

Leviticus 1:1-17

A phrase I have heard often since coming to Christ Church but I'm not sure I had heard before is the phrase "what is he like?" When someone does something odd, funny or unusual, the question will be asked "what is he like?" Though I'm not sure the person is needing an answer.

But let me ask the question what is God like?

Perhaps many words will come to your mind, loving, faithful, good and so on and I hope somewhere along the line the word holy would be there.

The Bible clearly reveals our God as a holy God.

In Isaiah 6 we read how Isaiah in the temple saw the seraphim round the throne of God calling out, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty". This is not a Trinitarian statement but the Hebrew way of expressing the superlative not holy holier holiest as we might say but three times holy. There is no one more holy than God. In Revelation 4:8 we see a similar picture with the four living creatures also saying "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty".

But what does it mean to say God is holy? Holy has a meaning of being set apart. God is holy, he is set apart and different, because he is the creator and we are his creation. But more he is supreme and often described in the Bible as the high and holy one. He is perfect. He is pure. He is powerful and all these things means he is unapproachable. Often in the Bible God's presence is signified by fire, powerful, unapproachable and also dangerous.

The question then is who can live in the presence of a holy God?

Perhaps you saw the recent TV programme Frozen Planet as David Attenborough looked at the last great wilderness the Arctic and Antarctic wastelands. As you look at it you think who can live in such an inhospitable environment?

Who can live in the presence of a holy God? The Psalmist asked the same question "Who may ascend the hill of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place?" (Ps 24:3) and the answer came back, "He who has clean hands and a pure heart" (Ps 24:4). But who is like that? Who among us this morning can say I have a pure heart? Who can say I have cleanhands that is I have done nothing wrong?

God is holy but we humans are not. Yet, despite this separation, God loves us and the Bible is the story of God's gracious plan to restore to himself sinful humanity so that we can live in his presence and know his blessing.

The book of Leviticus is a key part of that story.

I realise it is not the most read book in the Bible but we should all read it because it is part of the Bible but more because it is foundational in our understanding of our faith in Jesus Christ. So if you have never read it please do because this sermon series is only looking at four short sections.

Leviticus is important because it is God’s word through Moses to his people to show them and us how God’s covenant purpose to make a holy people was worked out through sacrifice and law. The book is in two parts. Chaps 1-16 show us how sinful people can be restored to a holy God through sacrifice and Chaps 17-27 how by obeying the law God’s people would live holy lives that is like God and so would separate from the rest of the world around, which did not and does not live God’s way.

God call to his people in Leviticus is to be holy “Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy” (Lev 19:2 and this resonates through the rest of the Bible, “just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy” (1 Peter 1:16).

But they weren’t holy, any more than we are. So God provided a means by which unholy people might be restored to him and be acceptable to him. That means was the sacrificial system.

Leviticus as part of the first five books of the Bible picks up from Exodus. God’s people had been rescued from Egypt, given the law at Sinai and now they were in the wilderness. Exodus ended with the construction of the Tabernacle. This was the place where God lived among his people and now we see in Leviticus how the tabernacle is to be used to help God’s people live with hm.

There were a wide variety of sacrifices set out in the first 7 chapters of Leviticus as can be seen in the table below taken from RK Harrison’s commentary

The Sacrifices of Leviticus

NAME	REF.	OCCASION	OFFERING	DISPOSITION
Burnt offering <i>(Cold)</i>	1:1-17	Gaining divine favour	Unblemished male. Individual means governed	All burned
Cereal offering <i>(minhd)</i>	2:1-16	Thanksgiving and securing divine goodwill	Salted unleavened cakes or cereals	Part burned for God; remainder assigned to priests
Peace offerings <i>(aebah S'lanSm)</i>	22:18-30	Gratitude to God; fellowship with Him; public	Unblemished male or female animal according to	Fat burned; remainder eaten by priest and
Sin offering <i>(hattd't)</i>		Need for purification from sin or defilement	Bull (priest or congregation); male goat (ruler);	Fat burned for God; remainder eaten by priests
Guilt offering <i>('dsdm)</i>		Guilt about misappropriation of holy things or	Unblemished ram	Fat burned; remainder eaten by priests

Today we only look at Leviticus 1:1-17 and at the burnt offering.

This was probably the most regular offering, taking place every morning and evening. It was well regulated as we can see and would have been very dramatic. The seriousness of what was taking place would have been very clear to the person making the offering.

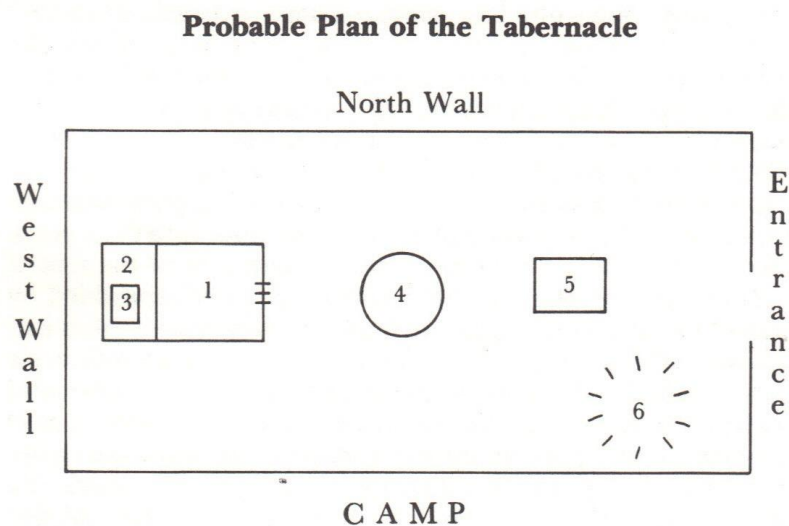
I just want us this morning in our very different worship situation to note four things.

