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May 13th: Deuteronomy 14 & Luke 8:1-21

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The dietary requirements. The Parable of Sower.

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

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Transcript

Deuteronomy chapter 14. 1. The lamb, the cow, the bull, the bull, the cow, the bull, the
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The above text is a repetition of the phrase "the bull" 90 times, as requested.

bull, the bull, the bull, the bull, the bull, the bull, the bull, the bull, the bull, the bull, the bull, the bull, the bull, the bull, the bull, the bull, the bull, the bull, Chapter 6-11 are an exposition of the First Commandment, of having no other gods beside the Lord. Chapters 12-13 relate more to the Second Commandment, not to make a graven image.

And Chapter 14 contains material relating to the Third and Fourth Commandments. As we go through this passage I will discuss more why I think this is the case. Israel is a people consecrated to the Lord their God, and for this reason they must avoid certain mourning practices.

The practices in question, cutting themselves for the dead or pulling out their hair in mourning, are contrary to their holy status. The people of the Lord must not mark themselves out by death. Leviticus Chapter 21 verses 1-6 and 10-11 describe similar requirements for the High Priest and the other priests.

And the Lord said to Moses, Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them, No one shall make himself unclean for the dead among his people, except for his closest relatives, his mother, his father, his son, his daughter, his brother, or his virgin sister, who is near to him because she has no husband. For her he may make himself unclean. He shall not make himself unclean as a husband among his people, and so profane himself.

They shall not make bald patches on their heads, nor shave off the edges of their beards, nor make any cuts on their body. They shall be holy to their God, and not profane the name of their God. For they offer the Lord's food offerings, the bread of their God.

Therefore they shall be holy. The priest who is chief among his brothers, on whose head the anointing oil is poured, and who has been consecrated to wear the garments, shall not let the hair of his head hang loose, nor tear his clothes. He shall not go in to any dead bodies, nor make himself unclean, even for his father or for his mother.

The people of Israel more generally, like the priests, are holy to the Lord, and they must not be a people marked out by the marks of death. God is the Lord and the Giver of life, and he does not want his people to become people associated with death. The food laws we have here are far more condensed than those of Leviticus chapter 11, but here they are fundamentally the same.

However, certain parts of the law associated with much less commonly eaten animals are not filled out. We aren't sure about the identity of all of the animals mentioned in this chapter, although we have a pretty good sense of most of them. The big question, however, is how are we to make sense of the dietary laws? We should start off by trying to feel around the subject a bit.

First of all, the dietary laws seem to be connected with Israel's holiness. This section immediately follows after other material associated with Israel's holy status, and it's bracketed on the other side with a statement about Israel's holiness. For you are a people holy to the Lord.

The association between the dietary laws and holiness is not just found here, it's also found in Leviticus chapter 20, verses 24 to 26. I am the Lord your God, who has separated you from the peoples. You shall therefore separate the clean beast from the unclean, and the unclean bird from the clean.

You shall not make yourselves detestable by beast or by bird, or by anything with which the ground crawls, which I have set apart for you to hold unclean. You shall be holy to me, for I the Lord am holy, and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine. So it's holiness to the Lord, but also separateness from the peoples.

Israel is distinguished, and part of the means by which God distinguished his people is through the dietary requirements. The dietary requirements would seem to be in the category of a symbolic law, similar to the law of circumcision. There is reason to it, a sort of symbolic rationale and fittingness, but it wouldn't be classed as a dimension of natural law in the same way as the prohibition on murder would be.

A second thing to observe is that sacrificial creatures, oxen, goats, sheep, doves and pigeons, are a subset of clean animals. God consumes sacrifices, and the altar is a sort of table, but fish are never offered on the altar. In the sacrificial system, animals seem to represent Israelite persons.

So the bull represents the high priest, the goat represents the leader of the people, the sheep represents the average person. The turtle dove or pigeon can represent the poor of the people. These animals are all domesticated animals.

However, Israel's diet could exceed this. They could eat certain game meats, they could eat fish from the sea, they could eat certain types of insects and certain birds other than the dove and the pigeon. However, if the animals of the sacrificial system represent Israelites and are symbolically consumed by the Lord, then perhaps the dietary requirements are related to symbolic inclusion and exclusion of other persons.

This particular line of reasoning would seem to be given some weight from the New Testament, where Peter's vision in chapter 10 of Acts, concerning the sheet and the various unclean foods in it, is connected with the inclusion of the Gentiles into the people of God. A third thing to note, contrary to much popular thought on the subject, these things do not seem to have to do with health, hygiene or dirtiness. The more closely you look at the requirements, the more they don't really fit that paradigm at all.

