

Atonement: Lev 16:1-22

We don't tend to do much as a nation. We are more usually focused on our own individual activities. But once every three years or so, an event does occur that unites Australia, that involves almost every adult citizen, that brings us together as a people, for one day, to make a decision as to the future of our country. It is something that impacts everyone. It is something that crosses cultural, gender, and religious boundaries. And it's not a sport. And it is compulsory. That day is voting day.

And once every three or so years, when we have these elections, there is a little ceremony that takes place, whereby the Governor-General swears in the new prime minister and government ministers. It is a fairly simple oath that is taken, but without this ceremony, without this symbolic gesture, there cannot be a federal government. One small action has one very large result. After that oath, the prime minister and government is put in charge of over one trillion dollars, over 80,000 armed forces personnel, and over 160,000 Commonwealth public servants. After that oath, the wheels of government can start turning once more.

Well, in ancient Israel, the high priest officiated over a ceremony that was similarly a symbolic gesture, but that represented an even greater, more important result for the nation as a whole. Once a year, he would perform this Day of Atonement ritual, which represented God cleansing the sin of his people, so that they could remain in his presence.

Sin is serious stuff

Now, it's hard to really appreciate the depth of importance of this statement without having a proper appreciation of just how serious sin is. You see, sin is not just a matter of disobedience that requires punishment. It is something that prevents us from coming close to God. Sinfulness is the opposite to holiness, and God is holy. The Old Testament uses the language of cleanness and purity to describe holiness – God is perfectly clean and pure. When you're reading about this cleanness, and all the hard work God's people had to do to keep themselves ceremonially clean (we read a sample of that in verse 4), it's easy to mistakenly think that God is like clean, pure water, and sin is like poison, and you have to make sure that you're clean, and everything is clean, otherwise it might pollute God's perfect, clean water.

But that's not how it works. God's holiness is not like pure water that is in danger of being ruined by our sin. God's holiness is clean and pure the way disinfectant bleach is clean and pure, and our sin is like the germs of a disease. Do you think you wear thick rubber gloves and protective clothing to protect the bleach from getting contaminated by your skin? It's to protect us from getting burned! The problem with sin is that it's not just something we do – sin is part of who we are as human beings. The sickness of sin can't survive in God's holy presence... but neither can the people sick with sin. God's rules about ritual cleanness are not to protect him from the dirtiness of people's sin – they are to protect people infected with sin from his perfect, holy bleach.

Sin is serious stuff. Like any highly volatile and dangerous substance, you can't just deal with sin any way you want. You have to do it right. If you get bitten by a venomous snake, you can't decide, "Oh, I just want to get some bed rest and take some Panadol." You can't decide, "It's not really convenient for me to get the anti-venom now, I'm going to wait until I've been to the shops and bought dinner." But at the same time, you also can't decide, "You know, I don't like getting headaches. I'm just going to take enough painkillers now to last me the rest of my life." Well, you can, but the rest of your life won't be very long. Earlier in Leviticus, the sons of Aaron, the high priest, decide they want to make sacrifices to God when they wanted, rather than when God had approved them. It was about them, not about God – and that is sin. The result was God burned them to death. You can read about that in chapter 10. It turns out you can't just approach God whenever and however you want. He is too holy, too pure for that. It's not God who gets burned by sin.

Sin, then, is serious stuff. It's not just bad, it's not just distasteful, it's not just ugly. Sin is not even just deadly. It prevents us from being able to come close to God – which is what he wants, since we're his people – so it has to be dealt with. Just think about that a moment... is that how you think about sin? Do you think about its consequences as being so severe, that it makes it impossible for people to come close to God? When you sin, are you thinking about what impact it will have on your relationship with God? And just to make this clear, I don't mean your eternal salvation. We know that as Christians, even if we sin, we are forgiven by God thanks to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We're free from eternal punishment. But sin still has consequences that aren't eternal. You still have a relationship with God to maintain.

Think of it this way: if a child swears at its mother and abuses her, does it stop being her child? No. You're always your mother's child, simply by virtue of being born to her. But that doesn't mean you can't ruin that relationship with your actions. That is what sin is like for us as Christians. God won't stop loving us, no. But it's like swearing at your mum. It still hurts the relationship. And it's hard knowing that in our relationship with God, the only person who ever does anything to screw it up is us. That's why it's so important to know that God wants us to be with him. That's why he goes to all this trouble to deal with sin, and to be seen to deal with sin. It is of supreme importance to God, and it should be of vital importance to us too.

