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April 14th: Numbers 8 & Mark 9:30-50

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Alastair Roberts

The appointment of the Levites. Becoming like a little child.

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

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Transcript

Numbers chapter 8. And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Take the Levites from among the people of Israel, and cleanse them. Thus you shall do to them to cleanse them. Sprinkle the water of purification upon them, and let them go with a razor over all their body, and wash their clothes, and cleanse themselves.

Then let them take a bull from the herd, and its grain offering of fine flour mixed with oil, and you shall take another bull from the herd for a sin offering. And you shall bring the Levites before the tent of meeting, and assemble the whole congregation of the people of Israel. When you bring the Levites before the Lord, the people of Israel shall lay their hands on the Levites, and Aaron shall offer the Levites before the Lord as a wave offering from the people of Israel, that they may do the service of the Lord.

Then the Levites shall lay their hands on the heads of the bulls, and you shall offer the one for a sin offering, and the other for a burnt offering to the Lord, to make atonement

for the Levites. And you shall set the Levites before Aaron and his sons, and shall offer them as a wave offering to the Lord. Thus you shall separate the Levites from among the people of Israel, and the Levites shall be mine.

And after that the Levites shall go in to serve at the tent of meeting, when you have cleansed them and offered them as a wave offering, for they are wholly given to me from among the people of Israel. Instead of all who open the womb, the firstborn of all the people of Israel, I have taken them for myself. For all the firstborn among the people of Israel are mine, both of man and of beast.

On the day that I struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I consecrated them for myself. And I have taken the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the people of Israel. And I have given the Levites as a gift to Aaron and his sons from among the people of Israel, to do the service for the people of Israel at the tent of meeting, and to make atonement for the people of Israel, that there may be no plague among the people of Israel when the people of Israel come near the sanctuary.

Thus did Moses and Aaron and all the congregation of the people of Israel to the Levites. According to all that the Lord commanded Moses concerning the Levites, the people of Israel did to them. And the Levites purified themselves from sin and washed their clothes, and Aaron offered them as a wave offering before the Lord, and Aaron made atonement for them to cleanse them.

And after that the Levites went in to do their service in the tent of meeting before Aaron and his sons, as the Lord had commanded Moses concerning the Levites, so they did to them. And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, This applies to the Levites. From twenty-five years old and upward they shall come to do duty in the service of the tent of meeting, and from the age of fifty years they shall withdraw from the duty of the service, and serve no more.

They minister to their brothers in the tent of meeting by keeping guard, but they shall do no service. Thus shall you do to the Levites in assigning their duties. Numbers chapter 8 begins with the Lord instructing Moses concerning Aaron's service of the lamps.

The book of Numbers intersperses narrative with law, and the law and the narrative are often mutually illuminating, but it's not always clear why they are placed together. It can require a bit of puzzling out on occasions. The previous chapter lists the offerings at the consecration of the tabernacle.

After the tabernacle has been consecrated, the setting up of the lampstand and the rules concerning it follow fairly naturally. In Exodus chapter 25 verses 31 to 40 we read the rules concerning the lampstand when the instructions for the tabernacle are first given. 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 of it, 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 work of it, 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. Further instructions can be found in Exodus chapter 40 verses 24 to 25.

He put the lampstand in the tent of meeting, opposite the table on the south side of the tabernacle, and set up the lamps before the Lord as the Lord had commanded Moses. Presumably this suggests that the light of the lamps was supposed to be casting light onto the table. In Exodus we saw parallels between the lampstand and the priests as anointed ministers in the tabernacle.

Aaron's entry into the service of the tabernacle would perhaps connect naturally with the service of the lamp in the holy place, which would have been among his chief duties. The Levites were appointed to replace the firstborn of Israel in Numbers chapter 3 verses 11 to 13 and 40 to 51. The Lord spoke to Moses saying, Behold, I have taken the Levites from among the people of Israel, instead of every firstborn who opens the womb among the people of Israel.

The Levites shall be mine, for all the firstborn are mine. On the day that I struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I consecrated for my own all the firstborn in Israel, both of man and of beast. They shall be mine.

I am the Lord. The Levites then seemed to have been set apart to replace the firstborn of the Israelites in Exodus chapter 32 in the aftermath of the golden calf incident, when they stood beside Moses and judged the Israelites on account of their sin. The Lord said to Moses, List all the firstborn males of the people of Israel from a month old and upward, taking the number of their names.

And you shall take the Levites for me. I am the Lord, instead of all of the firstborn among the people of Israel, and the cattle of the Levites, instead of all the firstborn among the cattle of the people of Israel. So Moses listed all the firstborn among the people of Israel, as the Lord commanded him.

