

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Easter, April 29, 2018

Solemn Evensong

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year 2: Wisdom 7:22–8:1; Hebrews 12:1–14; John 6:13–21

Since I work with our lectionary readings, I often check what is being read at Morning and Evening Prayer to see if I, or someone else, has made a mistake in setting out the text. This morning, the first reading was from the beginning and the end of the eighth chapter of Leviticus. The passage was about the ordination of Aaron and his four sons, Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar,¹ as priests.² Looking at the Bible that I keep at my seat, I realized why: part of the ordination included the ritual slaughter of one bull and two rams.

Leviticus describes a process that includes marking Aaron and his sons with animal blood their right earlobes, thumbs, and big toes. The rest of the blood was “dashed” against the altar.³

Also omitted from this morning’s reading was a description of a ceremony of taking different sections

¹ Exodus 28:1.

² Leviticus 8:14–29. All Bible quotations in this sermon are from the NRSV.

³ Leviticus 8:22–24a.

of animal fats, livers, kidneys, and the right thigh of a ram and the placing of these on three cakes, one of unleavened bread, one of bread with oil, and one wafer (matzo?). Then Moses put in the hands of Aaron and his sons the fat, the organs, the right (not left) thigh, and the cakes. The new priests raised their hands with the animal parts and breads as an “elevation offering.”⁴ Then Moses took these offerings and “turned them into smoke on the altar with the burnt offering.”⁵ Leviticus continues with this comment, “This was an ordination offering, for a pleasing odor, an offering by fire to the Lord.”⁶

The word English word “ordination” derives from Latin words related to setting things in order and also arranging military rank.⁷ In the New Revised Standard Version’s description of the ordination of Aaron and his sons, I came across this footnote: “The ordination offering is similar (but not identical) to the well-being offering. It inaugurates the system for priestly compensation, as indicated by its name: *ordination*, literally [in Hebrew], “filling the (hand),” refers to the

⁴ Leviticus 8:27.

⁵ Leviticus 8:28.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ D.P. Simpson, *Cassell’s New Latin Dictionary* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1968), s.v. “ordo,” 416.

assignment of part of the offerings to the priests.”⁸
 The root Hebrew word here is “מְלֵאִים” — “millu.”

You will recall that the first lesson at Morning and Evening Prayer alternates on a two-year cycle. We will have this reading from Leviticus on Sunday night next year. This year we have a reading from the Letter to the Hebrews. In tonight’s passage, the first part of chapter 12, begins with a reference to what has come just before it in chapter 11 that begins, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” God’s people know their home is a “better country;” [the city that God “has prepared for them.”]⁹

Hebrews is the letter that identifies Jesus as being “designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchiz'edek.”¹⁰ The writer of this letter knows that the priesthood of Aaron and the priestly sacrifices of the temple have been replaced by Christ with his own body and his own blood.

⁸ *New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha, An Ecumenical Study Bible*, ed. Michael D. Coogan, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), Leviticus 8:22–32 n., 153.

⁹ Hebrews 11:16.

¹⁰ Hebrews 5:10.

Jesus turned the world upside down in so many ways. With respect to God's hand in history, one notes that instead of receiving food, our high priest offers food to feed us, "living bread" and a "saving cup."¹¹

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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¹¹ These phrases are from the title of a book: R. Kevin Seasoltz, *Living Bread, Saving Cup: Readings on the Eucharist* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1982).