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March 22nd: Exodus 29 & Matthew 25:31-46

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Alastair Roberts

The consecration of the priests. The sheep and the goats.

Some passages referenced:

Exodus 40, Leviticus 8 (performance of the ritual of Exodus 29); Leviticus 4:7 (blood of the sin offering generally put on the horns of the altar of incense); Leviticus 14:14 (blood placed on three 'corners' of the cleansed leper); Leviticus 7:29-34 (wave offering of the breast and the contribution of the thigh).

Matthew 10:40-42 (Jesus' identification with the disciples sent out earlier); Matthew 10:12-15 (test of hospitality in Israel); Hebrews 13:2 (entertaining angels unawares); Ezekiel 16:48-50 (judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah for their inhospitality).

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

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Transcript

Exodus chapter 29 Now this is what you shall do to them to consecrate them, that they may serve me as priests. Take one bull of the herd and two rams without blemish, and unleavened bread, unleavened cakes mixed with oil, and unleavened wafers smeared

with oil. You shall make them of fine wheat flour.

You shall put them in one basket, and bring them in the basket, and bring the bull and the two rams. You shall bring Aaron and his sons to the entrance of the tent of meeting, and wash them with water. her.

Then you shall take the garments, and put on Aaron the coat and the robe of the ephod, and the ephod and the breastplate, and gird him with the skilfully woven band of the ephod. And you shall set the turban on his head, and put the holy crown on the turban. You shall take the anointing oil and pour it on his head, and anoint him.

Then you shall bring his sons and put coats on them. And you shall gird Aaron and his sons with sashes, and bind caps on them. And the priesthood shall be theirs by a statute for ever.

Thus you shall ordain Aaron and his sons. Then you shall bring the bull before the tent of meeting. Aaron and his sons shall lay their hands on the head of the bull.

Then you shall kill the bull before the Lord at the entrance of the tent of meeting. And you shall take part of the blood of the bull and put it on the horns of the altar with your finger, and the rest of the blood you shall pour out at the base of the altar. And you shall take all the fat that covers the entrails, and the long lobe of the liver, and the two kidneys with the fat that is on them, and burn them on the altar.

But the flesh of the bull, and its skin, and its dung, you shall burn with fire outside the camp. It is a sin offering. Then you shall take one of the rams, and Aaron and his sons shall lay their hands on the head of the ram.

And you shall kill the ram, and shall take its blood, and throw it against the sides of the altar. Then you shall cut the ram into pieces, and wash its entrails and its legs, and put them with its pieces and its head, and burn the whole ram on the altar. It is a burnt offering to the Lord.

It is a pleasing aroma, a food offering to the Lord. You shall take the other ram, and Aaron and his sons shall lay their hands on the head of the ram. And you shall kill the ram, and take part of its blood, and put it on the tip of the right ear of Aaron, and on the tips of the right ears of his sons, and on the thumbs of their right hands, and on the great toes of their right feet, and throw the rest of the blood against the sides of the altar.

Then you shall take part of the blood that is on the altar, and of the anointing oil, and sprinkle it on Aaron and his garments, and on his sons and his sons' garments with him. He and his garments shall be holy, and his sons and his sons' garments with him. You shall also take the fat, from the ram and the fat tail, and the fat that covers the entrails, and the long lobe of the liver, and the two kidneys with the fat that is on them, and the right thigh, for it is a ram of ordination, and one loaf of bread, and one cake of bread

made with oil, and one wafer out of the basket of unleavened bread that is before the Lord.

You shall put all these on the palms of Aaron, and on the palms of his sons, and wave them for a wave offering before the Lord. Then you shall take them from their hands, and burn them on the altar, on top of the burnt offering, as a pleasing aroma before the Lord. It is a food offering to the Lord.

You shall take the breast of the ram of Aaron's ordination, and wave it for a wave offering before the Lord, and it shall be your portion. And you shall consecrate the breast of the wave offering that is waved, and the thigh of the priest's portion that is contributed from the ram of ordination, from what was Aaron's and his sons. It shall be for Aaron and his sons, as a perpetual due from the people of Israel, for it is a contribution.

It shall be a contribution from the people of Israel, from their peace offerings, their contribution to the Lord. The holy garments of Aaron shall be for his sons after him. They shall be anointed in them, and ordained in them.

