

“God’s odds & ends”

<u>Occasion</u>	Evening Service at Therfield Chapel
<u>Day, Date & Time</u>	Sunday 6 June 2004 at 18:30
<u>Basis</u>	Exodus 30:11-38
<u>Reading</u>	Exodus 30:11-38
<u>Hymns</u>	315, 330, 374 from Mission Praise
<u>Songs</u>	381, 324, 321, 307 from Mission Praise
<u>Author/Speaker</u>	Paul Rydon

How do you know that God loves you?

For the Bible believer, the answer is not that difficult.

We simply go to Romans 5:8 and there we read:

‘But God demonstrates his own love for us in this:

While we were still sinners Christ died for us.’

But what has this got to do with these few disparate verses in Exodus –
these odds and ends which have not been covered elsewhere?

You might well ask!!!

For when you look at these verses, you have to ask,
“What is it that binds them together?”

In the Census Tax,

we have the ideas of redemption

and equality before God;

In the Bronze Basin

we have the idea of washing

to be clean before God;

In the Anointing Oil and the Incense,

we have the idea of the uniqueness and holiness of all that belongs to God
or that is dedicated to him;

And in the anointing of Aaron and his sons,

we have the idea of separating out specific people for service.

Better preachers than I would preach a sermon from each one of these.

But if we put all of these together

we have a sense of the uniqueness and the holiness of God,

who stands in his essence outside of our reach.

A God who is so holy that to approach him is to die,
yet a God who has found a way to redeem the people he loves,
in spite of their rebellious and wicked nature
and bring us back to himself
and consecrate his people
and to select some for special service to be dedicated to him alone.

We sense the exclusivity of this God,
his greatness and his unapproachableness,
yet we also sense his desire that we should share in his glory
and that we should come to know him intimately
and be his people.

The idea of such a God is, of course,
anathema to our post-modern generation.

I have just started reading a book
'Further along the road less travelled' by Dr M Scott Peck,
a psychotherapist who integrates psychiatry and religion
in his books on 'The unending journey towards spiritual growth'.

It is not a Christian book as such,
though it contains many references to Christianity,
but it is frequently not the Christianity that I believe and hold dear.
And I am certainly *not* recommending that you read it.

His first reference to God comes unexpectedly,
but he doesn't seem to know who he is.
He quotes with approval, Mahatma Ghandi,
who apparently said 'Truth is God, and God is Truth'.
But he also says that he believes that God is also Light and Love.
He talks of a 'Higher Authority'
though he appears uncertain what that 'higher authority' might be
but is confident that man cannot function properly
without submitting to something or someone beyond himself.
He even goes so far as to say
that 'your will has to be harnessed to a power higher than yourself'.

Flicking through the as yet unread pages of the book,
I find a chapter entitled 'The search for a personal God'.
I will let you know whether or not he ever finds him.

But for most of the people I meet,
particularly the younger ones,
there is no acknowledgement that there is such a thing as a higher power,
let alone a personal God.

Moses, as he writes the book of Exodus, has no such problem.

Steeped though he was in his formative years in the sophisticated polytheism of the ancient Egyptian civilisation,
 his years in Midian had finally brought him face to face with the God of the Hebrews,
 the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,
 when the living God, the creator of the Universe
 had confronted him at the burning bush.

Here God revealed himself as the great I Am
 who would save Jacob's descendents from the oppression of the Egyptians
 and lead them into the land which he had promised to Abraham
 and make of them a great nation.
 And whatever their faults,
 that people, the Jews
 is still with us today.

Returning then to our passage for tonight,
 Moses is still up the mountain of Sinai,
 receiving instructions from God,
 and God is nearly done.
 Just a few more odds and ends to cover
 and it will time for Moses to return to his charges
 camped at the foot of the mountain.

 When a census of the people is to be taken,
 each man is to pay a half-shekel tax,
 which is to be used for the maintenance of the tabernacle.
 Such a census was taken during their stay at mount Sinai,
 and is recorded in Numbers chapter 1.
 And though I could find no mention of the tax,
 the record yields some fascinating information.

