

Priests: Then and Now

Leviticus 8:1-10:20

Priests. What comes to mind when you hear the word? What influences your ideas of what priests are and what they do?

- If you came from south-east Asia, you may have some idea of people in orange-coloured robes burning incense in ornate temples.
- If you came from tribal Africa, you may have some idea of people in strange masks who perform strange rituals with animal blood and who speak in strange languages.
- If you came from Italy, you may have some idea of people in fancy clothes who process down the aisles of fancy churches swinging burning censers and mumbling things in Latin.

Most of us don't fit into one of those categories – and so our experience of priests is much more limited. We pick up our ideas almost subconsciously from various things in the odd movie here or there – or something included in a documentary screened on the ABC or SBS. For most of us, priests are foreign to our way of life – and they've always been foreign to our way of life. They're irrelevant – and we don't have a great deal of interest in them. They don't impact on our day-to-day lives and we see no possibility for them doing so in the future.

Thus, there's the temptation for us to read Leviticus 8-10 with an attitude of bored indifference – even though this is God's Word. We come to these chapters with our minds already made up – there's nothing here for us. It's all just ancient history. It won't help us get that promot-

ion at work. It won't put any more money in the bank. It won't provide us with any more fun. Why bother even thinking about such has-beens?

Priests in the Ancient World

That may be our attitude to priests in the midst of our Western sophistication – but it's not the attitude of many in today's world and it wasn't the attitude of those in the ancient world. Before we become too dismissive of these guys, perhaps we should first understand why our attitude is different. After all, not every part of our Western culture's good. This wouldn't be the first time we'd ditched something good in our modern quest for sophistication.

In the ancient world, most cultures had priests.

- Priests held important and influential positions – they had a certain amount of power.
- Priests played a central role in the culture – and in the day-to-day life of the community.
- Priests guarded the orthodoxy of their religion.
- Priests took a leading part in the practice of their religion.
- Priests mediated between the people and their gods – whether those people be commoners or kings.
- Priests could provide guidance on an individual level or a community level – they spoke the mind of the gods.
- Priests could explain the events of life – why the gods were sending drought and what could be done to get the gods to send rain.

Priests played a crucial role in the community and were highly respected in most cultures.

Leviticus 8-10 shows us something of the role priests had

in ancient Israel. Some of their role's similar to things found in other cultures; some of it's different.

- Leviticus 8 tells us about the ordination of the first priests in Israel.
- Leviticus 9 tells us about the beginning of their work as priests.
- Leviticus 10 tells us about an early hiccup in the system.

We'll look briefly at each chapter in turn.

The Ordination of the First Priests

Leviticus 8:1 starts:

The LORD said to Moses, "Bring Aaron and his sons, their garments, the anointing oil, the bull for the sin offering, the two rams and the basket containing bread made without yeast, and gather the entire assembly at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting."

However, that's not the start of the process of instituting the priesthood in Israel.

That process begins back in Exodus 25. There God gives instructions about the whole religious set-up.

- Instructions about building the tabernacle – the big tent where the religious ceremonies happened.
- Instructions about building the furniture to go in the tabernacle.
- Instructions about the type of garments to be worn by the priests and how they're to be made.
- Instructions about the consecration of the priests.

Those instructions are interrupted in Exodus 32.

In Exodus 32, we have something of a catastrophe. Moses is up on Mount Sinai, receiving the commands of God. The people are down below on the plain – and they get

impatient. They think God's done away with Moses or Moses has deserted them and so they come to Aaron and ask him to make gods for them. Aaron agrees. He makes a golden calf and arranges a festival to God in which this calf plays a big part. They break their covenant with God and Aaron has a starring role in the process.

At that point, there's got to be a big question-mark over whether we'll actually get to Leviticus 8. Here's the guy chosen as the high priest leading the people in apostasy. Will God get rid of this guy and choose another? Will God decide no one qualifies to be high priest and get rid of the concept altogether?

