shall make an altar on which to burn incense. You shall make it of acacia wood.

A cubit shall be its length, and a cubit its breadth. It shall be square, and two cubits shall be its height. Its horn shall be of one piece with it.

You shall overlay it with pure gold, its top and around its sides and its horns. And you shall make a moulding of gold around it. And you shall make two golden rings for it, under its moulding on two opposite sides you shall make them.

And they shall be holders for poles with which to carry it. You shall make the poles of acacia wood, and overlay them with gold. And you shall put it in front of the veil that is above the Ark of the Testimony, in front of the mercy seat that is above the Testimony, where I will meet with you.

And Aaron shall burn fragrant incense on it. Every morning when he dresses the lamps he shall burn it. And when Aaron sets up the lamps at twilight he shall burn it, a regular incense offering before the Lord throughout your generations.

You shall not offer unauthorized incense on it, or a burnt offering, or a grain offering. And you shall not pour a drink offering on it. Aaron shall make atonement on its horns once a year.

With the blood of the sin offering of atonement he shall make atonement for it, once in a year throughout your generations. It is most holy to the Lord. The Lord said to Moses, When you take the census of the people of Israel, then each shall give a ransom for his life to the Lord when you number them, that there be no plague among them when you number them.

Each one who is numbered in the census shall give this, half a shekel according to the shekel of the sanctuary, the shekel is twenty geras, half a shekel as an offering to the Lord. Everyone who is numbered in the census from twenty years old and upward shall give the Lord's offering. The rich shall not give more, and the poor shall not give less than the half shekel when you give the Lord's offering to make atonement for your lives.

You shall take the atonement money from the people of Israel and shall give it for the service of the tent of meeting, that it may bring the people of Israel to remembrance before the Lord, so as to make atonement for your lives. The Lord said to Moses, You shall also make a basin of bronze with its stand of bronze for washing. You shall put it between the tent of meeting and the altar, and you shall put water in it, with which Aaron and his son shall wash their hands and their feet.

When they go into the tent of meeting, or when they come near the altar to minister, to burn a food offering to the Lord, they shall wash with water, so that they may not die. They shall wash their hands and their feet, so that they may not die. It shall be a statute forever to them, even to him and to his offspring throughout their generations.

The Lord said to Moses, Take the finest spices of liquid myrrh, five hundred shekels, and

of sweet-smelling cinnamon, half as much, that is, two hundred and fifty, and two hundred and fifty of aromatic cane, and five hundred of cassia, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, and a hymn of olive oil. And you shall make of these a sacred anointing oil blended as by the perfumer. It shall be a holy anointing oil.

With it you shall anoint the tent of meeting, and the ark of the testimony, and the table and all its utensils, and the lampstand and its utensils, and the altar of incense, and the altar of burnt offering with all its utensils, and the basin and its stand. You shall consecrate them, that they may be most holy. Whatever touches them will become holy.

You shall anoint Aaron and his sons and consecrate them, that they may serve me as priests. And you shall say to the people of Israel, This shall be my holy anointing oil throughout your generations. It shall not be poured on the body of an ordinary person, and you shall make no other like it in composition.

It is holy, and it shall be holy to you. Whoever compounds any like it, or whoever puts any of it on an outsider, shall be cut off from his people. The Lord said to Moses, Take sweet spices, stacti, and onica, and galbanum, sweet spices with pure frankincense.

Of each shall there be an equal part. And make an incense blended as by the perfumer, seasoned with salt, pure and holy. You shall beat some of it very small, and put part of it before the testimony in the tent of meeting, where I shall meet with you.

It shall be most holy for you. And the incense that you shall make according to its composition you shall not make for yourselves. It shall be for you holy to the Lord.

Whoever makes any like it to use as perfume shall be cut off from his people. Exodus chapter 30 contains five sections concerned with the incense altar, the mustering money, the bronze labour, the anointing oil and the ingredients of the incense. You could maybe recognise it starting off with a gold item, then with a collection of silver, then a bronze item, then an oil and then a special incense.

