

A Near Thing. Leviticus 1:1-2

About 15 years ago I visited the Niagara Falls on the Canadian side. They are truly awesome. There was one thing that surprised me. The walls on the side were quite low. There were even some people sitting on the walls to be photographed. I imagined one of them toppling backwards. It is one thing to come close to see a great and awesome sight. It is another to act in a foolhardy way that places one life in great danger.

In January 2009 some tourists were admiring the awesome beauty of New Zealand's Fox Glacier. Two brothers decided to cross a safety barrier to take photographs. An ice-shelf suddenly collapsed and in moments they were crushed to death beneath 100 tons of ice and rubble.

The book of Leviticus begins with an invitation for God's people to draw near to the most awesome sight ever seen by the human eye: the cloud of glory that hovered over the Tent of Meeting. For the book of Leviticus just continues on from the book of Exodus, which finishes with this description:

Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Throughout all their journeys, whenever the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle, the people of Israel would set out. But if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out till the day that it was taken up. For the cloud of the LORD was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel throughout all their journeys (40:34-38).

The book of Leviticus begins with God calling Moses and telling him to issue an invitation to all Israelites. Any Israelite who wants to can voluntarily draw near and meet with God, which is why, of course, the tabernacle, this mobile palace or temple, is called "the Tent of Meeting." But back in Exodus 19:16-19 we are told:

On the morning of the third day, there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently, and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder.

So it's all very well for God to say his people may now approach him. But during the time when Israel wandered in the desert we must recognise how scary it was for any person to draw near to God. The book of Leviticus begins with a phrase that is seldom used: "*The LORD called to Moses..from.*" The first time it is used is in relation to the burning bush on Mount Sinai as related in Exodus 3. When Moses saw this sight we are told, "*So Moses thought, 'I will go over and see this [awesome] sight – why the bush does not burn up.'*" Then we encounter our rare phrase: "*When the LORD saw that [Moses] had gone over to look, **God called to him from** within the bush, 'Moses! Moses!'*" Moses finds that he has drawn near to God and we go on to read, "*Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.*" It was a frightening experience for Moses when God called to him out of the fire on Mount Sinai just as it was for the whole of God's liberated people when God directly spoke to them out of the fire on Mount Sinai, all 2½ million of them.

We must not underestimate the colossal significance of what is being said in the first two verses of the book of Leviticus. As frightening as it might be, God is inviting his people to come individually into his presence: “When any of you brings an offering to the LORD.”

There is one word in the Hebrew which is translated as “brings an offering.” It is the word *qorban* which you already know because Jesus used this word when he had a go at hypocrisy of the Pharisee? Jesus said:

“...Moses said, ‘Honour your father and your mother’; and ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ But you say, ‘If a man tells his father or mother, Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban’ (that is, given to God) – then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother (Mk 7:10-12).

As Mark explains *qorban* means “given to God.” The offerings of Leviticus 1-7 are gifts to the Lord. Actually, the word also carries the idea of “drawing near.” The invitation of Leviticus 1:2 is saying in effect, “When any of you brings that which will enable you to draw near to the LORD, bring an animal...” The so-called “offering” then is intended as a gift and presupposes that the one who comes with such an animal does so because deep in their heart is the desire to draw near to God and meet with him.

Do recognise that the Israelite who wants to draw near to meet with God is not merely drawing near to the cloud of glory, that is, the presence of God. The Israelite does this at the tabernacle. As we read at the end of Exodus God’s shekinah glory, the cloud, is inseparable from the tabernacle.

Between November 4 and 9 this year nearly 3 million Muslims will make the pilgrimage, the *haj*, to Mecca in Saudi Arabia. In Mecca is located what Muslims regard as the most sacred shrine on earth, the Kaaba, that is, “Cube”. Every pilgrim makes seven laps of the Kaaba in an anti-clockwise direction. The Muslim will try to kiss, touch or otherwise greet the famous Black Stone which is set in a silver casing in the eastern corner of the Kaaba. Muslims are taught that the Kaaba is a remnant of the original temple built by Abraham and Ishmael.

The book of Leviticus begins with the most sacred shine on earth for the Jewish people: the tabernacle. In the first verse of the book of Leviticus it is called “the Tent of Meeting” because it is the place where Moses meets with God and it also the place where every one of God’s people can meet with God. When Muslims get close to the Kaaba they are not meeting with Allah. No Muslim ever gets to meet with their god. He is always remote, inaccessible. When Allah revealed the Qur’an he never spoke directly to Muhammad, the founder of Islam. Muslims understand that Allah spoke to Muhammad through the angel Gabriel. Muslims believe Muhammad was a perfect man. Yet Islam never portrays Muhammad as having an intimate, personal relationship with Allah.

What a contrast with Islam is indicated by the very first verse of the book of Leviticus! Muslims do not believe that Allah is present in their most sacred shrine. Allah has never spoken directly to any human being from the Kaaba or from anywhere else for that matter. But the book of Leviticus begins with Yahweh, as God is often called in these early books, speaking directly to Moses and inviting his people to meet with him. Indeed, in Exodus 19 God says he wants all his people to be a kingdom of priests. That is, he wants all of them to be able to come, like priests, into his presence.