Leviticus 8 provides the answer. Aaron is anointed as high priest. His sons are anointed as priests. Part of the ordination service is the recognition that these guys aren't perfect. Verse 14 refers to the bull they present for their sin offering.

- Aaron and his family aren't chosen because they've never sinned.
- Aaron and his family aren't chosen because they're better than everyone else.

They're in exactly the same boat as the rest of the people. In themselves, they too can't approach close to a holy God. In themselves, they too need to be cleansed by the blood of sacrifices.

And it's not that they somehow become perfect either. Leviticus 9:8 – in the chapter where Aaron and his sons begin the ministry – they bring a calf as a sin offering for themselves. Now, they've been at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting for the past seven days – ever since they offered their previous sin offering – yet, still they're re-

quired to bring this sin offering before God. Israel's priests aren't some elitist group that are somehow above the rest of the people. Just like everyone else, they sin. Just like everyone else, they must bring sacrifices for their sin.

The main thing coming through in chapter 8 is the way everything's done according to God's command. It begins by saying:

The LORD said to Moses

Verse 4 states:

Moses did as the LORD commanded him, and the assembly gathered at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting.

And then it's a continual refrain throughout the rest of the chapter. By the time you get to the end, you may even feel it's got a bit monotonous. Indeed, you may have got so used to it by then that you simply skip over the phrase. You've heard that bit before.

Yet, this is one of the most important things in this chapter. The fact it's repeated so often is meant to drive it home to us. Everything's done the way God told them to do it. Why's this so important? It's how the relationship works.

- If you have a relationship between equals, it's not usual for one to command the other.
- But if the relationship isn't between equals, then that's a different matter altogether.

If I come to work in your business, who decides what I'm to do all day? If as my boss, I come to you and say I'm going to use my time at the office to sleep so I'll be refreshed and ready to do the things I want to do when

I'm not at the office, what'll you say? Will I keep my job at your office?

When it comes to God's people and God, it's God who calls the shots. Especially when it comes to how God wants His people to approach Him, it's God who makes the decisions about how that'll happen. Our culture may want to blur many of the distinctions between the boss and the workers to bring about a greater equality between the two, but don't let that fool you into thinking you can do the same with God. It's just not on. We're not the ones to decide how God's pleased. Our job's simply to find out from God how He's pleased and to do it. God's not after innovation in this area.

That's even more important when we remember these people aren't coming from a position of neutrality. When they approach, they're actually coming from the position of having offended God. God's pure and holy. They're impure and unclean. They can't just bowl up to God in their uncleanness and expect God won't notice the stench of their wickedness. They need to do something about the stench. That too is highlighted in this ordination service.

- The priests are washed to be made ceremonially clean.
- The priests are clothed with special clothes.
- The priests are anointed so they're consecrated – that is, set apart – for this particular service of God.
- The priests offer sacrifices for their own sins – to cover their own guilt before God.
- The priests have some of the blood of the sacrifice put on various parts of their bodies.

The people as a whole have been told it's dangerous to

have a holy God dwell in their midst – who knows when His holiness may break out and destroy them. This lesson's reinforced to the priests. It's a dangerous thing for them to serve in the sanctuary of this holy God. It's essential they ensure their own cleanness if they're to serve.

The Ministry of the Priests

The ordination of Aaron and his sons takes seven days. On the eighth day, they begin their ministry as priests. A significant part of that ministry's to offer sacrifices. It's not all the priests did – but it's a significant part of what they did and that's primarily what happens in this chapter. First of all, Aaron makes sacrifices for himself:

- he begins with a sin offering (8-11); and
- then he offers a burnt offering (12-14).

After he's made these offerings for himself, he moves to the offerings for the people:

- a sin offering (15);
- a burnt offering (16);
- a grain offering (17); and
- a fellowship offering (18-21).