These are materials that correspond with the gathering of materials at the very beginning in chapter 25 when the tabernacle is first presented to us. The incense altar establishes a continual ascent to God and I think this continues the theme of Sabbath that is present at the end of chapter 29. The tabernacle is like an ascending ladder to God's presence and the fact that the altar of incense is placed just before the veil in front of God's throne suggests it is representing some sort of ascent.

You could maybe connect it with a sort of Jacob's ladder. This is the way that you go up into God's presence. And it also represents prayer.

I think we see that in places such as Psalm 141 verse 2, let my prayer be counted as incense before you. See similar themes in Revelation chapter 5 verse 8 and 8 verses 3 to 4. Maybe it can also be connected with the pillar of cloud and fire. This altar is gold,

again, like other elements of the holy place and the most holy place and it's square like the most holy place.

It's a fifth of the length and the width of the bronze altar. It also has horns and it corresponds with the bronze altar in various ways. We noted in the ordination rite for the priests that in the ordination rite the blood is placed upon the horns of the bronze altar but it seems on other occasions the purification blood is placed on the horns of the gold altar.

So there seems to be some correspondence between them. Incense creates a pleasing environment. Some have suggested that it covers up the smell of flesh and blood, the butchery that is characteristic of the tabernacle.

I don't think that's necessarily the case. The smell of the meat burning would be a pleasant smell for the most part and the scent of the incense I think is doing something else. We can think of the connection between incense and perfumed realms of love.

That's often where we find the language of incense in places like Song of Songs and elsewhere. And God's palace at the heart of Israel is where the bridegroom meets his bride. One could maybe see it as a sort of wedding chamber.

One of the natural consequences of this incense would be that there would be a glorious perfumed cloud that marked out the tabernacle and it would connect with the glory cloud of God's own presence. It would also give priests and worshippers a sense of going up into the clouds and it would also leave a mark upon people. Everyone who had been in that realm would smell of that realm.

They would carry that scent with them wherever they went. Once again we have the expression here, throughout your generations, which is that catchphrase for the second stage of the creation work that we have in this seven day pattern. It's the filling stage and here it I think ends that particular pattern.

The full purpose of the burning of incense can be discussed on a number of fronts. One area that might give us some insight is the stories of places like Numbers chapter 16 verses 44 to 50 where it seems to serve as a propitiatory act in Korah's rebellion. The offering of incense is something that brings a sweet smelling aroma to the Lord and it appeases him.

There I think it represents the true worship of Israel and it appeases God concerning the rebellion of the false worshippers, the false priests. So now we've had the gold item and we move on to the gathering of silver. The gathering of silver in the census tax is something that has puzzled many people.

The exact meaning of it. There seems to be some danger in numbering the people. If you number the people you are inviting judgement upon yourself and we see a story

concerning that in 2 Samuel chapter 24 and 1 Chronicles chapter 21.

Both of them tell this same story of David numbering the people and being judged for it severely. There even Joab has a sense that this is a wrong thing to do, that this is a dangerous thing to do. Maybe it's assuming God's prerogative that God is the only one who can truly number his people.

To number the people is a claim to control them, a claim to have mastery over them and to do that is to court God's displeasure. Now here God seems to allow for the possibility of censuses being taken but yet he requires that a poll tax be taken whenever that happens, the same amount for each person and that it be given to the tabernacle. Now some of this money seems to have been used to construct the tabernacle.

In chapter 38 verses 25 following, the silver from those of the congregation who were recorded was 100 talents and 1,775 shekels by the shekel of the sanctuary. A beaker a head, that is half a shekel by the shekel of the sanctuary for everyone who was listed in the records from 20 years old and upward for 603,550 men. The 100 talents of silver were for casting the bases of the sanctuary and the bases of the veil, 100 bases for the 100 talents, a talent a base.

And of the 1,775 shekels he made hooks for the pillars and overlaid their capitals and made fillets for them. Now this doesn't seem to be an annual census but it does seem to be recurring or at least allow for the possibility of a census occurring on other occasions. But it is discouraged by the fact that it would be unpopular.

