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To Serve me as Priests: Part II Exodus 29:1-46

Fr. William Klock

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Last Sunday we looked at Exodus 28, which is where we see the instructions the Lord gave to Moses for the garments of Israel's priests. The passage was full of detailed instructions for the materials and the designs and we saw that these garments were meant to bring dignity and honour to the priests and to bring glory and beauty to the worship of the Lord. The garments of the high priest, in particular, highlighted his role as mediator. He bore the names of the tribes of Israel on his garments, both a memorial to the Lord that Israel was his people, and a reminder to the people that the high priest represented them as he offered sacrifices and stood in the presence of the Lord on their behalf. Even though we don't know much about the mysterious Urim and Thummim he carried in the pouch on his breast, they again highlight his role as mediator. A mediator was required even for the King when he needed to inquire of the Lord. I closed last week with the grand and glorious picture that Jesus ben Sira gives us of the high priest around 200 B.C.—Simon II standing in dignity and honour before the Lord, on behalf of the people. Seeing the priests in their glory inspired hope and love and loyalty towards the Lord. Remember, the people could not enter his presence directly, and so the priest, in many ways, stood in for the Lord. He was a symbol of the Lord's promise. His presence communicated the great truth at Israel's core: I will be your God and you will be my people. And I said that if the high priest did that for Israel, how much more ought our remembrance of Jesus and his sacrifice on the cross do the same for us—our great high priest who offers

not the blood of bulls and goats, but his very self.

Now, we'll see more of this today as we move into Chapter 29. Again, it's a long chapter with lots of details. I'll have to paraphrase and summarise some of it, but we'll start by reading the first nine verses, which serves as an introduction and a bit of a summary of the rest.

“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. Then you shall take the garments, and put on Aaron the coat and the robe of the ephod, and the ephod, and the breastpiece, and gird him with the skillfully 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 forever. Thus you shall ordain Aaron and his sons.

I hope you noticed how centred this ordination ritual is on cleansing. Before Aaron and his sons were brought before the Lord to be ordained, Moses was told to prepare a bull and two rams for sacrifice along with bread for an offering. So we have Aaron and his sons brought before the Lord by Moses. Moses is the prophet, the one who has met the Lord face-to-face and speaks for him. Moses brings his brother and nephews to the entrance of the tabernacle. The

text suggests they were naked. They've left *everything* behind. And Moses is to wash them with water. This is a ritual purification. In the next chapter we'll read about the laver or basin to be put before the tabernacle. (It's not really clear, by the way, why this bit about the ordination of the priests sits in the middle of all the instructions for the furnishings of the tabernacle, but it does.) Water from the laver is poured or sprinkled on these priest-to-be—an image and symbol picked up in the New Testament for baptism. For the regular daily service of the priests, it was only necessary to wash the feet and hands, but here at their ordination, everything gets washed.

Once Aaron was washed, Moses was to then dress him in the garments we read about last week in Chapter 28: the undergarments, the ephod, tunic, robe, breastpiece, and turban to which is affixed that golden band—here it's described as a crown—that golden band inscribed with the words, “Holy to the Lord”. So now Aaron and his sons are washed and clothed in their garments. They've been cleansed by the washing of water and outfitted with the garments that mark them as the mediators between the Lord and his people. Moses then anoints Aaron and his priestly garments with oil. Anointing with oil was a symbolic way of setting something or someone apart for God, marking them out as holy. The tabernacle and all of its furnishings will be anointed, too. Think of the Messiah. The Messiah is the “anointed one”—the one set apart and committed to the Lord and his purposes. The Hebrew word here kind of has the sense of smearing or daubing, so we might picture Moses dipping his finger into a vessel of oil and then marking Aaron and his vestments with it, but the reality—according to the Psalms—seems to have been a lot more dramatic and a lot messier. Psalm 133 talks about the goodness of brothers dwelling in unity and then draws on a couple of images to express just how good it is. One of

those is the anointing of the high priest:

**It is like the precious oil on the head,
running down on the beard,
on the beard of Aaron,
running down on the collar of his robes!** (Psalm 133:2)

So this isn't the kind of anointing we know, where I daub my finger in a bit of oil and mark a cross on your forehead. This is Moses pouring the whole jar of oil over Aaron's head so that it runs down and covers everything. It really is a dramatic image of being set apart.

But there's more. Remember the bull and rams and the bread that were prepared. The instructions for these sacrifices make up the bulk of the chapter. It starts with the bull in verse 10:

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 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.

