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March 18th: Exodus 25 & Matthew 23:13-39

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Ark of the Covenant, Table of the Presence, Lampstand. Jesus condemns the scribes and Pharisees and weeps over Jerusalem.

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

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Transcript

Exodus 25. The Lord said to Moses, Speak to the people of Israel, that they take for Me a contribution. From every man whose heart moves him, you shall receive the contribution for Me.

This is the contribution that you shall receive from them. Gold, silver, and bronze, blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twisted linen, goat's hair, tanned ramskins, goatskins, Acacia wood, oil for the lamps, spices for the anointing oil, and for the fragrant incense, onyx stones and stones for setting, for the ephod and for the breastplate. And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst, exactly as I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle, and of all its furniture, so you shall make it.

They shall make an ark of Acacia wood. Two cubits and a half shall be its length, a cubit and a half its breadth, and a cubit and a half its height. You shall overlay it with pure

gold, inside and outside shall you overlay it, and you shall make on it a moulding of gold around it.

You shall cast four rings of gold for it, and put them on its four feet, two rings on the one side of it, and two rings on the other side of it. You shall make poles of Acacia wood, and overlay them with gold, and you shall put them into the rings on the sides of the ark, to carry the ark by them. The poles shall remain in the rings of the ark, they shall not be taken from it, and you shall put into the ark the testimony that I shall give you.

You shall make a mercy seat of pure gold. Two cubits and a half shall be its length, and a cubit and a half its breadth, and you shall make two cherubim of gold, of hammered wood, and you shall make on the two ends of the mercy seat. Make one cherub on the one side, and one cherub on the other side.

Of one piece with the mercy seat shall you make the cherubim on its two ends. The cherubim shall spread out their wings above, overshadowing the mercy seat with their wings, their faces one to another, toward the mercy seat shall the faces of the cherubim be, and you shall put the mercy seat on the top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the testimony that I shall give you. There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel.

You shall make a table of acacia wood, two cubits shall be its length, a cubit its breadth, and a cubit and a half its height. You shall overlay it with pure gold, and make a moulding of gold around it, and you shall make a rim around it a hand-breadth wide, and a moulding of gold around the rim, and you shall make for it four rings of gold, and fasten the rings to the four corners at its four legs. Close to the frame the rings shall lie, as holders for the poles to carry the table.

You shall make the poles of acacia wood, and overlay them with gold, and the table shall be carried with these. And you shall make its plates and dishes for incense, and its flagons and bowls with which to pour drink-offerings. You shall make them of pure gold, and you shall set the bread of the presents on the table before me regularly.

You shall make a lampstand of pure gold. The lampstand shall be made of hammered work, its base, its stem, its cups, its calyxes, and its flowers shall be of one piece with it, and there shall be six branches going out of its sides, three branches of the lampstand out of one side and three branches of the lampstand out of the other side of it, three cups made like almond blossoms, each with calyx and flower on one branch, and three cups made like almond blossoms, each with calyx and flower on the other branch, so for the six branches going out of the lampstand. And on the lampstand itself there shall be four cups made like almond blossoms, with their calyxes and flowers, and a calyx of one piece with it under each pair of the six branches going out from the lampstand.

Their calyxes and their branches shall be of one piece with it, the whole of a single piece of hammered work of pure gold. You shall make seven lamps for it, and the lamps shall be set up so as to give light on the space in front of it. Its tongs and their trays shall be of pure gold.

It shall be made with all these utensils out of a talent of pure gold. And see that you make them after the pattern for them which is being shown you on the mountain." In Exodus chapter 25 we have the beginning of the preparation for the construction of the tabernacle. The people of Israel received gifts from the Egyptians but now they will give gifts to the building of the Lord's tabernacle.

This is a house being built from people's hearts. If things such as the law of the firstborn, the feast of unleavened bread, the Passover and the Song of the Sea serve to institutionalise the deliverance from Egypt and perpetuate it in the life and the practice of Israel, the building of the tabernacle will serve the same purpose with regard to Sinai and the encounter with the Lord there. The tabernacle is a portable Sinai, a moveable mountain.

And the story of Exodus begins with Israel building for Pharaoh and ends with them building a house for the Lord to dwell in their midst. There is a sort of symmetry to it. The first half concerned with the service of Pharaoh, the second half with the service of the Lord.