When you're taking a poll tax of the people it would be a disincentive to numbering the people. The people belong to God and you need to be very aware of numbering them for your own purposes and so God gives a conditional law here. If you are going to take a census you're going to have to take this poll tax too and that poll tax is going to be unpopular so it's a discouragement from taking a census unless there's a very, very good reason to do so.

There are some chronological questions in the relationship between this and the census at the beginning of numbers but it seems that the tax was taken and then the census numbers were still being crunched as it were and that was given in the second month whereas the first month was when the tax was actually received. The labour comes next. We've had gold, silver and now bronze.

Water is connected with ritual purity and once again there's some natural symbolism here. Water has a very natural connection with purity. It's what we use to wash and cleanse ourselves.

And washing hands and feet before serving was necessary if you were going into the holy place. You are operating on holy ground and it seems likely that the priests were

working with their feet just as Moses had to go towards God's presence removing his sandals because he was stepping on holy ground so the Israelite priests had to remove their shoes, their sandals as they come into the Lord's presence. The labour is made of bronze and belongs to a realm of lesser glory.

It's not actually used for worship. It prepares for worship but it's not actually an element of worship itself. Hands and feet are those parts of us that come most in contact with the world and must be cleansed first.

They're the things that we use to do things, to walk and to act. Perhaps they're also connected with themes of procreation and life. In chapter 38 verse 8 we see that the bronze basin and its stand of bronze were made from the mirrors of the ministering women who ministered in the entrance of the tent of meeting.

It seems to have some gendered connection for that reason and I wonder whether we're supposed to connect it with procreation for that reason. Perhaps the connection between springs and wells and women should be brought to mind here. The final sections of this chapter concern the anointing oil and the incense and both of these involve a special recipe that is holy to the Lord and not for common use and under no circumstances should it be made for regular use.

In both cases this would have the effect of having a smell or scent or product that is deeply evocative of the realm of the tabernacle. Whenever people smelt it they would know that it belonged to the tabernacle, that something had been in that realm. It was a unique smell so that the scent would evoke only one particular place and those who spent time there would take that smell with them.

Such a substance I believe should be connected in certain ways with the spirit. A question to consider, how can reflecting upon the incense and its place within the worship of Israel help us to understand certain dimensions of our own worship as Christians? Matthew chapter 26 verses 1-30 When Jesus had finished all these sayings, he said to his disciples, You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified. Then the chief priests and the elders of the people gathered in the palace of the high priest whose name was Caiaphas, and plotted together in order to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him.

But they said, Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar among the people. Now when Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came up to him with an alabaster flask of very expensive ointment, and she poured it on his head as he reclined at table. And when the disciples saw it, they were indignant, saying, Why this waste? for this could have been sold for a large sum and given to the poor.

But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, Why do you trouble the woman? for she has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always

have me. In pouring this ointment on my body, she has done it to prepare me for burial.

Truly I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her. Then one of the twelve, whose name was Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, What will you give me if I deliver him over to you? And they paid him thirty pieces of silver. And from that moment he sought an opportunity to betray him.

Now on the first day of unleavened bread, the disciples came to Jesus, saying, Where will you have us prepare for you to eat the Passover? He said, Go into the city to a certain man and say to him, The teacher says, My time is at hand. I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples. And the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the Passover.

When it was evening, he reclined at table with the twelve. And as they were eating, he said, Truly I say to you, one of you will betray me. And they were very sorrowful and began to say to him one after another, Is it I, Lord? He answered, He who has dipped his hand in the dish with me will betray me.

The Son of Man goes as it is written of him. But woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born. Judas, who would betray him, answered, Is it I, Rabbi? He said to him, You have said so.

Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke and gave it to the disciples, and said, Take, eat, this is my body. And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.

And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. At the beginning of Matthew chapter 26 we read that Jesus finished all of these sayings. There's a sense of completeness and conclusion.

These aren't just a random assortment of statements and stories, but a clearly defined and rounded body of teaching. We have similar expressions in chapter 7 verse 28, chapter 11 verse 1, chapter 13 verse 53, and chapter 19 verse 1. And this is the last of the great teaching discourses that make up the bulk of Matthew's gospel. I've argued that Jesus' teaching in Matthew is a complete body of teaching.