All the males of twenty years and older,
 who were still fit enough to serve in the army
 were counted tribe by tribe.
 The smallest tribe, Manasseh, yielded 32,200,
 and the largest tribe was Judah with 74,600.
 The total number was 603,550 fighting men.
 This number did not include the Levites,
 who were by then separated out to act as the priestly tribe.
 A different count showed them to be quite a small tribe
 as they only numbered 22,000 including all males from one
 month upwards to old age.

Incidentally,
 for I have no intention of exploring this point this evening,
 many have questioned these numbers,
 as this would mean that if you included women and children,

the total number of persons camped at the foot of Mount Sinai would have been at least two million.

Incredibly, this census tax was still in existence in Jesus' day.

Some of you may remember that the authorities asked Peter if Jesus paid the 2-drachma temple tax and Peter said 'Yes'.

But Jesus comments on the matter implied that as he was the Son of God, he wasn't obliged to pay.

But so as not to cause offence, he sent Peter off to catch a fish where he would find a 4-drachma coin in its mouth

which Peter was to use to pay for Jesus and himself.

You'll find that story in Matthew 17:24-27.

Returning to Exodus,

this poll tax, as you might like to think of it, had a special meaning and was to have a special purpose.

It was clearly quite a small amount.

A half shekel in those days was around 5½ grams and it would almost certainly have been paid in silver.

The silver spot price on Friday this week was \$5.78 per ounce, so today, 5½ grams would be worth about 6 pence Sterling.

But if you multiply that by 603,550, you accumulate £36,213, which was to be used to maintain the Tabernacle and its ceremonies.

The other significant thing is that everyone paid the same amount, stressing I believe in this instance, the equality of every person before God. Rich and poor are treated alike.

But what is really interesting about this poll tax is that God describes it as a ransom. This is what it cost to buy your life.

It was to be given as an offering to the Lord to atone for your life and to be used for the service of the tent of meeting.

You know, I find this amazing.

For years I have believed that there was no scriptural support for a Sunday service collection, but now I find there is.

We expect all members of this church to contribute to the upkeep, not only of these buildings, but also to the service and functioning of the church activities and the support of our paid worker when we have one. This is done by a combination of members' standing orders, the Sunday collection and reclaimed tax.

Clearly, it is the responsibility of those who are members of this Church to make that contribution.

But the Israelite poll tax had an even deeper meaning.
It was a ransom,
an atonement for your life.
It was small
and everyone paid the same.

You see, before God, we are all sinners.
Almost every part of these passages in Exodus makes it clear
that sin must be atoned for,
and here this is reinforced yet again.

Later, Jesus would repeat it
and the apostle Paul would say it again in that famous verse in Romans 3:23:
“There is no difference,
for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”.

We are all ‘in the same boat’.
And the Israelites were to understand that redemption has a price,
but the price is the same whatever your status,
rich or poor,
humble or aristocratic,
old or young,
and in our day, whatever your race,
gender
or ethnic origin.

If we read on in Romans 3,
the very next verse (24) says,
“and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by
Christ Jesus”.

The Israelites paid their 6p per person,
but the New Testament tells us that redemption is free.
Not that it didn't cost anything,
but that Christ has paid the price,
by his death.

Many of us saw the film, ‘The Passion of Jesus Christ’.
We watched as brutal, unfeeling men beat him almost to death
and then nailed him to a cross,
but they couldn't show the even greater suffering that Christ endured
when he paid the price of our sins to God the Father
in order to redeem the life of every sinner in the whole world.

We don't even have to pay 6p because,
since Christ died,
everything is free,
if indeed we are willing to submit our wills to his,
acknowledge our guilt
and take the gift of redemption with open hearts.

But we must move on.

In the next paragraph,

God instructs Moses to make a bronze basin
for the priests to wash their hands and feet before they enter the Tent
of Meeting.

Incidentally, the word tabernacle merely means tent
and Moses often refers to it as a tent of meeting.

He used it in his life time to go and meet with God,
but apart from him,
only the ordained priests were allowed to enter.

But they had to do so every morning and every evening to attend to the lamps,
and at other times to fulfil their priestly duties.