Washing with water and anointing with oil as symbolic of cleansing and being set apart is all well and good, but the water alone can't deal with sin. Before Aaron can serve God as mediator, before he can enter the Lord's presence in the tabernacle, before he can offer atonement for the sins of the people, his own sin needs

to be dealt with. Now, as far as we know so far, Aaron wasn't a great sinner or anything. At least so far in the story, he seems to have been a decent guy. But that's just it. None of us is sinless. None of us perfect. We were created to live before the face of God, daily in his presence, but in rejecting him, we were cast out. The unholy cannot live in the presence of the holy. Even the best of us stands condemned before God. As St. Paul reminds us, the wages of sin is death. Because of our sin, we were removed from the tree of life and subjected to the dominion of death. And so, to enter the presence of God, this sin offering had to be made on Aaron's behalf. He and his sons were first to lay their hands on the bull. It was a way of sort of claiming the bull as their own, of placing their sins on its head, that it might stand in for them as a sacrifice. The blood—the life of the bull—was daubed on the horns of the altar and its liver, kidneys, and fat were burned there. Even the altar needed this purifying ritual. It had been made by human beings, it had been touched by sinful hands, and here it is purified with the blood of the sin offering and claimed by the Lord as his own.

In a similar way, Aaron and his sons were to place their hands on both the rams. The first, we're told in verses 15-18, was to be slaughtered, its blood thrown or dashed on the sides of the altar—the rabbis say the blood was thrown first on one corner and then diagonally on the other so that all four sides were covered—and then the ram was to be butchered, washed, and all its parts burned on the altar. In verse 18 we're told that "it is a burnt offering to the LORD...a pleasing aroma, a food offering to the LORD." Burnt offerings were meant to show the devotion and commitment of the person offering them. The sin offering cleansed the new priests of their sin. The burnt offering showed their commitment to the Lord.

When the second ram was brought, they were to lay their hands on it as well. This third sacrifice is more complicated. The Lord says:

[Y]ou 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.

This daubing of blood on the body seems to have been symbolic of purification. The other place we see it done is with people who have recovered from skin diseases in the laws of Leviticus. Why the ear, hand, and foot? It doesn't say, but the most obvious reason would be that it symbolises the purification of the ears and hands and feet of the priests who serve the Lord. Their ears are purified to hear the word of the Lord, their hands are purified for service, and their feet—it's worth noting that the priests went barefoot in the tabernacle—their feet were purified to walk on holy ground. And then those beautiful, white linen garments. Well, they've been doused with oil and now they're sprinkled with blood—purifying them and marking them out as holy to the Lord. If Aaron had had an altar guild, those ladies would be having conniptions. But it highlights the messy reality of the tabernacle, of the priesthood, and of the cost of sin—and it highlights just how dramatically the once-for-all sacrifice that Jesus has made has changed everything.

Now, that's not all for this second ram. Portions of its fat, its liver and kidneys, and right thigh along with portions of the bread prepared earlier

were “waved” before the Lord by Aaron and his sons. After that, Aaron was to take breast of the ram and wave it before the Lord. The technical term for this offering, not surprisingly, is a “wave offering”. The Mishnah says that the priest would take these items and wave them first forward and back and then up and down.¹ Why? We’re not sure, but it seems to have had something to do with fellowship with the Lord. This portion of the ram that was waved, the Lord says, belongs to Aaron. Verses 31-34 say that the ram of ordination belongs to Aaron and his sons along with the bread that was prepared. The same will go for portions of the offerings brought by the people. This was the food of the priests. We read in verse 33:

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.

There’s a pattern with the Lord and his people. When he calls them to himself, he invites them to eat in his presence. He did that with the elders of Israel when the covenant was established. Now he does the same with Aaron and his sons. There’s a lot packed into this idea, but it highlights the goodness and the faithfulness of the Lord towards those who belong to him and it looks forward in faith and hope to the day when the Lord finally sets this world to rights—a day we see throughout the Bible as a day of plenty and a day of feasting in the presence of the Lord.

Now, that sounds like a lot. Washing, vesting, pouring oil over the head, three different sacrifices. Now repeat it—seven times. Look at verses 35-37:

“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.

This was a big deal. That this ordination was take place over seven days pointed back to the creation. As we’ve seen—remember back to March—the tabernacle itself was full of imagery that hearkened back to the garden. In the garden, human beings lived in the presence of the Lord and so the tabernacle, the Lord’s dwelling in the midst of Israel, reminds the people of what human beings were created for, it reminds them of the garden. The priest, when he enters the most holy place, has to purify himself before passing through the veil with its embroidered angel and before he approaches the mercy seat with its fierce angels standing guard. The tabernacle is like the cosmos in miniature and so its priests are ordained over seven days.