The son who succeeds him as priest, who comes into the tent of meeting to minister in the holy place, shall wear them seven days. You shall take the ram of ordination, and boil its flesh in a holy place. And Aaron and his son shall eat the flesh of the ram, and the bread that is in the basket in the entrance of the tent of meeting.

They shall eat those things with which atonement was made at their ordination and consecration. But an outsider shall not eat of them, because they are holy. And if any of the flesh for the ordination or of the bread remain until the morning, then you shall burn the remainder with fire.

It shall not be eaten, because it is holy. Thus you shall do to Aaron and to his sons, according to all that I have commanded you. Through seven days shall you ordain them, and every day you shall offer a bull as a sin offering for atonement.

Also you shall purify the altar, when you make atonement for it, and shall anoint it to consecrate it. Seven days you shall make atonement for the altar and consecrate it, and the altar shall be most holy. Whatever touches the altar shall become holy.

Now this is what you shall offer on the altar. Two lambs a year old, day by day, regularly. One lamb you shall offer in the morning, and the other lamb you shall offer at twilight.

And with the first lamb a tenth measure of fine flour mingled with a fourth of a hin of beaten oil, and a fourth of a hin of wine for a drink offering. The other lamb you shall offer at twilight, and shall offer with it a grain offering and its drink offering, as in the morning, for a pleasing aroma, a food offering to the Lord. It shall be a regular burnt offering throughout your generations at the entrance of the tent of meeting before the

Lord, where I will meet with you to speak to you there.

There I will meet with the people of Israel, and it shall be sanctified by my glory. I will consecrate the tent of meeting and the altar. Aaron also and his sons I will consecrate to serve me as priests.

I will dwell among the people of Israel, and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the Lord their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt, that I might dwell among them. I am the Lord their God.

Exodus chapter 29 concerns the ordination of Aaron and his sons. This follows very naturally from the previous chapter in which the clothing of the high priest and the other priests was described. This corresponds to the sixth day of creation.

It's the formation of a new humanity. It corresponds with the day in which man was created as the image of God within the creation, charged with exercising stewardship over it. And the priests are anointed just as the spirit of life was breathed into Adam and his creation.

This follows very naturally from what has just gone before. There are close parallels here with Leviticus chapter 8 where the actual performance of this ritual is described. Also in Exodus chapter 40 which is another description of the same performance.

What is the priest? The priest is the household servant in the divine palace. His task is to do all the things that would be the responsibilities of such a household servant within a palace. A steward within the house.

He's supposed to guard the house. He's supposed to serve at the table. He's supposed to maintain and clean the house.

He's supposed to represent the authority of his master to the guests and also to serve and minister to the guests. But then he also represents the people in some ways to God. He maintains not just the house of the temple but the house that that house represents, the house of Israel.

Ordination, this rite that's described in this chapter, is a filling of the hand quite literally is the way it's described. And that's literally what happens in verse 20. The priest is filled with his hand with the things that he will minister to the Lord with.

The rite begins with the gathering of different materials and then the washing with water. The ordination ritual is a seven day process. The first day involves washing with water, being invested with priestly garments and being anointed.

And we maybe can see some parallels between this and the logic of baptism. There are three sacrifices that need to be brought forward. There's the purification or sin offering,

the whole burnt offering and the consecration offering.

So the first one is a bull for the sin offering. Then there's the two rams, one for the whole burnt offering and another for the consecration offering. They must wait in the entrance of the tent of meeting.

The purification or sin offering for the priest here is different from the regular one. As in the case of the regular rite, it is performed with a bull that represents the high priest. But it seems as if the blood is placed at a different point.

For the regular sin offering or purification offering, the blood is placed on the altar of incense in the holy place. We see this in Leviticus chapter 4. But here it seems as if the blood is placed on the bronze altar in the courtyard. Now when we look through these rituals, we'll see particularly in this case a number of ways in which it diverges from the typical ritual.

And those divergences are important to notice because they help us to understand the logic of this one. This is a very unusual sacrifice because it's performed for the sake of priests that are not yet ministering in the holy place. And because the priest is not yet a minister in the holy place, he can't defile it.

So the blood of the sacrifice is not taken in there. Later on when he does minister within the holy place, the blood of the sin or purification offering will be taken into the holy place and it will be placed on a different altar. This also suggests that there is some analogy between the bronze altar and the altar of incense.