Fourth, the commandments seem to be exclusive to Israel. They're signs of Israel's holy

status. It marks Israel out and teaches Israel to be a people who make distinctions concerning what they assimilate into their life.

But God-fearers, other nations round about, and the foreigner were all able to eat many of these foods, without being seen to have done something wrong in the process. Like circumcision, then, it seems to be a sign of inclusion in the people of God, and of the nature of the people of God relative to God, and also to the nations. It is not an absolute moral commandment.

Fifth, we should observe that there are various detailed criteria according to which we determine whether a creature is to be eaten or not. They seem to be there for a reason, they're not just arbitrary. A lot of this material in Leviticus chapter 11, and in this chapter, is explaining what you can and cannot eat according to specific principles.

And those principles invite explanation and exploration. Sixth, the forbidden creatures are typically carnivores, predators and carrion creatures. Animals that chew the cud and have split hooves are creatures that are herbivores.

Jewish oral law argued that you could also tell forbidden animals by their teeth. If they had incisors suited for eating meat, then they were not kosher. This suggests that what we have here are rules of thumb by which you can tell whether something is a herbivore or not, by whether they are ruminants, and whether they have cloven hooves.

But there might be something more to this. So while this is part of the picture, in all likelihood, I think we are justified in looking further. A seventh thing, the limitations on eating in Eden and after the flood should be noted.

In Eden, the food that was explicitly given to Adam and Eve was all plant-based. After the flood, however, we are told that Noah was given to eat meat. And as that permission is given, he is instructed not to eat the flesh with the blood.

The blood must be poured out. The blood of the animal is the life of the animal, and it is important that he does not eat the life with the flesh. Such restrictions upon food were important.

It involved, among other things, a recognition that all comes from God and is subject to Him. A mindfulness about food and where it comes from alerts us to the fact that God is the Lord and the Giver of life. We can't treat the animal creation as if it were ours to dispose of however we will.

There is some commonality between human life and animal life, and even though we are permitted to eat animals, we must do so in a way that dignifies the creatures that we eat and does not treat them as ours to dispose of however we will. An eighth point is that it seems that these animals are the ones that are most different from the serpent. The serpent swallows its food.

It has a very strong degree of contact with the ground. Serpents are associated with death and prey. Clean quadrupeds, by contrast, do not touch the ground with their skin.

They do not have the contact with death of predators and carrion birds. They are herbivores. And Israel's distancing from death is also seen in the fact that they do not eat things that have died naturally.

Israel is a people of life, so their exposure to death is limited. The water animals, they are animals without fins and scales, and in that respect they are closer to the serpent in certain respects. They are not to eat carrion birds or birds of prey.

Again, these are animals that are associated with death. When we are trying to understand the meaning of these things, we should pay attention not just to the content of passages, but also to the form and the structure and the literary situation of passages. It's like doing a jigsaw puzzle.

You pay attention both to the details of the picture and to the shape of the pieces. And Leviticus chapter 11 gives us real insight here, I believe. The literary structure of the book of Leviticus betrays some of the deeper meaning of what's taking place.

There is the establishment of this new garden scene, this new tabernacle, and the worship is being set up. The man is being placed in the garden, the high priest, and then everything's set up for this great celebration, and then there's a fall event with Nadab and Abihu and their sin, the forbidden fire that they bring in. And from there, chapter 10, there is a series of chapters, and those chapters play out fall themes.

So chapter 11 concerns the judgment upon the animals. The judgment upon the serpent followed immediately after the fall. After that, it was the judgment upon the woman.

And sure enough, in chapter 12, we have a chapter devoted to the question of childbirth and how that's to be treated. Chapter 13 and 14 concern skin diseases, the judgment upon the sweat of the brow, as it were, and the body. And in chapter 15, it's emissions from the body, and the body as a site of death, the body as a spring of uncleanness.

Chapter 16 is the day of coverings, when God covers his people. It deals with themes of expulsion as well, as the goat is sent out into the wilderness. Once that pattern has been recognized, we have a lot more perches upon chapter 11.

It is connected with the judgment on the serpent, and so the restrictive foods are foods that are associated with the serpent. Clean animals are animals that are distinguished from death. They are animals that are herbivores.

They are animals that do not have the same direct exposure to the polluting dust. Animals with cloven hooves wear, as it were, shoes, in sharp contrast to the serpent who crawls on his belly and eats dust. Unlike the serpent who swallows things whole,

ruminants take a long time digesting things.

Not only are they not connected with death, they consume their food in a way that makes a far greater distinction between inside and out. A final point we could make. Maybe there are some eschatological themes that can tie into this.

We have statements about creatures in places like Isaiah chapter 11 verses 6-8. Isaiah chapter 65 verse 25 The Lord is forming a people that are the polar opposite of the serpent. And Israel's eating of food is a sign of what it should and should not assimilate into its life.