God instituted all these different types of sacrifice – we looked at them last week. The people were responsible to bring those sacrifices at the appropriate time. Yet, the general people weren't permitted to approach the altar itself. They brought the animal to the sanctuary; they placed their hand on its head; they slit its throat – but the one who put the relevant bits on the altar was the priest. He's set apart for that particular task by God. The priest acted as a mediator on their behalf by presenting the sacrifices for them. Someone stands between the people and God and represents them.

The purpose of this is highlighted in verse 7:

Moses said to Aaron, "Come to the altar and sacrifice your sin offering and your burnt offering and make atonement for yourself and the people; sacrifice the offering that is for the people and make atonement for them, as the LORD has commanded."

Their sin offended God. It made them unclean in His sight. Something had to be done to remove the offence of their sin. God provided this system of sacrifice – this system where the death of an animal in some sense was taken to cover for the deserved death of the sinner. The priests played a big role in that.

The highlight of this chapter comes at the end. Verse 23:

Moses and Aaron then went into the Tent of Meeting. When they came out, they blessed the people; and the glory of the LORD appeared to all the people. Fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the fat portions on the altar. And when all the people saw it, they shouted for joy and fell facedown.

It's what Moses promised at the beginning of the chapter:

- first to Aaron (4); and
- then to the people as a whole (6).

They followed God's directions. They obeyed all God's commands in this matter. God responds with by manifesting His glorious presence. Fire comes out from the presence of the Lord and consumes the animals on the altar. God expresses His satisfaction with the sacrifices. God adds His stamp of approval to what Aaron and Moses did.

Did the people somehow earn God's glorious presence? No. God's presence is given in response to His promise. The people didn't earn that promise. The promise was given on the basis of God's grace. Certainly, the promise was conditional. If the people had failed to follow God's instructions, God wouldn't have manifested His presence in this way. Yet, the promise itself and the fulfilment of that promise was an expression of God's grace.

It's a picture of life as it should be.

- The people of God willingly doing the things God instructed them to do.
- The people of God experiencing the reality and blessing of God's presence because there's nothing to hinder the fulfilment of God's promise.

The Significant Hiccup

But when we turn to chapter 10, we find a significant contrast. We get a picture of life as it's not meant to be.

Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, contrary to his command. So fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD.

At this point, a lot of people – even Christian people – want to give God bad press. They want to claim God acted unfairly – that God was unjust in what he did to Nadab and Abihu. After all, what did these poor little humans do?

- They merely added their own religious ceremony.
- They merely spiced up the service.
- They merely did their own thing to express honour

to God.

And what's God do in return? He wipes them out. That's way too harsh. God should be more gracious than that.

Note the errors in this sort of thinking.

- First, there's the error of thinking we can sit in judgment on God. We simply aren't in the same league as God such that we even have the ability to judge His actions. Certainly, we're called to evaluate what we do know of God and His ways – but we're also warned we're very finite and know only a fraction of what goes on in the universe. That's the point God makes to Job.
- Secondly, there's the error of thinking we have the ability to decide what should please God. For someone to "do their own thing" instead of "doing God's thing" is an expression of rebellion against God. It's the definition of sin. If I want to please God, then I need to do God's thing – not my thing.
- Thirdly, there's the error of thinking that something is *merely* disobedience to God. We have this tendency to downplay sin – to suggest sin's not really as bad as God says; to suggest sin's just a minor mistake rather than outright rebellion; to suggest God should simply wink at sin in the way a grandparent winks at a child's mischief. It's wrong thinking. What these guys did was deadly serious.

Think of it in terms of the contrast with chapter 8. At the ordination service everything's done as God said it should be done. The refrain comes at the end of each paragraph: *as the Lord commanded Moses*. God told Moses what to do. Moses, and the others involved, did what God said. That resulted in God's glory appearing to the people. The

contrast in chapter 10 couldn't be greater.

- These two guys do something contrary to the command of God.
- Fire again comes out from God's presence – yet this time it doesn't come in blessing, but in judgment.