The altar of incense represents something about the priest and the bronze altar more maybe commoners of Israel. There are two rams involved in the rite. There's the ram of the burnt offering and the ram of consecration.

And in both of these cases, as with the bull, Aaron and his sons put their hands on the animals but they do not kill the animals which is unusual for a sacrifice. Moses rather is the one who performs the role of the priest in these rituals. He is the prophet who's establishing this whole system.

After the offering of the whole burnt offering, the consecration ram is offered. Now the consecration ram is like the peace offering in many respects but there are significant differences. This is a rather anomalous rite.

Moses for instance received the breast of the ram of ordination and the wave offering of the thigh is established as the perpetual Jew of Aaron and his sons. However they do not receive it as they usually would as a sort of direct contribution. In Leviticus chapter 7 verses 29 to 34 we get a sense of the more usual, typical practice of this rite.

In the case of that rite it seems that Aaron and the priest receive meat from two different

quarters as a direct contribution from Israel and then also as a wave offering from the Lord. They wave it up to the Lord and then it's received back as it's lifted up and then received back from him. Here however Moses gets the priest's portion of the wave offering of the breast and the thigh goes to Aaron and his sons.

Stepping back a bit as we look at the practice of the consecration offering, blood is placed upon both the priest and the altar. It's placed on the horns of the altar, the four horns and then other parts of the blood are placed on the right ear of Aaron and the tips of the right ears of his sons and on the thumbs of their right hands and on the great toes of their right feet. When you include the fact of circumcision with this it seems as though the four tips of the human body are touched with this blood representing the connection between the altar and the priest who serves it.

We've already seen connection between the clothing of the priest and the tabernacle and the particular places that are touched are connected with specific functions, with hearing, with the action of the hands, with the going of the foot and then with the procreative purpose of the genitalia. Perhaps we should see the priest as a sort of living altar, one whose soul should ascend in service and also in prayer and worship and we see that connection with the altar of incense perhaps there. A similar rite of touching blood to different extremities of the body is found in the cleansing of the leper rite in Leviticus chapter 14.

The filling of the hand of the priest is also something that equips him to serve God and the bread that is placed in his hand perhaps we should see that as representing human beings. The bread placed before the Lord, the twelve loaves, represents Israel and here perhaps we're supposed to see human beings anointed with the spirit as being represented by bread anointed with oil. This process is not just anointing and preparing and consecrating Aaron and his sons, it's also preparing the tabernacle and its realm as a realm of service.

So it's the setting apart of the altar as we see in verses 35 to 37. Seven days you shall make atonement for the altar and consecrate it and the altar shall be most holy. Whoever touches the altar shall become holy.

That connection between the holy altar and the holy people who are connected with it and that way in which the priest and the altar are connected by having blood touched to the four tips of themselves helps us to see something of the logic of this system. Now with the reference to seven days here I think we've moved into the stage of the Sabbath of this new creation week. This is establishing the rest where finally the service of the tabernacle is established and Israel knows the presence of God in their midst.

And this consecration of the altar and the tabernacle and the priests connects with God's consecration of the Sabbath day. This is the Sabbath realm and at the end of this we're having this statement of coming to rest. I will dwell among the people of Israel and will

be their God and they shall know that I am the Lord their God who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them.

I am the Lord their God. It's a coming to rest of the story and that practice of the daily sacrifices evening and morning again is this perpetuation of the rhythm of creation. There's been a new creation and a new humanity and that humanity is delegated with the task of continuing this pattern of the original creation evening and morning evening and morning and the sacrifices that correspond to that.

A question to consider. There are a number of passages in the New Testament that seem to allude back to the practice of priestly ordination and particularly the washing involved in referring to baptism. Can you think of some of those passages and how might they help us to understand the meaning of baptism? Matthew chapter 25 verses 31 to 46.

Then the righteous will answer him saying. And the king will answer them. Then they will answer saying.

And he will answer them saying. Along with the parable of the wheat and the tares and the parable of the dragnet the parable of the sheep and the goats that ends chapter 25 of Matthew is one of the great separation parables of Jesus' ministry. A raid before the exalted and enthroned son of man is a great judgement scene.

The nations being divided by the king as a shepherd divides the flock between sheep and goats. Sheep being sent to the right, the place of blessing and the goats to the left. Now while this is commonly described as the parable of the sheep and the goats that analogy isn't really explored within it.