The tabernacle's construction is also ordered according to a creation-like pattern in Exodus chapter 25 to 30. In Genesis 1 verse 1 to 2 verse 4 we see that creation has two stages. On the first three days the order of creation is formed by the division between light and darkness, waters above and waters beneath, land and sea.

And on the second three days each of these realms is filled and distributed to ordained rulers. Day four corresponds to day one, day five to day two, day six to day three. And in Exodus chapter 25 to 30 we see two sets of phases dividing the construction of the tabernacle.

There are pattern phases and there are ordinance or generation phases and these are marked out by phrases. So make everything according to the pattern that you've seen on the mount or this must be done throughout all your generations. So one concerned with the pattern, the other with the continuing practice and the delegation.

The pattern phrases which occur in the first half in chapter 25 verses 9 and 40, chapter 26 verse 30, chapter 27 verse 8 refer to the forming stage of the new creation. And the ordinance or generation phrases occur in chapter 27 verse 21, chapter 28 verse 43, chapter 29 verse 9 and chapter 30 verse 10. These refer to the filling stage where the new formed order is filled and apportioned to rulers.

The first day of the tabernacle building begins with formless raw materials assembled for the construction of the tabernacle. This is what happens in verses 1 to 9 as they devote certain things to the Lord. And then the ark, the table and the lampstand are formed on that first day.

They're covered with gold and they represent the radiance of God's glory presence. There will be other things that are formed of other materials but these are formed of gold. They're specially representing God's presence.

The ark and its cover represent God's throne and footstool. The table might be seen as the earth beneath the heavens and the lampstand is the light of the first day. We should also observe the way, particularly in the following chapters, that the spirit of God assists in the building of the tabernacle.

This is also something that human beings are establishing as creators under God's direction and instruction. In the creation story of Genesis chapter 1, God creates the heavens and the earth and in the formation of the Garden of Eden in Genesis chapter 2, he plays out a similar pattern of creation with man as a witness. Now there is a further movement still as God is teaching man to create under his direction.

We'll also see as we get further on in the book that there are themes of assessment and blessing and Sabbath just as we have at the end of the story of the creation. The ark of the covenant also reminds us of Noah's ark. Even though the word for ark isn't the same, we've seen already some similarities between the ascent of Sinai and the ascent of the ark upon the waters leading it to Mount Ararat and the establishment of a new covenant there.

There's a similarity between Moses' ascent into the cloud and the ascent of the ark upon the waters. So two sets of seven days followed by a 40 days and 40 nights period. Now the ark of the covenant reminds us again.

Once again there's a construction of a particular type of wood box that God gives the instructions for that must be overlaid with something inside and out with specific dimensions. But there are sharp contrasts of course. One is covered with pitch, the other is overlaid with gold.

And the Hebrew letters used for the covering of Noah's ark in Genesis chapter 6 verse 14 are taken up again to refer to the covering or the mercy seat of the ark of the covenant. Noah's ark was lifted up by the waters and the people must provide liftings up or contributions for the building of the tabernacle. On the first day of a new year the tabernacle is established later on in the book and the covering of the ark is removed in Genesis chapter 8 verse 13.

Again a new creation event. Perhaps the tabernacle should be seen as a sort of building

of a new ark that God is going to lead his people through the wilderness and his presence among them within this vessel is perhaps a new form of ark. To dwell in the hostile environment of a flooded world Noah had to build a world in miniature, the ark, and dwell in that realm for a period of time.

For God to dwell in our hostile environment, a world of sin, a world that rejects him, a world that is impure in his spotless and pure holiness requires a different sort of ark, a glory ark that contains God's glory presence in our midst without that presence breaking out and destroying us. It allows for communion between God and man without God's holiness destroying the worshipper. The ark of the covenant then and its cover represent God's throne in the inner chamber of the tabernacle or this sort of palace tent.

It's a throne and a footstool, the footstool being the ark and the throne being the cover. We should probably relate the furniture of chapter 25 to the details of the previous chapter. The ark of covenant represents God's throne.

God was seen enthroned in the previous chapter. The elders, the priests, and Moses representing Israel ate before the Lord and the table of showbread is the continued representation of that communion between the people and God in God's tabernacle or his tent. The golden lampstand represents the assembly of Israel burning like the burning bush with the presence of God in its midst.

