

## I. CONSECRATION – BIBLICAL ROOTS

### Key Scripture passages:

Exodus 28:40 – 29:9

2 Chronicles 31:4-8

Deuteronomy 26

### Thoughts on the Theme

A number of years ago, we were holidaying in Rotorua. We decided to pay a visit to one of the thermal areas, and made our way down to Waiotapu. It was winter, and Waiotapu is a little way out of Rotorua, so there were not many people there. A lot of the time we could wander round feeling like we had the place to ourselves.

At one point, I found myself completely alone, the others having gone on ahead. I was standing staring at a small mud pool bubbling away. It was nothing spectacular, just one tiny one like dozens of others around it. As I watched I became aware of the overwhelming sense of God's love for me. There were no words, nor any kind of vision, but for me it was unmistakably the sense that I was held secure in the loving embrace of God.

I have often pondered why then, and why there? I cannot offer an answer to either question. But it was a significant moment in my pondering about the nature of sacred space. Pilgrimage has always been a part of Christian spiritual practice. From the most ancient of times, Christians have found their way to the sites which they deem to be holy. Tradition has it that Helena, mother of the Emperor Constantine, had the first Church of the Holy Sepulchre built at the place which was believed the crucifixion of Jesus had taken place. Pilgrims had been coming there for many years before there was a building to mark the place.

Sacred space will very often have moments and events attached to it. A human response to an encounter with the spiritual has been to place some kind of marker to denote the place as significant. One of the most famous such encounters and markings is Jacob at Bethel in Genesis chapter 28. This is the place where Jacob has a dream in which God renews the covenant made with Abraham. Jacob wakes and recognises the place as the house of God and the gate of heaven. He marks it with a stone which he anoints with oil. The irony perhaps is that God seeks to bless Jacob, but Jacob then blesses the place.

All of this sits in the context of our God who knows no human bounds, and who is not confined by time or space.

## Scripture Study Notes

### *Exodus 28:40 – 29:9*

God's covenant with Abraham offers the promise of descendants and a land to inhabit. It is an intention to create a people who will be God's own people. Genesis has its focus largely on the question of descendants with the fragile and seemingly uncertain question as to whether Abraham and Sarah will conceive a child. As Genesis closes, a small family has grown, and found refuge in Egypt. When Exodus opens, the family has grown through many generations, and become an ethnic group known as the Hebrews. The focus shifts to the promise of a land to inhabit, and God through the leadership of Moses, rescues the Hebrews from slavery, and they begin their journey to the Promised Land, where they shall become Israel.

Along the way, they must discover what it means to be God's people. God gives the Law and establishes ceremonies and rituals that will help the Hebrews both to understand and to live out their calling. In this passage, we read of the instructions given to ordain and consecrate Aaron and his sons, who become the first priests in Israel. The instructions for their vestments are elaborate, but they are also somewhat hidden from us. We cannot be certain precisely what each piece of clothing is, or the order in which they should be worn.

The key point of the vestments is the same as that given in all of the instructions for worship. God is present, and the people must respond to that presence. In the ritual life of their worship, the priests and their vestments signify an authority by having been consecrated (set apart) for their task, but also point to the source of that authority, the presence of God in the midst of the people. People and objects that are consecrated point beyond themselves. The priesthood, its clothing and liturgy proclaims that God is here, the people are God's, and that they must both know this and show this.

### *2 Chronicles 31:4-8*

The Chronicles at first glance seem to be another retelling of the history contained in Samuel and Kings. They are that, but there are considerable differences in their accounts. Chronicles is written later, possibly in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, and uses those earlier histories of this period as a source. Much is both added and omitted.

Originally one book, but divided into two parts in our bibles, the first 9 chapters would be largely unread by most of us, detailing lists of descendants from Adam onwards. Even in the narrative that follows, there are many lists of people inserted. The Chronicler is almost preaching an extended sermon which looks over the whole of God's interactions with human history to present a pattern of human striving and failure, alongside divine grace and restoration. Its purpose is to offer guidance as to what it means to be in a right relationship with God, and to live morally in a way that reflects God's calling.

The short passage we have read comes late in the book, and is from the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE in the time of King Hezekiah, who undertook a great reform of Israel's life and worship. Hezekiah had witnessed the earlier fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel to the Assyrians, and was king in Jerusalem at the time of the siege by the Assyrians in 701.

Hezekiah restored Temple worship, and had all of the alternative high places and pagan shrines taken down. The priesthood has been restored and reorganised. It is perhaps true to say that a sign of whether religion is taking effect in people's hearts is reflected in their willingness to give to support it. So here we read of the tithe offerings brought by the people which support the religious life of the nation, and those who have been set aside to minister to them.

### *Deuteronomy 26*

Deuteronomy means "second law" and is a retelling of the Law given to Israel through Moses. The setting is the end of Moses' life, as the Israelites are preparing to enter the Promised Land. Moses offers three sermons reminding the people of the story of their 40 years of wanderings in the wilderness, exhorting them to be true to their covenant, and especially to hold fast to their faith in God when they enter a land where many other gods are worshipped.

The passage we read describes the ceremony of the first-fruits. It is a harvest festival at which people are to bring a portion of the first produce of the land as a symbol of their thanksgiving to God who is the source of what is being harvested. As they do so, they make a recital which has the form of a creed, recounting the saving grace of God in making a people that was no people, rescuing them from slavery in Egypt, and bringing them to a land to inhabit as their own.

Part of their thanksgiving is to be expressed as a gift to those in need. At the end of each third year the tithe was to be given to the "aliens, the widows, and the orphans", a group which together can be understood to be the poor of the community. The ritual of worship is not disconnected from the life of the community and the needs of its people.

## Questions for Discussion

- Worship , at its best, enables us to experience transcendence – i.e. the ‘otherness’ of God which is both beyond us and intimately close. What is it, in particular, which helps you to experience that – e.g. music, silence, vestments? Is this consistently so, or would your answer vary from week to week, or from year to year?
- What is useful about distinctive clothing? What does it signify and, more broadly, what role does ‘beauty’ play in worship and our thinking of God? Why does the ugly and the tuneless offend us in worship?
- Liturgical renewal over recent decades (e.g. post-Vatican II, NZ Anglican Prayer Book) has included a number of changes providing simplicity and flexibility, and placing greater emphasis on lay leadership. There is also significant variation between one Parish/Ministry Unit and another. In what ways do you think the ‘set-apart-ness’ of the priest has been retained, safeguarded or put at risk in these changes?
- In the move towards church buildings which are both consecrated for divine worship and used for more diverse purposes (the latter either by deliberate design or financial necessity) where do we draw the line between uses that are appropriate and those that are not?
- ‘The Church is always asking for money!’ When you hear that comment from inside or outside the Church, what is your immediate response?
- The Deuteronomy 26 passage sets giving (in money or in kind) in a context that is multi-layered. There are, for example, an affirmation of the giver’s identity and a concern for the disadvantaged. What other elements do you find here? How could the Church do better in its teaching or practice of Christian Giving as an act of consecration?