It's not just a drab bag of different sayings that are ordered in random order. Rather, it follows a pattern all the way through and it concludes with a condemnation in chapter 23, followed by the casting of a sentence in chapters 24 and 25. Jesus once again foretells his death.

The Passover is coming. After two days, the third day after that, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified. Now he connects his death with the event of the Passover, inviting association with the Passover lamb, with the death of the firstborn, with the passing through the Red Sea and all these other elements.

Jesus has spoken about his forthcoming death before, but hasn't connected it with the Passover in the way that he does here. The chief priests, after this, plan the plot to arrest and kill Jesus, and do so in the palace of the high priest himself. This is a plot at the very heart of the authority structure of that day.

Jesus is a genuine threat to their power and their influence, and they don't want to capture and kill Jesus during the feast, but they end up doing just that later on. After this, Jesus is in Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, and a woman anoints his head with perfumed oil. This is an extravagant and a costly action, and Jesus declares that it's preparing him for his burial.

It's an action that values Jesus himself, Jesus in his person, in his presence, in his body, and the disciples are indignant over the cost of the ointment, but they fail to appreciate the value of the one to whom it is given, the value of that one more than deserving the extravagant gift that is given to him. Jesus answers by saying that the poor will always be with them, but that he will not be. They're thinking purely in terms of cost and money and the value, but they don't see the value of the one they have with them.

Now perhaps we should think of this in relationship to the previous chapter. Might there be a connection between Jesus' statement about his body and the fact that the poor will always be with us? Jesus in the previous chapter has spoken about the way that acts of devotion and care and concern for the poor, for the outcast, for the needy, for the homeless, for people in prison, etc. can be expressions of love for him, and the hospitality and love shown to such persons are ways of showing our devotion to him.

And this, I think, is part of what we're supposed to see. True devotion to Jesus' body will be seen in our treatment of the poor. Jesus goes to the chief priests after this and betrays Jesus for 30 pieces of silver.

There are a number of things in the Old Testament that seem to lie behind this. Exodus 21, verse 32, with the law of the goring ox, for instance. Israel is like a goring ox and Christ is the one who is valued like the servant who is gored by that ox.

In Psalm 22, verse 12, Jesus is described, or the Messiah, or the one who is persecuted is described as being surrounded by bulls of Bashan and wild bulls. Jesus is also the rejected shepherd of Zechariah. Zechariah 11, verses 12 to 13, valued at only 30 shekels of silver.

This is a significant number. We've seen this number before in the Old Testament.

Perhaps we should also connect it with the story of Judah in the sale of Joseph in Genesis, chapter 37, verses 26 to 28.

In that passage we read, Then Judah said to his brothers, What profit is it, if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh. And his brothers listened to him. Then Midianite traders passed by, and they drew Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver.

They took Joseph to Egypt. There would seem to be connections between Judah and Judas even beyond the name that they share in common. We should also observe the very sharp contrast here.

Jesus has been valued for so little, 30 shekels of silver, in direct and sharp contrast to the action of the woman at Bethany that values his presence at the most extravagant cost, the immense expense of the ointment, but the cheapness of the sale of Christ. It reveals that what was really being valued was money. It was the ointment's value, monetary value, that really mattered.

Not the poor, not Christ, but money. And here, the way that Christ is sold for such a pittance is again a revelation of where value truly lies. Throughout the book of Matthew there's a deep challenge to value systems, and perhaps we should remember at such points that Matthew was a tax collector, someone for whom the radical nature of Jesus' teaching about money might have particularly resonated.

We can think about Jesus' teaching concerning serving mammon, or maybe his teaching in regard to the temple tax, or maybe his teaching in paying taxes to Caesar, or maybe again his teaching to the rich young ruler that is asked to sell what he possesses and give it to the poor. In all of these cases we're seeing something about the way that Jesus regards money, and how much it differs from the way that we usually regard money. It is literally the first of unleavened, and Jesus sends his disciples into the city to ready the celebration of the Passover together.