I am studying one-by-one every single reference in the Qur'an to the Garden of Paradise, the Muslim heaven. I am up to my 60th blog. Do you know that even those Muslims who get to paradise still don't have a personal, intimate relationship with Allah. Even there he is removed from them.

Here we need to see that it is not only our concept of God but also our concept of what it means to be human that is radically different. God created man, that is, Adam, in his image and likeness. Genesis 2 presents us with a mountain sanctuary, with Adam placed in the garden as its priest. Ezekiel 28 helps us to understand what is already implicit in Genesis 2. There the king of Tyre is compared with Adam, with God saying:

You were the model of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone adorned you: ruby, topaz and emerald, chrysolite, onyx and jasper, sapphire, turquoise and beryl. Your settings and mountings were made of gold; on the day you were created they were prepared. You were anointed as a guardian cherub, for so I ordained you. You were on the holy mount of God; you walked among the fiery stones.

There you have it. The Garden of Eden was a mountain sanctuary. Adam was the original guardian cherub who, as you will recall, was replaced by guardian cherubim when he failed in his responsibility. In Genesis 2:15 we are told: *"The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it."* The words translated "work it" and "take care of it" can also be translated as "serve" and "guard" and this same pairing is used elsewhere in the Old Testament to describe the work of a priest. So, for example, we find these same words together in Numbers 3:7-8 where we are told what the duties of the Levites will be, namely:

They are to perform duties for [Aaron] and for the whole community at the Tent of Meeting by doing the work of the tabernacle. They are to take care of all the furnishings of the Tent of Meeting, fulfilling the obligations of the Israelites by doing the work of the tabernacle.

Adam was placed by God in his mountain sanctuary, the Garden of Eden, to be its priest, someone who had immediate access to God's presence and who was responsible to serve God and guard the Garden and stop anything from happening that would undermine the intimate relationship God wants to have with all whom he has created in his image.

The next time we encounter a mountain sanctuary is in Exodus 19. Mount Sinai is that mountain sanctuary and it is precisely in this context that God declares that he wants his people to be "a kingdom of priests." That is, God wants all of his people to be able to draw near to him and meet with him, to come into his presence. God's people, however, cannot stay at Mount Sinai. They need to travel through the wilderness. You may have heard the saying, "If you can't bring the mountain to Muhammad, bring Muhammad to the mountain." The tabernacle, the Tent of Meeting, was made so that the mountain sanctuary might be brought to God's people wherever they were located. More than this, when God invited anyone of his people to draw near to him in the tabernacle, it was like inviting them to come back into the Garden of Eden. All doubt concerning this is removed when we realise that in Leviticus 1:2 a word-for-word translation goes something like this: *"When any man brings an offering to the LORD."* To be more precise still the word for man is not the usual word *ish* but the word Adam. In effect, God says *"When any Adam draws near to me with an offering."* In other words, it is as though any Israelite who draws near to God, to meet with him, is like a new Adam coming back into the mountain sanctuary.

There are some important lessons we need to learn from all this:

1. *God invites us all to draw near to him.* James assures us, “Come near to God and he will come near to you.” (4:8). The book of Leviticus does not begin with commands but with an invitation. As Jesus said to the woman at the well, “Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks” (Jn 4:23). God wants you to come and worship him because that is what you yourself want to do.
2. *God wants us all to be what he created us to be.* In Leviticus 1:2 God sees any of his people who want to meet with him as an Adam, as one created in his image, as one created to radiate his glory. When Moses went into the presence of God he came out with his face shining with the glory of God. Reflecting on this background Paul comments, “And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:18). Does your face, does your life, shine with the glory of the Lord? The more we live our lives in God’s presence the more our lives will shine for him?
3. *God treats all his people alike.* As the description of the voluntary offerings in Leviticus 1-3 makes clear, God welcomes all of us to come near to him and meet with him, no matter how rich or poor we are, no matter how important or unimportant we may be in the eyes of the world and in our own eyes. Sometimes we say something like “any Tom, Dick or Harry can do that.” Well, God invites any Adam to come to him and this is non-gender. God means for all of us, male or female, ordinary or gifted, high status or low, to come and meet with him. Never think for a moment that God’s invitation does not extend to you.
4. *Coming into God’s presence is a big deal.* We don’t see the cloud of glory, the flashing lights. The book of Leviticus concerns a time when any Israelite who approached the tabernacle was coming closer and closer to the highly visible cloud – an awesome and frightening thing to do. In John 1:14 we read “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” A translation that captures the Old Testament background better goes like this: “The Word became flesh and tabernacled among us.” Jesus is the new tabernacle. Jesus did not come into this world, nor did he begin his ministry, with guns blazing. His glory was veiled. But we need to keep on reminding ourselves of how great our God is and how unworthy we are as we come into his presence and live in his presence.

Close by citing Hebrews 12:18-29