There's a pattern shown to Moses as we see in Numbers chapter 8 verse 4 on the mountain so perhaps we should think that there is a heavenly archetype for this. This is something that Hebrews suggested that there is a heavenly tabernacle that corresponds to the details of the earthly tabernacle. This is a sort of heaven model on earth, a model of God's presence in our midst.

God's heavenly throne is represented in an earthly model. When we get to it we should also contrast the building of the tabernacle with the building of the golden calf which is sharply contrasted with it. Israel's life will later be coordinated around the tabernacle.

It will be symbolically mapped onto the reality of the encounter with God at Sinai and the continued presence of God in their midst thereafter. God isn't bound to a particular place but his special presence will move with them and his throne will be set up among them within this special tent. Understanding the nature of the tabernacle first as a portable Sinai, a movable mountain, and then as a new creation, and then as something related to Noah's ark, will help us to see how the sacrificial system works in relation to it.

The tabernacle is a continued representation of these things. It relates to heaven above, it relates to Sinai, it relates to the garden of Eden, it relates to the original creation as a whole, and it relates to Noah's ark. And as Israel orders its life around this building, its symbolic practice will relate it to all of those past events.

It's a way of continuing the reality of those events and developing those events in their significance in the continuing life and practice of the nation. This is not just a past event. When they leave Sinai behind, they will take Sinai with them in some sense and that will be taken with them in the tabernacle.

It will be a continued place of encounter with God, of meeting and fellowship with the heavenly bridegroom. It will be a way of entering into the realm of heaven itself in a model. A question to consider.

In Hebrews chapter 8 verses 1 following we read, Now the point in what we are saying is this. We have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the majesty in heaven, a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man. For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices.

Thus it is necessary for this high priest also to have something to offer. Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law, they serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God saying, see that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain.

But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old, as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. How can meditating upon the meaning of the tabernacle, its connection with Sinai and its connection with heaven, and then thinking about the connection between the tabernacle and Christ, help us better to understand what the new covenant means in this regard. Matthew chapter 23 verses 13 to 36.

For which is greater, the gold, or the temple that has made the gold sacred? And you say, if anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing. But if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath. You blind men! For which is greater, the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? So whoever swears by the altar, swears by it and by everything on it.

And whoever swears by the temple, swears by it and by him who dwells in it. And whoever swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faithfulness.

These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.

You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also

may be clean. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the prophets. You would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets. Thus you witness against yourselves that you are the sons of those who murdered the prophets.

Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barakiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. Truly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it, how often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you are not willing. See, your house is left to you desolate, for I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Jesus' public ministry began with blessings and the beatitudes and in chapter 23 of Matthew it ends with woes.

These blessings and these woes can also be mapped onto each other as we'll see shortly. Peter Lighthouse observes that they can be divided into woes upon the Pharisees for their effect upon others, woes upon them for the handling of God's truth and the law, woes upon them for their neglect of purity of heart, for the purity of the flesh, and then finally woe upon them for the treatment of the prophets. First of all their effect upon others, they shut up the kingdom of God against others.

Secondly, they prey upon widows. Third, they trap Gentiles as proselytes. And then the handling of the law.

First, they purposefully distort the law and use legalistic circumventions to neglect the intent of the law. Second, they show an utter failure for the deeper purpose of the law and reduce it to detached and nitpicking commandments. They will tithe the smallest spices but they forget justice, mercy and faithfulness.

Third, they neglect purity of heart and under this Jesus accuses them first of their assumption that mere external cleansing suffices for purity without dealing with the deep issues of the heart. Second, they are like whitewashed tombs. They look pleasant but they contain and they convey impurity to others.

And the final charge is that their fathers killed the prophets and that they are continuing in the murderous ways of their fathers. And then we should note that these woes can be matched onto the Beatitudes as their counterparts. First, blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven and that corresponds with the woe upon the Pharisees who shut up the kingdom of heaven in people's faces.

Here on the one hand you have those who are poor in spirit who are receiving the kingdom of heaven and the Pharisees who close the kingdom of heaven to other people. Second, blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted and the contrast is with the Pharisees who devour widows' houses. They destroy the mourners, they pray upon the mourners whereas those who mourn in the kingdom of God will be comforted.

