

God in a Box

A Sermon by the Reverend Brian Coleman

Sunday, March 15, 2009

The system of ritual sacrifice called in Hebrew *korbanot*, was understood as a means of purification in order that those who offered such sacrifices might be able to approach the throne of God, and worship. It was a vehicle toward individual holiness, designed to cleanse a person from sin and thus make them worthy of the act of prayer and worship—communion with God. The root of the word *korbanot* is *karov*, and means approximately to come close to God.

The earliest stories of how humanity related to God in the Bible entail ritual sacrifice. From the offerings of Cain and Abel, to the establishment of the covenant between God and Abraham (which we heard about last week), to the near sacrifice of his son Isaac on Mount Moriah, where the First and Second Temples would eventually be built, and where the Dome of the Rock now stands in Jerusalem.

Animal sacrifice had always been associated with worship in Ancient Israel, and the legal system outlined in the Book of Leviticus was a necessary guide to negotiating this intricate process as were the industries of animal husbandry, currency exchange, and butchery. These were all means to an end. Such sacrifice, and the processes that surrounded it were meant to facilitate the worshippers journey toward God. Somewhere along the road, though, God's people lost their way. They confused ritual sacrifice with true worship itself, which has little to do with the blood of animals and everything to do with striving after righteousness. The prophets of old, and the Psalms held up before the Israelites the true path to communion with God.

'With what shall I come before the Lord,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings,
with calves a year old?
Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?'
He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:6-8)

What God asked was that they love *hesed*, a Hebrew word meaning fidelity, goodness, loving-kindness: an expression of love on their part in response to God's love and favor toward them.

The sacrificial offerings made by God's people had become meaningless ritualism, half-hearted praise, mere lip-service. The Temple, which was intended to be a gateway to the presence of God through the purifying act of ritual sacrifice had become a destination in itself. People no longer made offerings in order to draw near to God, they sacrificed for the sake of the act itself, forgetting the potential relationship that lay beyond such ritual action.

Remember, after all, God's initial reaction to David when he initially proposed building the Temple that his son Solomon would ultimately construct:

Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, 'Why have you not built me a house of cedar?' (2 Samuel 7:5b-7)

Buildings seem inevitably to distract us from relationship. They are almost always attempts to put God in a box, literally in this case—a box 20 cubits by 20 cubits by 20 cubits (the dimensions of the Holy of Holies in Solomon's Temple).

By the time of King Herod's reign, the Temple (now in its third incarnation) was so mired in a complicated system of laws requiring no end of animal sacrifice that for all its marble and gold, it had become nothing more than a magnificently constructed slaughterhouse which instead of bringing people closer to God further alienated them through the unwieldy and often impenetrable bureaucracy of the priestly class.

This is the scene that Jesus would have beheld the day he arrived in Jerusalem, just before the Passover. The story from today's Gospel is often subtitled: The Purification of the Temple; which implies that there was a time in the Temple's existence when things were more simple, intentions more pure, and the people's relationship with God less obscured by the industry of sacrifice. It falsely assumes that there was a time when the temple was more pure than it was when Jesus made his protest. But the temple had always been a place of sacrifice, like all other religious temples of that age. There were animals being slain and rivers of blood proceeding from the sewers every day. The surroundings were crowded with the enterprise that necessarily existed for the temple's needs. Pilgrims from across the Middle East had to exchange currencies and purchase unblemished animals from the herdsmen who supplied the demand. Jesus would have been familiar with these practices, and perhaps even comfortable with them. One New Testament scholar makes the point that:

Those who write about Jesus' desire to return the temple to its 'original', 'true' purpose, the 'pure' worship of God, seem to forget that the principle function of any temple is to serve as a place for sacrifice, and that sacrifices require the supply of suitable animals. This had always been true of the temple at Jerusalem.... There was not an 'original' time when worship at the temple had been 'pure' from the business which the requirement of unblemished sacrifices creates. (E.P. Sanders, in *Jesus and Judaism*, pg. 63)

To argue that Jesus' action against the temple was an attempt to purify it, and in some way return to the good old days of the Hebrew religion ignores the history of Judaism, and the Biblical witness to that history. As one American journalist put it, "Nothing is more responsible for the good old days than a bad memory." (Franklin Pierce Adams)

So what did Jesus have against the Temple and its economy?

What was he trying to do by turning over the tables of the money changers?

In order to understand what motivated Jesus in his actions in the Temple that day, we need to look at the whole context of his life and ministry, for his behavior this day cannot be isolated from the overall project of his ministry. Jesus' ministry was ultimately one that included those who were excluded by persons in positions of power and authority. He ministered to the poor, the widowed, the orphan, the unclean (crippled, blind, deaf, mute, diseased, demon-possessed, tax collectors) and the generally disenfranchised.

No group was more disenfranchised by the system of ritual sacrifice enshrined in the Law of the Temple than the Gentiles. That Jesus demonstrated in the temple, specifically in the Court of the Gentiles (where the moneychangers and those who sold doves would have been positioned), shows that his concern was for the Gentiles who were being excluded from the inner chambers of the Temple, and more importantly from the redemption promised to the Jews by God. The exclusion that Jesus protested against was systematic. An inscription in the temple read, "Let no Gentile enter within the balustrade and enclosure about the holy place and whosoever is caught shall be responsible to himself because death follows." The message was clear to anyone not of the Jewish faith: You are not one of the Chosen, stay out! And equally clear was Jesus' protest: "My house shall be a house of prayer for all nations, clear a space for those who you (the religious establishment) have excluded." Jesus preached that the end of time was at hand, and one of the main features of this belief was that the Gentiles would come to Israel and would be included among God's chosen people. Jesus' action in the temple corresponded perfectly with his preaching among the outcast.

Jesus' purification of the Temple is reflective of his desire to dispense with the inherent segregation of the people - Jew from Gentile, clean from unclean, righteous for unrighteous - that was enshrined by the system of ritual sacrifice practiced in the Temple.

Jesus was trying to expand the holiness of the temple to the court of the Gentiles, and beyond. He was exposing the futility of our attempts to put God in a box. His ministry was about destroying the boundaries that lead to some people feeling justified and others being excluded. The Temple served to reinforce these boundaries and his message was that any may approach the throne of grace if they do so humbly.

In my opinion, one of the most poignant stories Jesus tells in the Gospels is that of the pharisee and the tax-collector who both go to the Temple to pray

Here is a parable that he told; it was aimed at those who were sure of their own goodness and looked down on everyone else: 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.' (Luke 18:9-14)

Elsewhere the psalmist writes: "The sacrifice of God is a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." (Ps 51:17)

This is the sacrifice God longs for us to offer; This is the sacrifice that Jesus calls us to make; this is the sacrifice that will bring us closer to the heart of God.

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