If you want to see how far away our sin pushes us from God, then look at the ritual of the Day of Atonement. It really highlights God's holiness. The high priest has to take a bath. Only then can he put on the sacred garments to be worn for these special occasions. But that's not enough. Then he has to make a sacrifice to atone for the sins of himself and his own family. That's still not enough though. Then he has to sacrifice to cleanse the tabernacle, because that was the house of God amongst his people, and the people's sin made it unclean. Then he had to sacrifice for the most holy place inside that tabernacle, the place where God symbolically resides where the ark of the covenant sits. Then he has to make atonement for the altar, where the sacrifices are made to God.

It's like having to go through multiple security checkpoints that you see in the movies – you have to put in the right combination on the keypad, then you have to have a fingerprint scan, then a retinal scan, then a voice recognition scan, then you have to be X-rayed for weapons, then searched for bombs and chemicals, and then finally you are allowed into that most secure place where the most valuable people or possessions are kept. It is symbolic of how big a barrier sin is to our being with God.

Atonement, needed?

Finally, once all those steps have been taken, the high priest can lay his hands on the head of a goat, and he can confess all the sin and wickedness of God's people, and with that, all the sin of God's people is put onto that goat. And they don't kill that goat, surprisingly. Instead, they take that goat, with all the people's sins, out into the wilderness. And that symbolises the taking away of their sins, outside of the camp, outside of the people of God – and with their sins gone away, they can now remain in God's presence without fear.

I say it symbolises, and I think we have to be clear about this – the sacrifices in the Old Testament Levitical law do not deal with sin. They are only symbols. This is called the Day of Atonement, but really, it is not an atonement in the human sense of the word. 'Atone' means to be 'at one' with each other – that's not a silly saying to make it easier to remember, the word's provenance is actually from the saying 'at one'. It means you make reparations to bring a relationship that has become askew back into accord. But if the Day of Atonement really made atonement for the sin of the nation of Israel, then how much was sin of Israel's million or so people worth each year? How much did it cost? One goat. All the other animals are sacrifices to cleanse the tent and the altar and the high priest so he can come to this one, lone atonement goat. This goat is not a sacrifice – it is donated by all the people of Israel, so it represents essentially a zero loss on their part. And it doesn't even get killed – it gets released into the desert.

There is no part of the Day of Atonement symbolism that includes having to give sacrificially, or pay a cost. The Israelites are not paying reparations to God for their sin on this day. The Day of Atonement is entirely a work of God. Sound familiar? “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.” Yes, it may have been possible for some Israelites to mistakenly build for themselves a works based salvation – just like the church has done in the past. But God's attitude to sin has always been the same – it is something he despises, and something he deals with for us. People often think that God seems to change the rules between the Old Testament and the New, but really, this is the same God. When the Israelites see that goat being led off into the desert, they have to trust that God will deal with their sin. And he did so – at the cross of Christ. Is it any different for us, reading that Jesus takes away our sin? You can't see sin, after all. You can't feel it or measure it. God tells us that Jesus took it away, and we have to trust him – just like the people of Israel had to trust God would do what he was showing in this symbolic ritual.

God's People Saved

Which brings us back full circle to the beginning of my talk, about symbolic actions. The Day of Atonement is a national symbol, one that includes all of God's people, even if it is only the High Priest officiating. It takes away the sin of a whole nation, not just the High Priest. They are freed from their sin together, and that is what unifies them as a people before God. It's no coincidence that the scapegoat is taken out of the camp – it symbolises that the peoples' sin is carried outside the community now, outside of their camp.

We don't often focus on our sin as a community of God, although sometimes we're forced to. So we should remember that we are saved not just as individuals, but saved into the people of God. It is true that sin is a problem between you and God, but his solution is between us and God, together. We can spend a lot of our time focused on our own individual spiritual needs and standing before God, but we mustn't forget that God relates to us not just on our own, but as members of one body, which is his church.

In 1 Peter 2:9-10 it says, “[Y]ou are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

God's community is a vital part of the Christian spiritual life. It's not vital because we come and sing and hear sermons. It's about being a member of a larger community, whose focus is on God. We are linked not just with God, but with each other, and not just each other here, but with our brothers and sisters around the world. What links us is not our denominations, not our worship music, not our geography – it is our salvation, it is God's mercy. “Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

If you are not a part of the church, by that I mean if you are not connected with God's people, then you are missing a huge part of how God interacts with you. I daresay that this is the biggest selling point any church should have. If weekly sermons and songs of praise are what attract people, then we should all be like Hillsong. Those things are good, but they are only a function of what church is really about – it's about us coming together as a community of believers united by God's mercy, and relating to God in that communal aspect. That's why our church's vision is “To see people engaging with God in community”. We don't just want people to meet God. We want them to meet God as a member of his people. We want to provide communities where you can come and see how salvation works as a people, not just as a person. We are thinking about this as a church, and that is encouraging – and we should keep thinking about it. God chooses a people for himself. He shows them mercy as a people. We should seek to serve him not just as a person, but as a people.