The people are given a very vivid illustration that it's a dangerous thing for sinful people to be in the presence of a holy God. It's dangerous for the people as a whole; it's dangerous for the priests. God's not after innovation, He's after obedience. You don't honour God by making up your own way of approach; you honour God by doing what He says.

The rest of the chapter deals with fixing up the problem caused by this dishonouring of God.

- The bodies of Nadab and Abihu are removed from the sanctuary.
- Aaron and his sons are forbidden to mourn their loss in the usual way.
- The sacrifices are resumed in the proper way.

In the middle of it are some more instructions for the priests. Verse 8:

Then the LORD said to Aaron, "You and your sons are not to drink wine or other fermented drink whenever you go into the Tent of Meeting, or you will die. This is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come."

This is in contrast to many of the other religions of that time – where the priests of those religions used fermented drinks to help them contact the unseen world or to go into various trance-like states. Israel's priests aren't to be like that. They're to have their minds fully operative for the tasks God's given them.

Verse 10:

You must distinguish between the holy and the common, between the unclean and the clean, and you must teach the Israelites all the decrees the LORD has given them through Moses.

Part of the priests' ministry was to teach the people what pleased God. The priests didn't form some secret society with special knowledge about the mysteries of God – knowledge kept from the ordinary people. No. Their job was to ensure the people understood all they could about God and God's requirements. The priest's given knowledge about God that he may share it with the rest of the people – not so he could keep it for himself and pretend to be superior to them.

Priests Today

An important question remains for us this morning: if priests were so important to God's people back then and they performed such an important function for them, why don't we have priests today? Why don't we need someone offering sacrifices to God for us? Was this priest thing and this sacrifice thing something that just went out of fashion? Is it that we've grown up and got rid of those older superstitions?

No. We still need a priest today. That hasn't changed one little bit. Sin's just as offensive to God as ever. We have a tendency to forget that.

- We have a tendency to downplay the seriousness of sin – to suggest it's so common amongst us that it really can't be all that bad.
- We have a tendency to excuse our sin – to suggest it's just part of the way we are and God shouldn't hold it against us.

- We have a tendency to even justify our sin – to suggest we have a right to do what we want to do and God's an interfering busybody to suggest we don't have a right to our own happiness and freedom on our own terms.

Sin still is serious – deadly serious.

So, sin still requires atonement – it still requires something to cover God's anger against us. God doesn't just wink at sin like an indulgent grandfather. Sin still requires someone offer something to God on our behalf so God doesn't act against us in judgment. The underlying principle hasn't changed one little bit.

The big difference is what that something is and who the someone is who offers it.

- The New Testament tells us we still need a priest – and that priest is Jesus. Jesus is the One who offers a sacrifice to God on our behalf. Jesus is the One who stands between us and God as our mediator. Jesus is the One who pleads to God for us.
- The New Testament tells us we still need a sacrifice – and that sacrifice is also Jesus. The sacrifice He offered to God was Himself. It wasn't that He gave the life of a sheep or a cow on the altar for us – rather, He gave His own life to pay the penalty for our sin.

Last week, we read from Hebrews 10. It said this Old Testament system was a shadow of the reality that was to come. It was a picture pointing to something far more significant. It pointed forward to Jesus. Jesus is the reality of how God deals with sin.

- Jesus is the true priest who truly represents us

before the throne of God.

- Jesus is the perfect sacrifice – offered once for all time as the complete sacrifice for our sins.

And so, as it says in Hebrews 7:24-27

because Jesus lives forever, He has a permanent priesthood. Therefore He is able to save completely those who come to God through Him, because He always lives to intercede for them. Such a high priest meets our need – one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, He does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for His own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when He offered Himself.

Thus, we no longer have priests in this sense within the church today – not because they're no longer necessary or the function they performed's unimportant, but because we have one Priest (namely, Jesus) and He has fulfilled perfectly the atonement required for our sins.