And all the firstborn males, according to the number of names, from a month old and upward, as listed, were 22,273. And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Take the Levites instead of all of the firstborn among the people of Israel, and the cattle of the Levites instead of their cattle. The Levites shall be mine.

I am the Lord. And as the redemption price for the 273 of the firstborn of the people of Israel, over and above the number of the male Levites, you shall take five shekels per head. You shall take them according to the shekel of the sanctuary, the shekel of 20 geras, and give the money to Aaron and his sons as the redemption price for those who are over.

So Moses took the redemption money for those who were over and above those redeemed by the Levites. From the firstborn of the people of Israel he took the money. 1,365 shekels by the shekel of the sanctuary.

And Moses gave the redemption money to Aaron and his sons according to the word of the Lord as the Lord commanded Moses. The Levites weren't like the priests. They did not perform the service of the altar and were not permitted to enter into the tabernacle.

They were appointed to guard and to serve. These were duties of the priests and high priests as well, but in a different realm and to a greater degree. All of these things look back to the Garden of Eden where Adam was placed in the garden to keep and to serve the garden, to guard it and to serve it and minister within it.

In Numbers chapter 3 verses 5 to 10 we have a description of their dedication. And the Lord spoke to Moses saying, Bring the tribe of Levi-nea and set them before Aaron the priest that they may minister to him. They shall keep guard over him and over the whole congregation before the tender meeting as they minister at the tabernacle.

They shall guard all the furnishings of the tent of meeting and keep guard over the people of Israel as they minister at the tabernacle. And you shall give the Levites to Aaron and his sons. They are wholly given to him from among the people of Israel.

And you shall appoint Aaron and his sons and they shall guard their priesthood. But if any outsider comes near he shall be put to death. We should remember the way that the Levites functioned as zealous military guardians of Israel's holiness in Exodus chapter 32.

They are now appointed for this purpose more generally. The firstborn is the first fruits of strength and the Levites are as it were the standing army of the Lord around his palace

tent while the rest of the Lord's host, the other tribes, are arrayed around it by their tribes. They were purified and appointed for service if they were in the age range of those who would work, 25 to 50 as we see at the end of the chapter.

However, they weren't ordained like the priests nor were they holy in the same way as the priests. After the initial setting apart of the Levites for a covering of the people of Israel there wouldn't be any ceremony so much as a ritual process that all of the Levites would have to undergo. The water of purification here is presumably the water described in chapter 19.

The Levites aren't merely being appointed for this service. They are also taking the place of the firstborn. They are offered as a wave offering with representatives of the whole congregation presenting them as their substitutes.

The firstborn had to be sacrificed to the Lord as we see in Exodus chapter 13 but the Levites take their place making covering or atonement for them. We can see that the sacrifices make covering and atonement for the Levites themselves. They protect the people from the plague as we saw in the census tax of Exodus chapter 30 verses 11 to 16 when people come before the Lord are brought to his attention then there is the threat of the plague if they do not bring some sort of ransom or redemption or some covering for themselves.

And so there is a need for covering and the Levites provide that for the rest of Israel. They are offered by the Israelites and they are also offered by the Lord to Aaron. Maybe we can see some sort of similarity here with Eve being brought near to Adam to help him in the realm of the garden.

Now there are obviously many dissimilarities between these two things but a similarity is quite possible. This is just before the second Passover so the dedication of the Levites as the replacement for the firstborn is very fitting and timely in this particular context. A question to consider, what about the tribe of Levi sets it apart from the other tribes to this point? Why might they be particularly apt for this particular calling? Mark chapter 9 verses 30 to 50.

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise again.

But they did not understand the saying and were afraid to ask him. And they came to Capernaum, and when he was in the house he asked them, What were you discussing on the way? But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. And he sat down and called the twelve, and he said to them, If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.

And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his hands he said to them, Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives not me, but him who sent me. John said to him, Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us. But Jesus said, Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me.

For the one who is not against us is for us. For truly I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward. Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung round his neck and he were thrown into the sea.

If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off.

It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.

For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another. In the concluding half of Mark chapter 9, Jesus once again predicts his death and resurrection, and once again his disciples fail to understand.

They presumably think he's speaking some strange sort of parable here, when on this particular matter he's speaking entirely plainly. He's giving them the details down to the specifics of the specific people who will be responsible for his death and the day on which he will rise again. The question of who is the greatest obviously occupied the disciples' thoughts on this and many other occasions.

The typical human desire for exaltation over others is being expressed here, and Jesus' response to it is to show them a child. The kingdom of God does not work in the same way as the kingdoms of this world, the societies of this world. The child challenges people to humble themselves, not to be people who vaunt themselves over others, who seek to have an expression of their superiority, of their honour, of their status.