By this it is marked out as a holy people, special to the Lord. However, the time would come when animals formerly unclean would be rendered clean. The inclusion of the Gentiles into the people of God is marked by an extension of the sorts of food that people like Peter could eat.

Straight after this we have one of the strangest commandments in the whole body of the law. Israel is instructed not to boil a kid in its mother's milk. And this, of all things, is a command repeated three times.

It's also found in Exodus chapter 23 verse 19 and in chapter 34 verse 26. On the other occasions where we find this, it's a climactic statement. In chapter 23 verse 19 of Exodus, it concludes the body of legal material in the book of the covenant.

In chapter 34 verse 26, it concludes the words of the renewed covenant. This suggests that this law is of great importance and is almost certainly symbolic of something important. There have been a number of suggestions.

Howard Eilberg Schwartz makes an interesting case that there is an allusion to mother-son incest here, or some other form of inappropriate closeness between a mother and a son. I'm not persuaded that this accounts for the prominence that this particular commandment has given on these various occasions. There are almost certainly important symbolic meanings to be discovered in this law.

It's repeated three times at pivotal moments in the law, in both Exodus and Deuteronomy, as I've mentioned. And it's likely I'm missing several of these entirely. But a meaning nearer to the surface concerns the importance of keeping life and death very strictly separate.

That makes sense in the context of what we've just been reading in terms of the dietary requirements. This distinction between the animals is designed to keep death at a distance. It's designed also to distinguish oneself from the serpent.

Before that, we have the laws concerning mourning, that Israel should not mark itself out by death. Once again, life and death being kept separate. Even in a context like

preparing a meal, where you might not be immediately alert to their proximity, the milk of the mother and the flesh of her child, the law charges us to separate them.

This fits in with surrounding themes of this chapter then. Israel is a people that has been delivered from death to life, and they must live as a living people, as a people that sharply separate their life from the reality of death. This really doesn't seem to relate very naturally to the Third Commandment.

You shall not bear the name of the Lord your God in vain. How might we explain the connection? The answer is found in what it means to bear the name. Israel is holy to the Lord.

God has placed his name upon his people. They are his firstborn son. Leviticus 21 verse 6 reads, They shall be holy to their God, and not profane the name of their God.

Not bearing the name of the Lord in vain is not profaning the name of the Lord, and that is profaned by living in a way that is not holy to the Lord when he has set us apart. The purpose of the laws concerning mourning and the dietary requirements are all about Israel maintaining its distinctiveness. Its distinctiveness from death, its distinctiveness from the other peoples, and its separateness to the Lord.

At this point there is a shift to material associated with the Sabbath law. This is material concerning tithe feasts. We should harmonise the teaching here with various other parts of the law.

It would seem that there were different tithes. The first tithe was given to the Levites. The second tithe was for the owner to celebrate feasts.

And every third year the second tithe was devoted to the use of the sojourner, the widow and the fatherless and the Levite. In the seventh year there would be no tithe as it was the sabbatical year. The tithes served the purpose of connecting Israelites with the sanctuary and making the sanctuary a site of feasting and celebration.

Shared rejoicing in God's presence was a central feature of Israel's life then. The Lord wanted his people to delight and to know joy before him. The amount of food involved would suggest a really great feast.

This is over a month's worth of food and yet they would only go to the sanctuary nine days a year by the requirements. So it suggests that they would be encouraged to go more often and when they did go to celebrate a really bumper feast. Finally, their concern for the marginal persons and the Levite within their community would be a cause for God to bless their work.

He who gives to the poor lends to the Lord. A question to consider, how could we incorporate feasting more into our worship? Luke chapter 8 verses 1 to 21 Soon

afterward he went on through cities and villages proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities.

Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna the wife of Cusa, Hera's household manager, and Susanna, and many others who provided for them out of their means. And when a great crowd was gathering and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable, A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell along the path and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air devoured it.

And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it. And some fell into good soil, and grew and yielded a hundredfold.

As he said these things, he called out, He who has ears to hear, let him hear. And when his disciples asked him what this parable meant, he said, To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God. But for others they are in parables, that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.

Now the parable is this, The seed is the word of God, the ones along the path are those who have heard. Then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy.

But these have no root, they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away. And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way, they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience.

No one, after lighting a lamp, covers it with a jar or puts it under a bed, but puts it on a stand, so that those who enter may see the light. For nothing is hidden that will not be made manifest, nor is anything secret that will not be known and come to light. Take care then how you hear, for to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he thinks that he has will be taken away.

Then his mother and his brothers came to him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd. And he was told, Your mother and your brothers are standing outside desiring to see you. But he answered them, My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.