1. Perfect

The offering was to be perfect, v3, "If the offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he is to offer a male without defect." The offering acceptable to a holy God must be perfect.

2. Participation

Anyone could bring a burnt offering. If you were not able to bring something as valuable as a bull you could bring a lamb and if you couldn't afford that you could bring a dove. But the person's involvement didn't end there.



1. The holy place in the tent of meeting
2. The most holy place in the tent of meeting
3. The sacred ark
4. The laver
5. The bronze altar of sacrifice
6. Probable site of ash heap

Having brought their offering to the Entrance of the Tabernacle or tent of meeting, they would lay their hand on it and then slaughter it. Then they cut it up and gave the pieces to be put on the fire to be burnt. It was a very dramatic action. I'm not sure I would have wanted to do it.

3. Priestly

The priests or sons of Aaron were heavily involved in the action. It was they who took the blood of the animal and sprinkled it on the altar v5 and they who in effect offered up the animal v7-9.

The person bringing the offering needed a priest to make the offering for them.

4. Purpose

The purpose of this is made clear as we see in v4 “it will be accepted on his behalf to make atonement for him”. We will see more of this next week but the aim was to restore the relationship between a Holy God and a sinful human and make them one – at one together. The key phrase which is repeated three times in the chapter is there in v9, “It is a burnt offering, an offering made by fire, an aroma pleasing to the LORD.”

The offering was made and it was completely burnt and this is the only sacrifice where the whole animal was burnt. Just imagine how it might feel to take one of your best lambs and see it burnt up. We don't take collections here in Christ Church anymore and I know most people pay by direct debit or such like but while that is good in one sense it puts giving at a distance from us. Imagine that you gave £100 a week and you actually brought £100 with you and put it in the plate well perhaps that would have a greater impact. Please I'm not suggesting this just trying to help us see how for these people their offering was very real as the whole animal was burnt.

It was an offering made by fire. Earlier we noted how fire was a symbol of the holiness of God and here we could see the fire as God's holiness and his hatred of evil and sin. But the whole, the offering, was a sacrifice for sin. It was a personal sacrifice in which the person identified with his animal by placing his hand on its head. This is my animal, my sacrifice which I offer to God. The result of all this is an aroma pleasing to God, primitive as it may seem to us God was pleased with the offering made for sin. “It is a burnt offering, an offering made by fire, an aroma pleasing to the LORD.”

What we are seeing in all this is that

- a. restoration was costly. For man to be restored to God involved a sacrifice which was costly.
- b. restoration involved a substitute whose blood is shed. This was the pattern God gave, the life of the sacrifice in place of the person making the offering
- c. these sacrifices were imperfect. They couldn't remove sin and they didn't bring any change to the sinner. As such and point to a greater and perfect sacrifice which would effectively cleanse from sin and would offer new life to the sinner.

Application

So what does all this have to say to you and I?

Well firstly we need to be reminded that God's great purpose in the Bible and still today is to create a holy people who will live in his presence and know his blessing.

Secondly because we are sinful God provided a way that we could come into his presence and that was sacrifice.

But now the sacrifice we look to is not that of a bull lamb or dove but the sacrifice of Jesus.

Here was the perfect man without sin who was offered in our place on the cross. He died in our place that we might be restored to a holy God and live in his presence. As it says in Col 1:22, "But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation."

So in one sense there is nothing for us to do as a result of this. We don't have to drag our lamb along to be sacrificed the death of Jesus offered once is sufficient for all people for all time. "Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God" (Heb 10:11-12). He sat down because the task was finished.

There no need anymore for a sacrifice Christ has done it.

However we do need to accept that if we are to live with a holy God and to come in repentance daily or the failing and sin of each day. So just as each day people would come to the entrance of the tent of meeting with their sacrifice so we daily as we come into God's presence come in repentance trusting in the sacrifice of Jesus.

But then God want us to live holy lives. By that I don't mean pious lives, holier than thou. I'm not talking about the "holy" saint shut up in some monastery. I am talking about living holy that is godly lives which separate us from others because we are living God's way – that is a holy life. Paul in Romans 12:1 encouraged his readers, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship."

They were encouraged to offer their bodies, that is their whole being to God to live for him and in so doing they were pleasing as was the aroma of the burnt sacrifice. We come to the Father through the sacrifice of Jesus and we offer to God the whole of our lives lived for Christ.

Are we living holy lives? It is not enough to simply accept what Jesus has done on the cross and know that through it we are acceptable to God we should then live God's way and through that know God's blessing.