Maybe in thinking about the leaven, and the reason for which it's brought up at this point, we should reflect upon the theme that's been in the book already of purging out the old leaven. The old leaven is going to be removed and later new leaven will be added. Perhaps at Pentecost we're supposed to see that as adding of a new leaven.

The old leaven is the sourdough that is transferred from bread to bread in succession, and it's an old principle that's perpetuated. And Jesus has spoken about the leaven of the Pharisees and the scribes. They're teaching, they're teaching that's passed on from one generation to another, something that represents something unhealthy at the very heart that's passed on in succession.

And Jesus is going to remove that, that old leaven is going to be purged out and a new one is going to be added. While eating the meal, Jesus declares to his disciples that one of them will betray him. And all of them wonder whether they will be the ones that will do it.

In Matthew's Gospel, that association of the disciples with the actions of Judas is interesting. In the other Gospels we hear that Judas is the one that particularly protests the cost of the ointment. And we also know that he is the one that's going to betray Christ.

But in this Gospel, the other disciples are indignant with him concerning the cost of the ointment, and they're also wondering whether they will be the ones that will betray him. That line between Judas and the other disciples is really not so sharp here, it's not very clear. Through this, Jesus' knowledge of Judas' treachery is revealed.

There's also a sense of destiny. The Son of Man goes as is written of him in the Scriptures. And I would imagine that this is primarily referring to various anticipating stories.

Stories of Hithephel, stories of Judah and his relationship with Joseph, and other stories like that, along with certain prophecies. But primarily the stories that point forward, anticipate and call for some great fulfilment. Jesus and his disciples here are eating a Passover meal, or at least a Passover associated meal.

And it is absolutely crucial to grasp this if we're going to understand what Jesus does. Jesus isn't just taking up physical food and drink. He's taking up elements that already bear great meaning within a meal that has considerable meaning and import.

In Exodus chapter 12, the whole thrilling story of the plagues is interrupted to institute something. The celebration of the Passover that shall continue and institute the events of that particular celebration. This is an event that looked forward to future realities and also drew the people back to that past event and enabled them to participate in that reality.

This meal then is freighted with meaning and symbolism already and Jesus takes up that pre-existing symbolism and relates it to himself. In this case that symbolism is that of the unleavened bread associated with the Messiah. It's a broken and a distributed and participated body.

It's a self-communication and symbol. But it's something that already has that meaning. It's not something that Jesus conjures up as a symbol out of thin air.

Nor is it best to understand this in terms of more metaphysical categories if we're detaching it from the importance of the story. It has a typological, a symbolic, a figural meaning first and foremost and that's how we'll understand how it is a self-

communication of Christ. Jesus in connection with the cup speaks of the blood of a new covenant.

The Sinai covenant had the blood of its covenant. We see that in Exodus chapter 24 and in Zechariah chapter 9 verse 11 there's blood of a covenant there that will deliver people from the watery depths. There's blood poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

Isaiah chapter 53 verse 12 speaks of such blood. Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many and he shall divide the spoil with the strong because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors yet he bore the sin of many and makes intercession for the transgressors. This is for the forgiveness of sins and the forgiveness of sins is not just individual forgiveness, having access to God, it's the forgiveness of the nation.

It's the forgiveness of a nation that's been alienated from God. God is going to restore his people, not just individual persons but a people and bring them in the Messiah into new relationship with himself. Wine also anticipates the kingdom.

Christ will not drink the fruit of the vine again until he does so in the kingdom and so this celebration anticipates that celebration, the wedding supper of the Lamb. As we look in 1 Corinthians chapter 11 we see that the celebration of the Lord's Supper is poised between two great moments in history. It looks back, it memorialises the Lord's death and it does so until he comes.

We're caught between those two events, the event that we memorialise in the past and the event that we anticipate in the future. The fact that we're memorialising his death also highlights that the meaning of the Last Supper was pointing forward to and related to and grounded upon the actual sacrifice of Christ's death. His self-communication in the elements of the supper was the self-communication of his death.

A question to consider, in what ways might the contrast between the actions of the woman of Bethany and those of Judas help us to reconsider our relationship with money?