The bit about the consecration of the altar leads into the last paragraph. This last part isn’t part of the ordination ceremony. It describes the daily sacrifice that will take place on the altar once the priests have been ordained. Look at verses 38-46:

“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.

First, the daily sacrifice. Again, the altar being mentioned four times leads naturally to the daily sacrifice, but the daily sacrifice also brings together the priests and tabernacle thematically. The priests had many duties, but this was their most important. Each morning and each evening a yearling lamb was offered on the altar along with grain and drink offerings. This daily offering was at the centre of the tabernacle service, it was part of the heart of the *torah*. The sound of the animals, the smell of the altar, the sight of the smoke rising over the camp was a reminder to the people that the Lord was in their midst and that the priests were there, behind the curtains of the tabernacle court, acting as mediators on their behalf. It was one of those aspects of daily life in Israel that, no matter how bad things got, as long as the daily sacrifices were going on, things were still okay. We get a sense of this in the book of Daniel—Maccabees recounts the history as well. Antiochus Epiphanes—the one Daniel describes as a “little horn” in Chapter 8—put an end to the service of the temple. This was a disaster. It was as if the world had come to an end. And, of course, remember the outrage directed at Jesus when he disrupted the service of the temple. Jesus repeatedly pointed to the days of the temple coming to an end. He would establish and build

¹ Menahot 5:6

something better. And yet most in Israel refused to listen. Forty years later the Lord's judgement came, the Romans tore the temple down stone by stone, and the daily sacrifice came to an end forever. To this day, unbelieving Israel lives without the service or the sacrifices of the temple—caught in a self-imposed limbo, without the redeeming sacrifices of the old covenant, while rejecting the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus, the perfect high priest and mediator.

Brothers and Sisters, Jesus shows that God has not forgotten or forsaken his promises to Israel. He promised here, in verse 45: "I will dwell among the people of Israel and be their God". He brought them out of Egypt that he might dwell amongst them—that he would be their God and they would be his people. In Jesus we see the fulfilment of Lord's promises. In Jesus we see what the Lord had been preparing, not only his people, but the whole world for as he took on our flesh to dwell—to tabernacle—in our midst. In Jesus, God himself became both priest and sacrifice for the sake of his people, both giving himself once and for all as a sacrifice for sin and then bearing that sacrifice into the presence of God as a perfect mediator and advocate for his people. In Jesus the promises of the old covenant were fulfilled and in Jesus a new covenant and a new people of God was born—a people redeemed by God himself and a people who, themselves, have become the temple through the indwelling of God's own Spirit—a people transformed, their—our— hearts of stone made hearts of flesh, a people who look not to a law written on stone tablets, but to a law of love inscribed on our hearts by God himself.

Dear Friends, think on that as you come to the Lord's Table this morning. As he invited the elders of Israel to feast in his presence on the mountain, celebrating their covenant

with him and as he invited Aaron and his sons to feast in his presence, having just been set apart as his priests, Jesus summons us to his Table, to his banquet, to recall who he is, who we are, and where we stand thanks to his redeeming grace. As we come to his Table in faith, recalling his death on the cross for us, as we feast on the bread and wine and recall his body broken and his blood poured out for us, hear his promise: I will be your God and you will be my people. But more than that, as St. Peter tells us, we not merely his people. We are a chosen nation, a royal priesthood, and that means that the mission of the old Israel had been passed on to the new. Jesus has brought us out of darkness and into his marvellous light *that we might proclaim his excellencies* to the world. Brothers and Sisters, we are not priests doing our work behind the veils of the tabernacle. Jesus has made us priests and he sends out into the world. Here he feeds us gospel food and from here he sends us out to feed a world starving for that very gospel.

Let's pray: Heavenly Father, thank you for the riches of your word and for the riches of your grace that it teaches us. From start to finish we see sinners redeemed by your grace, your enemies who deserved death, redeemed and forgiven and made holy by you, claimed by you, and then called to serve your mission of grace. Focus our hearts on your grace, we ask, as we think on your word this morning and as we come to your Table, taking part once again in the great sacrifice that Jesus has made for us. Fill our hearts with your grace to overflowing that we might be faithful stewards, faithful ministers of your grace as we go out into the world. Through Jesus we pray. Amen.