Third, blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth and then they travel on sea and land to make converts and make them children of hell. They will inherit hell and so they're trying to inherit the earth, they're trying to bring in the Gentiles but they're making them inheritors of hell not those who will inherit the earth. Fourth, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be satisfied and the Pharisees are marked rather by the perversion of all righteousness.

The way that they hunger and thirst to find some way out of righteousness, hungering for any way they can circumvent God's purpose. Fifth, blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy. The Pharisees tithe mint and anise and cumin and forget the weightier matters of the law, justice, mercy and faithfulness.

The weightier matters of the law, those who show mercy shall receive mercy. Those who understand and practice the law in that merciful way will receive the mercy of God. Sixth, blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God.

And this contrasts with the Pharisees who cleanse the outside only and don't deal with the heart. They're not pure in heart, they're just cleansing the surface. Seventh, blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called sons of God.

The Pharisees on the other hand appear beautiful on the outside but full of dead men's bones and uncleanness. The sons of God will be raised up on the last day. They will be those who are marked out as the children of the living God.

But yet the Pharisees are characterized by deadness even when they're still living. Eighth and finally, blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. However the Pharisees are the sons of those who persecuted the prophets.

Jesus talks about the way that those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, those who are persecuted for his name's sake are those who are continuing the ministry of the prophets. And just as they were persecuted by the fathers of the scribes and the

Pharisees, so the disciples of Christ will be persecuted by their children. Various books of the Bible are introduced, concluded or otherwise framed by contrast between blessings and woes.

We might think of Psalm chapter 1, blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners etc. Or perhaps we think of Proverbs chapter 9 with the contrast between the appeal of lady wisdom and the woman folly. Or in Leviticus chapter 26 the blessings and the curses or Deuteronomy chapter 27-28.

Matthew is framed in a similar way. Jesus' ministry begins with blessings and ends with woes and that bookends the entire teaching between. And that teaching of the body of the book of Matthew is repeatedly recognisable beneath the surface of this section.

Jesus isn't just making some new points here. Behind every one of his statements we can recognise a specific conversation, teaching or action that Matthew has recorded. He is summing up his entire public ministry to this point and declaring condemnation.

The next few chapters will lay out the sentence. To whom are these woes directed? They're directed to a specific group of people, to the religious leaders. The blessings of the Beatitudes on the other hand are directed to the faithful disciples of Christ.

These blessings and woes then are not just general blessings and woes but distinguishing markers placed upon two different groups. Looking through them we'll see the way that they refer back to the earlier teaching of Christ. First of all the effect of the scribes and the Pharisees upon others.

They shut up the kingdom of God. They don't open the kingdom of God to others. They close people off from it.

They enslave them with heavy burdens. The second challenge is that they prey upon widows. In the other synoptic gospels, in Mark and Luke, this is connected with the widow's mite.

And that story often taken as an example of sacrificial giving to follow, rather it's a story of judgment. It's a story of how people who give everything that they have are being destroyed by this. The false shepherds are fleecing the flock, causing them to invest in something that is going to be torn down as a result of their sin.

They trap Gentiles as proselytes. You can think about Jesus' ministry and the way that he has set forth Gentiles as examples of faith. The Canaanite woman, the centurion.

And rather than ministering to Gentiles as we've seen Jesus do, the scribes and the Pharisees are making them children of hell. Then in the challenges to their use of the law, first of all their use of casuistry and legalistic circumventions to neglect the intent of the law. We can think back to Jesus' conversation concerning the negation of the fifth

commandment, the way that they will purposefully circumvent the law through legalistic gerrymandering.

In challenging next, their utter failure to regard the deep purpose of the law and reducing it to detached and nitpicking commandments, we can think about the conversation concerning the greatest commandment. The small stuff matters. Tithing those small spices is not something to be neglected, but it only makes sense in the light of the most important things.

All of those details must point back to the core reality, the reality of love for God and neighbour. And where those things are forgotten, the little things just become burdens and things that distract and detract from the purpose of the law. Next, concerning their approaches to purity.

First, their assumption that mere external cleansing suffices for purity without dealing with the issues of the heart, reminds us of the conversation about hand washing and the way that Jesus challenged them specifically at that point concerning the nature of true purity and also true pollution. What truly makes a man's heart unclean? It's not external things, it's what comes forth from the heart. That's what really makes people unclean.