We are not to be invested in the competitive games of honour that consume so many other people and their attention, their concern. It becomes their preoccupation and it's not to be like that for the people of God. Rather the disciples are to recognise their dependence, their unworthiness, their lack of honour and status, and to resist the pursuit of exalting themselves over others.

Greatness comes through loving service of others. If you want to be first, you must be last. If you want to be the greatest, you must be the servant of all.

Greatness also comes through welcoming and receiving of the weak. The section of the passage that we're looking at now has a lot to say about how we recognise each other and the way in which our receiving of each other, our recognition of each other and our honouring of each other is a way of honouring and receiving Christ. Here it's found in receiving the weak person.

In receiving the child, in receiving the person who's dependent, who's without honour and status, who doesn't have anything to offer us in return. As we receive them, we are receiving Christ and as we receive Christ, we are receiving the one who sent Christ and we will be rewarded. But instead of trying to exalt ourselves over others, the alternative is not just recognising the goodness of the child, it's recognising that the kingdom works in a very different way as you show honour to those who do not naturally receive honour, you will be honoured by the one who has sent Christ, by the Father himself.

Children are highlighted as the example. They should be seen as representative of the wider group of weak and dependent persons but they are important in their own right. A number of people have seen Jesus paying attention to children and putting forward children as examples of the kingdom and have said that he must be referring to something else, that the children must illustrate some other group of persons.

Now they do illustrate a wider group of persons but they illustrate those wider group of persons precisely as children, precisely as the sort of group that you would not pay attention to in themselves, the sort of group that you would think they obviously are referring to some other group. It can't be children. Children lack the mental capacity or maybe they lack the age to be recognised as part of society, whatever it is that might cause us to discount them, it seems to me that Christ is challenging that.

That the people of the kingdom are defined by the least, by the weakest among them. Those are the ones we are to honour and as we honour them we will be honoured by Christ. This is not then the pursuit of honour and status for ourselves, of self-aggrandisement that the disciples had exemplified.

Rather it's about giving ourselves to others, it's about honouring others ahead of ourselves and that is how we will be honoured. Receiving children means paying attention to and honouring the people who cannot give you anything in return, who might threaten your status rather than raising it. The way that we treat children, the poor, the mentally disabled, the dependent and other such persons is how we follow or fail to follow Christ's example.

Jesus surrendered his rights for the sake of people who have nothing to offer, nothing to commend themselves to his attention and we are to do the same. This incident is

followed by the disciples seeing a man casting out demons and rebuking him. It's reminiscent of Numbers chapter 11 verses 26-29.

Now two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad and the other named Medad and the spirit rested on them. They were among those registered but they had not gone out to the tent and so they prophesied in the camp and a young man ran and told Moses, Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp and Joshua the son of Nun, the assistant of Moses from his youth said, My Lord Moses, stop them. But Moses said to him, Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put his spirit on them.

Jesus in his response to the disciples challenges their sectarianism. Indeed, even the smallest act of hospitality given to an apostle because they belong to Christ would not go unrewarded. Just a cup of water would be enough.

This is fleshed out in much more detail in Matthew chapter 25. You should note also here that Jesus refers to himself as the Christ. Jesus had challenged the way in which they failed to recognise the weak and sought to put themselves over others.

Now Jesus is challenging their sectarianism, their failure to recognise people outside of their camp. This is all about how we recognise and honour people and this theme continues through into the next body of teaching. Jesus talks about the importance of dealing radically with obstacles to the weak.

The connection to Jesus' teaching on adultery for instance in the Sermon on the Mount. We must deal radically with sin in order to protect not just ourselves but others from stumbling. If we do not deal with sin, if we do not deal with those things that might wound others in the body of Christ decisively, then we are in danger of hell itself.

The challenge here is to deal with anything that would lead to abuse, that would lead to destruction of the weak. We must recognise the weak. It's so often within churches the case that people will treat the weak, the dependent, the people who have no honour, as if they could be collateral damage of those with honour and status and platforms.

That's not how it's supposed to be in the body of Christ. The weak and the dependent and the children are seen by God himself. God sees the orphan and the widow.

He sees the one who is poor. He sees the child. And a Christianity that is unmindful of the weak and allows them to be abused is no Christianity at all.

This is once again all about how we recognise people, how we honour people. The description of the great millstone hung around the neck and the person being cast into the sea maybe reminds us of the description of Babel on the great. In Revelation 18 verse 21, A question to consider.

How might Leviticus chapter 2 verse 13 help us to read the final verses of this chapter?