It's just an introductory metaphor perhaps and what we're focusing upon is more a judgement scene that is less of a parable than a straightforward description such as we have in Matthew 7 concerning those who say Lord, Lord etc. Despite being very familiar this parable does raise a number of questions. Perhaps one of the most obvious ones concerns its relationship with the rest of the material of the Olivet Discourse.

While it occurs at the very end and the climax of the Olivet Discourse in Matthew where Jesus is speaking about coming judgement upon Jerusalem and the coming of the son of man in judgement in AD 70 it does seem difficult to fit into that limited frame. A number of commentators have maintained that there is some sort of temporal hiatus or break located at a point between the earlier part of the discourse and the later. So the former part deals with the events of AD 70 and then the later part with the end of all things.

Arguments for this have sometimes appealed to the idea of eschatological telescoping. So when you have a telescope you can pull it out and then you can bring it back in and there's a way in which future events foretold by prophets can correspond to each other with earlier events anticipating far greater later events. Now this is something that we

see in the prophets concerning for instance prophecies of a new covenant.

At certain points those prophecies seem to have an original referent to the return from exile. And so that's the new covenant. But there's clearly a greater new covenant brought in by Christ and so there's looking forward beyond that original event foretold by the prophet to something greater that fulfils that even more.

You can think about the same thing with the way the Exodus plays out. There's an original Exodus event but that Exodus anticipates a greater Exodus. And at certain points we see some of these prophecies that have elements that do not seem to rest finally upon their initial referent.

They seem to point beyond it to anticipate something even greater. Perhaps such prophecies could be thought of as great clouds of promise from which an initial shower comes but they do not yet fully discharge themselves of the full weight of the rain of blessing that they have to give that awaits something more. And here I think we might encounter one such occasion.

This parable or this discourse refers to AD 70 and the events immediately after that. But it also looks forward to something greater and I think something that is at the very end of all things. A second question concerning this concerns the identity of the least of these to whom Jesus refers.

And many people are divided between a universalist and a particularist reading of this expression. So universalist readings find in the least of these a reference to the poor more generally. So Benedict XVI for instance wrote that Jesus identifies himself with those in need, with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and those in prison.

Love of God and love of neighbour have become one. In the least of the brethren we find Jesus himself and in Jesus we find God. Now this is a reading that has a long history within the church.

A reading that is honoured in part by the fruit that it has borne. It's something that has inspired and encouraged many people to remarkable practices of the works of mercy. And so particularist readings by contrast tend to see in the least of Jesus' brethren a reference to the disciples and the emissaries of Christ.

They're the ones that Christ has sent out as his missionaries, as those who bring his name to different places. But this reading seems to undercut the support the passage has traditionally been seen to give to the church's ministry to the poor and particular identification with and concern for the poor. Now I think the particularist reading is the right one.

The reference to Jesus' brethren in the context of Matthew's Gospel is most likely to refer

to disciples or to people who respond positively to the Gospel. Jesus has already spoken in this book of his identification with the disciples that he sent out. In chapter 10 verses 40 to 42, Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.

The one who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and the one who receives a righteous person because he is a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward. And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward. We should also observe earlier in that same chapter, in chapter 10 of Matthew, Jesus sends out the twelve in a way that identifies with them and also uses a test of hospitality, the way that the cities and towns of Israel respond to them as a test by which they will be judged in the final judgment.

And whatever town or village you enter, find out who is worthy in it, and stay there until you depart. As you enter the house, greet it, and if the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it, but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town.

Truly I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town. Whether or not there is a large temporal hiatus, a gap between the events of AD 70 and the events of the end of the world, for instance, the end of Matthew 25 seems to involve a widening of the lens of discourse. The passages that precede it are focused upon the judgment of Israel and Jerusalem, but here it is the judgment of all the nations that is in view.

The Son of Man is enthroned, he is the ruler not just of Israel but of the whole world. This is a reordering of the cosmos and of the entire order of the nations, not just of Israel. The identification between Jesus and his emissaries was first spoken of in the context of the disciples' mission among the towns and villages of Israel, and this parable seems to envisage the expansion of this into a broader mission among all of the nations of the world.

Now that already took place in the events of the Book of Acts, and I think we have some anticipation of this in the Book of Revelation where there are seven churches in Gentile cities that correspond, I believe, to the city of Jerusalem which is the focus of the book. So there's the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, but there's also judgment upon Gentile cities. So I think we're seeing at least the initial fulfilment of Matthew chapter 25 in AD 70 and the events around that.

