

The reading today deals with the topic of animal sacrifices.

The requirement for animal sacrifices were set out in Leviticus, the book of laws which arise out of God's covenant with his people at Sinai. The purpose of the laws handed to Moses can be summed up essentially as "you must be holy, because I, the Lord your God, am holy". Sins therefore must be dealt with and God's people were to be different from the nations around them whose religion did not require morality and holiness. A close relationship with God meant a life of obedience and faith.

There were 5 different sacrifices given, only one of which involved burning the whole animal. Other offerings were eaten as a community feast or by the priests and their families. The purpose of the sacrifices was to atone for sins, but also to establish fellowship between the offerer and God, and between those offering sacrifices together. The offering bought blessing to the offerer as well as honouring God.

When we read about the animal sacrifices in the old testament they seem crude and barbaric and we might wonder how this practice could bring a person into relationship with God, let alone atone for sin. To understand this we need to know a bit about the people and the times they lived in.

These people would have lived a hand to mouth existence growing their own food on their land. The most valuable possessions were their animals. They would have been near vegetarians, not out of principle but because they could not afford to slaughter their valuable animals who would be providing milk and labour as well as meat. The only time meat might be eaten would be at times of celebration, or great religious festivals and involved real cost. In offering a sacrifice it was as if you were entertaining the most important guest ever; God himself. It was a special meal prepared in honour of your creator. In giving up the most precious things they own, the offerer returns to God his most valuable gifts as an act of worship. In the case of the guilt or sin offering, the offerer is acknowledging that their sins mean they deserve to die and that the animal is dying in their place (a scapegoat). The sacrifice made it possible for a Holy God to dwell with his people. The animals sacrificed had to be perfect, the best of what they owned.

But at the time that this book was written the Israelites were not bringing their best. Instead they were bringing their leftovers; the animals that weren't much use for anything else because they were blind or lame or diseased. They couldn't sell them so they might as well use them for the sacrifice and keep the good ones.

Now, it's true to say that God himself did not need those animals. But the problem wasn't with the poor quality of the animals but the attitude it represented. We often say, it's the thought that counts in relation to gifts. I have been given some lovely gifts, but some of my favourite ones are not actually worth that much in monetary terms. At Christmas we have such a large extended family that we draw names out of a hat and you only buy a present for that person. This avoids putting people in a difficult situation of having to spend money they don't have on lots of presents. One year I set a family challenge that the presents had to be handmade and cost a maximum of £5 in materials. I was expecting to get some hilarious results that we could all have a good laugh about! I was blown away by the results. My sister made me a lovely patchwork cushion from scraps of material that I love. My Daughter had her Auntie in tears with two little handmade models of her Bassett hounds. Allan got a weather forecasting station from our nephew. To be fair, Callum's for Grandpa was shocking, but Grandpa loved it! The effort and the thought involved was amazing.

The effort and the thought involved in the Israelites offerings to God was non-existent. It showed no respect, no love. It's like someone turning up with something they found in a bin wrapped in old newspaper. It would be hurtful and better that they had come emptyhanded.

In verse 10 God say through Malachi “Oh that you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires at my altar!”.

What’s worse is that not only did they bring disrespectful offerings, they even moaned about having to do it. Saying “What a burden!” in verse 13.

God’s response is a rejection of Israel’s worship. The people were in danger of losing their relationship with God, a kind of spiritual death.

At this point it seems like all of this is about something a long time ago and far away. How does this apply to us, we don’t give God animal sacrifices anymore. Jesus, as the lamb of God, was the one perfect sacrifice, made on our behalf, that paid for all our sins, past, present and future and so we no longer have to present sacrifices in order to be forgiven.

But just as in Malachi’s time, God is worthy of our worship. If you know God, you will agree with this statement. He is the creator of the world, the giver of all good things, who has chosen you and loves you and by sacrificing his only son has given you eternal life. One of my favourite song puts it like this:

“Jesus, what can I give, what can I bring, to so faithful a Friend, to so loving a King? Saviour, what can be said, what can be sung as a praise of Your name for the things You have done? Oh, my words could not tell, not even in part of the debt of love that is owed by this thankful heart.”

It is a natural response to the grace we have received to want to give something back as part of our worship.

Nowhere in the NT does it say we have to give. It doesn’t make us a better Christian to give or a worse one not to give. But right from the early church it was a natural response to be generous with what they had and honour God in this way.

Jan, in the first of the sermons in this series, talked about what this giving might look like, giving our time, talent or treasure. But are we giving our best? What might giving our best look like?

Time. Many people would describe themselves as time poor. Perhaps we feel that we could use a few more hours in the day. It’s our most valuable resource. We have to prioritise our time and that can mean favouring what is urgent over what is important. God is important but he is seldom urgent. This can mean that the busier we get the less time we have available for God. Like any relationship, our relationship with God will suffer if we don’t dedicate time to it. What if we gave the best of this most valuable that we don’t have enough of already to God? But am I being really honest with myself about how busy I am? Since the beginning of lockdown, I have read in excess of 18 books. That’s at least 3 a month and probably more like 1 a week, not counting the time I have spent reading the newspaper etc. How have I managed that if I am so busy that I struggle with the thought of a daily bible reading? I daren’t even admit how much time I spend a week watching TV. What if instead, when I have finished work and want to settle down in my favourite spot with the cat, I first give time to God?

Money. I remember when I first became a Christian at University, I told my Mum the next time I went home for the weekend. The first thing she said was “you haven’t given them any money, have you?” I said, “It’s the church of England Mum!”. Well, actually the Church of England needs money too, but you know who doesn’t need it? God. God doesn’t need our money, but he wants our heart and for some reason the heart and the wallet seem to be connected! Jesus knew that when he said “Jesus said that our heart somehow follows our treasure. “Wherever your treasure is, there your

heart and thoughts will also be.” The deeper question, you see, is this: What has priority in our lives? Is Christ really first—or do we put ourselves and our own desires first? The New Testament talks about the importance and benefits of giving but doesn’t command or even recommend that we should follow a legalistic system of giving. Often people will use the tithe of the old testament as a guide which is 10% of your income, but all the new testament says it that it should be “in keeping with income”. We should pray for wisdom about how much to give but most importantly, we should give with our hearts not our wallet. Otherwise we risk being like the priests in Malachi’s day who moaned about the burden of making sacrifices. A gift given grudgingly is hardly a gift at all. Imagine my sister giving me that beautiful cushion and saying, “it took me ages to make that it was a right faff, I’m glad it’s finished to be honest.” Even though it is knowing that she took the time and energy to make it for me is what makes it special, it would ruin it a bit if she made me aware of it and begrudged me that. I would feel very differently about it every time I saw it! “Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Corinthians 9:7). As it says in Chronicles 29 verse 14 “Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand.”

It’s easy to use Malachi’s words to make us feel guilty, but guilt is a poor motivator. It can make us feel the need to make changes in our life but often this doesn’t last long. Its an extrinsic motivator – caused by external events. What we need is an intrinsic or internal motivator, something inside of us that wants us to do better. May be our thankfulness to God for all he has done for us through his son is the intrinsic motivation we need. Let grace be our motivator.