And then second, they are like whitewashed tombs. They look pleasant but they contain and they convey impurity to others. And there we can see Jesus teaching in the background, avoid the leaven of the Pharisees, the hypocrisy that characterises their teaching.

And that leaven is that hidden thing at the heart. It's that thing that's introduced to the new batch that causes it to rise. It's that thing that's passed on from generation to generation, a poisonous tradition, a tradition that destroys people, that has that internal impurity as a transmission from one generation to another.

And they must avoid the leaven of the Pharisees. They must recognise the death that exists at the heart of that religious system that they represent, that legalistic approach that they are taking. And finally, their fathers killed the prophets and the way that they are continuing in their ways, all while covering this up by decorating the prophets' tombs.

Jesus then goes on to develop this point further, as he does in the Sermon on the Mount, where he directly connects his disciples with the prophets as those persecuted for righteousness' sake. He's taught concerning this in the story of the wicked vine-dressers, the wicked tenants. All these servants that are sent, that are killed, can think also of the way that the servants are treated in the story of the wedding feast.

Again, these are the prophets that are sent. And now the sun has come and he is going to be killed too. The Pharisees will prove themselves to be the sons of the murderers of

the prophets by continuing in their actions as they murder the emissaries of Christ.

They will murder the disciples, they will crucify the disciples, they will cast them out of synagogues. And the entire blood of the martyrs, the whole history of the martyrs, from Abel's blood that called out from the ground at the beginning of Genesis to the blood of Zechariah in 2nd Chronicles 24, is going to come on that generation. In Genesis chapter 15, God declared that the sin of the Amorites was not yet complete, with the assumption that when it was complete, Israel would enter into the land.

God gave Canaan into the hands of the Israelites when the sin of the Amorites was filled up. And now the leaders of the Jews are filling up the measure of their wrath and their city is about to be destroyed. The kingdom is about to be given into the hands of other parties, of tenants who will give the fruits of the land to the Lord, to the disciples who will sit on 12 thrones judging the 12 tribes of Israel.

Jesus here is a new Jeremiah. He declares judgment upon the house. He declares that there is no peace when others are saying peace, peace.

And finally he laments over Jerusalem. And in that lamentation we can hear the voice of Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, the one who stands over Jerusalem and sees it in its destruction. Jesus anticipates the destruction of Jerusalem and weeps over it, just as Jeremiah does.

Peter Lighthouse has observed the way that the story of Matthew follows a pattern. It begins with themes of Genesis, the genealogy, the Genesis of Jesus Christ, and then giving his connection with Abraham. A Joseph who's the son of Jacob who leads his people into Egypt after having dreams.

And then people being led out of Egypt. The themes of the Exodus coming at various points in those earlier chapters, particularly in Jesus' baptism and his time in the wilderness for 40 days. And then in chapters 5 to 7, all these themes on the Sermon on the Mount that point to the law being given, connect us with the story of Sinai in the Revelation there.

A new law being given, a new understanding of the law. And then the disciples are sent out. There's the mission of the 12, a preparation for conquest, a spying out of the land, an entrance into the land as they are sent to the cities and the cities will be judged according to the way that they respond.

And then there's the parables of the kingdom, the wisdom of Solomon in chapter 13. And then as we've moved through, we've seen all these different themes tracing through Israel's history until we arrive at this point. And there's the expectation of the end of Judah and Babylonian exile.

There's the statements of Jeremiah. There's Ezekiel coming to the foreground at various

points as well. There's Babylonian exile.

And then as we end the book, it will end on the theme that is the theme of the final verse of the Old Testament in the Hebrew ordering. It will end with 2 Chronicles chapter 36 and the decree of Cyrus re-entering the land, building the temple and God's presence being with his people. Now what's the point of all of this? Christ is playing out the history of Israel.

Christ is the son of Abraham. Abraham played out the history of Israel in advance. Christ is playing out the history of Israel as its Messiah, the one who sums it up in himself.

He is the one who brings it to its destiny. And as we follow the story even further, we'll see what shape this takes. A question to consider.

One of the problems for many people's understanding of Christ, as they see him in the Gospels and in his teaching and in his practice, is that the Jesus they believe in is not crucifiable. Yet the Jesus that we see in these chapters would seem to be crucifiable. Looking at the conflict between Jesus and the religious and political leaders in the last few chapters, summed up in this final chapter of Condemnation, how can we better understand the motivations that people might have for crucifying this man?