There's going to be judgment upon Gentile places along with Israel. Like the towns and the villages of Israel, the nations will be judged by the hospitality or the hostility that they show to the poor brethren of Jesus. The mission to the nations is in continuity with

and is an escalation of the disciples' earlier mission to Israel, and it will lead to a similar judgment.

Now although it's been suggested that the particularist reading of the least of these, the identification of the least of these with the particular disciples of Christ and the missionaries of Christ challenges the ministry to the poor that the passage has inspired, I don't believe that that need to be the case. The key element of this parable that we're in danger of forgetting is that Jesus comes incognito and the sheep entertain him unawares. Think about the example of Abraham who entertains angels unawares.

He's a man of hospitality and that leads him to entertain angels not knowing that they're angels. In the same way the people who are blessed here are blessed on account of their hospitality not knowing who it is that they're entertaining. They don't know that they're entertaining Christ and his disciples.

Now back in Matthew 10 there is a suggestion that there is some recognition that this is a righteous man or a prophet, so beware of overplaying this identification with the poor but it is important. One of the things that it does highlight is that Christ comes in a form that we would not expect. Israel was expecting one to come as a great king perhaps and yet they find someone who eats with tax collectors and sinners, one who's a friend of prostitutes and those who are outcasts and hated and despised and marginalised.

And Christ in a similar way tests our posture towards people in general. Only by a greater extension of hospitality can we enjoy Jesus' particular presence. As Hebrews 13 verse 2 declares, The church needs to live with an open door and an open heart because that's where Christ meets it.

It's much safer to conceive often of Christ's presence as something that can be clearly located maybe in the Eucharist or in the preaching of the Gospel or in the body of the church. But a Jesus who can come to us as the unrecognised stranger, that can come to us as he came to Israel for instance, as one who breaks some of our taboos, as one who does not socialise with the refined people that we would want to socialise with, well that is a lot more unsettling and threatening perhaps. How can we welcome such a king? The connection of the test of hospitality with divine judgement is not just found here and in Matthew chapter 10.

We see the same thing in Genesis with the stark contrast between the unwitting welcome that Abraham extends to the angels and the attempted gang rape of the angels and Sodom. And in Ezekiel chapter 16 verses 40 to 50, God declares that Sodom's condemnation was related to its indifference and cruelty to the poor and the needy. And that was displayed in their treatment of two unknown visitors.

They didn't know that that was the day of their visitation. They didn't know that those visitors were angels. They just treated them as they would have treated other visitors.

And on various occasions throughout the scriptures we see that the revelation of the presence of Christ or his people is rendered contingent upon the extension of hospitality to the poor and those in need. It is in the act of mercy of the good Samaritan that a new neighbour relationship was formed, a new brethren. The Samaritan and the man who fell among thieves were separated from those who had excluded themselves from their indifference to the one in need.

And in that parable the people of God are established through that act of mercy. At Emmaus it was only through the hospitality extended to the unknown stranger that the presence of Christ was made known and a meal that was just a regular meal became a celebration of the Lord's Supper. Something very similar occurs in the parable of the sheep and the goats then.

It is as the sheep receive Jesus' poor brethren that they receive Jesus himself unawares. It is through this act of receiving Jesus' poor brethren that they themselves are marked out as the blessed heirs of the Father with them. And so the precondition of fellowship with the exalted Son of Man is the welcome extended to the Jesus who comes to us in the guise of the needy stranger, as the abandoned or attacked or rejected prophet.

And perhaps this suggests that our society's welcome to the exalted Son of Man will be tested and sought and demonstrated first, not in great cathedrals or in the eloquent prayers that people can give in halls of power, but in soup kitchens and prison cells, in shelters and refuges. And on that day of judgment it will be the way that we have treated that person in need, that person who's the stranger, that person who's rejected, who came across our path. And in our posture towards such people we are being tested in our reception of Christ himself.

Christ will go on to be rejected by this people. He will be an outcast, he will be a crucified one, one who's marked as a criminal, one who's shamed and publicly humiliated and marked. He identifies with the least, he's the one who becomes one of the least of his society.

And only a people who can reach out and recognize and love those who are the least and rejected and outcast will be able to receive such a Christ. A question to consider, how can the criteria of judgment suggested in this particular passage change or maybe challenge some of our ideas of what final judgment looks like?