Washing was clearly necessary,
because preparing animal sacrifices was a pretty messy business,
but it had a symbolic meaning too.

God is holy,
and if we are to meet with him,
we too must be holy.

And we can only be holy if we are free from sin.
And we can only be free from sin if we confess our sins and accept
forgiveness.

We are cleansed,
not by the washing,
that is only a symbol,
but by the death of Christ.

We live our Christianity moment by moment
and as such we live in a moment by moment state of repentance
and forgiveness.

Not in a legal sense as some do
going to confession once a week,
but in a living sense like breathing as we walk with God
on a moment by moment basis.

Next we come to the anointing oil.

Using a base of olive oil,
together with large proportions of aromatic oils and spices,
the quantities stated here would make a couple of gallons of sacred
anointing oil,
which would last quite a long time.

The highly perfumed oil was to be used to anoint and consecrate the various items of
furniture and utensils used in the service of God
including the very tabernacle itself
and the Ark of the covenant.

Finally, Aaron and his sons were to be consecrated as priests
to stand before God in the place of the people.

This oil is unique.

It is not to be copied,
nor used for any other purpose.
Anything consecrated with it becomes most holy,
separated to God for his service
and his alone.

Remember the first commandment?

‘You shall have no other gods beside me.’ (Exodus 20:3)

The Israelites had come out of a polytheistic culture in Egypt

where there were many gods,
and here God is reinforcing time and time again that there are no other gods.
He and he alone is God.

Everything he does, and is, is unique.
And everything consecrated to him is his alone.
Counterfeits and copies are not allowed.

Sadly as time went on,

these ceremonies became a sham
and those so consecrated abused the special-ness of their calling
and brought their consecration into disrepute.

Hence the New Testament tends to eschew such things,
looking for the reality of holiness in the heart,
rather than a superficial holiness imposed by ceremony.

Yet the simple lesson remains
that if we give ourselves to God,
we become his and his alone.

Again, we submit our wills to his
and seek his ways rather than our own.

Even in our small way, we have our little ceremonies where we dedicate one another
in special ways.

We receive members formally, and pray over them as we did tonight;
We dedicate our children and promise to bring them up in the ways of God;
We baptise those who come to Christ and initiate them into Christ's Church;
When we elect or re-elect our deacons, we pray over them as they set out as
servants of the Church;
If we appoint a new elder, we lay hands on him and dedicate him to God as a
leader and shepherd of God's people;
And when we appoint a new Pastor, we will ordain him to special service to
serve, lead and teach the Church.
We all need to uphold one another in prayer that each of us may be faithful to
our calling as we seek to serve one another in His Church.

Then finally, the incense.

Again made in bulk to the recipe given by God.
Again it is to be unique and used only to be burnt within the tent,
on the small altar of incense

which stood just in front of the holy of holies,
 where the Ark of the Covenant was kept.
 When burnt it created a sweet smelling smoke,
 which many believe symbolises the prayers and worship of God' people as
 they rise up to God,
 and God is pleased to accept them when they come from a pure and
 penitent heart.

 We worship a very special, a unique and a holy God.

Indeed there is no other.

For this God made us and the Universe in which we live.
 If we look outwards we see an infinite greatness,
 more and bigger than anything we are able to imagine.
 If we look inwards we see infinite complexity,
 not only within ourselves,
 but within every other living creature,
 and within the very matter itself
 of which things are made.

We as mankind stand at the centre of this Universe
 made in the image of our creator,
 able to think,
 create,
 communicate
 and to love,
 just like him.

As his people we are of infinite value to him.

Thursday's Metro – the free London commuters' newspaper –
 carried a story of a woman who was fined £83 for a hit-and-run offence
 in which a 22-year old man was killed,
 whilst another driver was fined £443 by the same judge
 for hitting a tree.

How much are you worth in God's eyes?

6p?

£83?

No. You are worth so much to God that he sent his Son to redeem you back to
 himself.

There is no other god like our God.

And he wants *you* to live with *Him* for evermore.

Amen

Paul Rydon –
 6 June 2004