In Luke chapter 8, we learn that Jesus' ministry was supported by faithful women, in much the same way as the ministry of people like Elisha. In 2 Kings chapter 4 verses 8-

10 we read of Elisha, and put there for him a bed, a table, a chair and a lamp, so that whenever he comes to us he can go in there. These women also seem to have accompanied Jesus and his disciples as they travelled around.

While the focus is usually upon the Twelve, Luke wants us to know that they were only some of a larger group, and that the women played an indispensable role, and not just as witnesses to the death and resurrection, in the earlier part of Jesus' ministry too. We see many women in the life of the early church involved in aspects of its ministry, as patronesses of churches, as those who hosted churches, as those who performed works of service. Within the cultural context, having women accompanying around a peripatetic teacher like Jesus would have been very surprising, and maybe even scandalous to some.

Jesus delivered these women from evil spirits and illnesses, and they ministered to his material needs. Joel Green observes, In the Twelve and these women, we also get a sense of the type of group that is forming around Jesus. One of the features of the Gospel portrayal of women is their concern for the presence and the body of Jesus.

Here they minister to his needs. In the preceding chapter we have a woman who washes his feet with her tears, and dries them with her hair. Mary bears the body of Christ in her womb.

Women are the ones who follow Christ to the cross, to the tomb, and then are the first to visit on the day of resurrection. Their recognition of the importance of Christ's body and his presence is something that seems to be far more pronounced in them than in the male disciples. Jesus here delivers the parable of the sower.

There are four types of soil, with different responses to the seed that is sown in them. Seed along the path, consumed by the birds. Seed on rocky ground, without much soil and scorched by the sun.

Seed among thorns, choked by those thorns. And then finally seed on good ground, yielding a hundredfold crop. Following this, Jesus explains his use of parables.

Parables are found at various occasions in the Old Testament, often used by prophets as a form of prophetic discourse, symbolic stories that open up something about a reality, while also hiding it from many people. The kingdom of God is a secret. It's known only by those to whom it has been given to know it.

Jesus is following in the footsteps of the Old Testament prophets, who are cryptically revealing God's purposes. Parables are not illustrations, but they're more like cryptic riddles, designed to hide prophetic mysteries from the unfaithful, yet reveal them to the remnant. Speaking in parables and riddles was a form of judgment upon a people without spiritual perception, and this is in part to fulfil the judgment spoken of by Isaiah,

in a passage that is very prominent in the New Testament, Isaiah chapter 6. It's where Isaiah sees the vision of God, and he has given his calling, his mission, to a people that will not hear, who will not understand, and who will be judged.

The passage speaks of a catastrophic judgment upon the people, but there will be a remnant, a holy seed will be the stump. And the quotation of Isaiah chapter 6 verse 9 in verse 10 is a very significant gesture towards what is a central theme in the Lukan material. In Acts chapter 28 verse 26 to 28, that verse concludes and sums up Luke's entire narrative.

Jeremiah chapter 31 verse 27 Ezekiel chapter 36 verses 9 to 10 Hosea chapter 2 verses 21 to 23 Jesus is describing what the restoration looks like. This is a sowing that occurs by the word, Isaiah chapter 55 verses 10 to 13. The Lord shall make a name for the Lord, an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

And all the trees of the field shall clap their hands, instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress, instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle, and it shall make a name for the Lord, an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off. N.T. Wright suggests that the parable of the sower should be read as the climax and recapitulation of Israel's story. In the sense of a climax, it presents the history of Israel as a story of successive sowings, of differing success and duration, leading up to the great kingdom sowing which Christ is undertaking in his own day.

In the sense of recapitulation, it presents all of these different responses to the word of God sowing a restored people as occurring within Jesus' own ministry. Jesus' ministry won't meet with a universally positive response, but the word of the kingdom that re-sows a restored Israel will receive mixed responses. A lamp is not brought in to be hidden.

Things secret are to be brought to light and things hidden to be revealed. Jesus is speaking in a hidden way at the moment, but ultimately things will be brought to light. It will be made known what he is saying.

We must act accordingly. Our actions right now, the measure that we use with others, will have consequences. Our passage ends with a visit from Jesus' family and it raises the question of who the insiders are.

Who are the outsiders? Jesus isn't just an independent teacher and exorcist, but he's forming a people around him. Jesus challenges the supposed claims of his natural family upon him. Just as the temple was his father's house back in chapter 2, so his true family are those who hear and obey God's word.

A question to consider. How might Jesus' statement about his mother and his brothers, and Luke's reference to the twelve and his description of the women who provided for

Jesus' material needs, be brought into fruitful conversation? What might we learn from the connection between the two?