

Leviticus 20v1-5

Aaron Eime, Christ Church Jerusalem, 2022

For the modern follower of Jesus, this chapter can be challenging and troubling. Severe punishments, particularly the death penalty, can challenge our sense of modern moral justice. And actually, that's exactly the point. Can we super impose our modern day morality back onto the past? The answer to that question is no! The modern student of the Bible might ask whether the dishonouring of one's parents really deserves the death penalty. But that decision is not for him to make at all. Modern law codes are an expression of contemporary social norms which are shaped by the historical circumstances of that particular nation. Ancient Israel was not alone in the use and practice of the death penalty. All of the surrounding nations had very similar strict judicial laws. In the mind of the ancient cultures and nations, the death penalty was enforced on those sins which were felt to be the most threatening to their way of life, social order and stability. The Jewish people were called to be a holy people, and thus those sins which were seen as endangering the holy fabric of Israel were treated with strict justice: the offender being removed, either through ex-communication or permanently through death.

After the initial reading of the chapter, much of our discussion was centred around the distinguishing between clean and unclean and how that applies to our modern walk of faith with the Lord. It is a sad reflection on the modern world where we can no longer distinguish wrong from right, pure and impure and for the Church to no longer be able to distinguish sin.

Without being able to say what sin is, then we cannot offer the good news to a sinner of a saviour to redeem us from that sin. Discerning the sacred from the profane remains one of the central callings of the people of Israel and follows into the New Covenant with the commonwealth of Israel; both Jews and Gentiles are still called to be a holy people. The call to be holy implies that we know the difference between what is holy and what is not. This begs the question then: how can we be holy? Is that not beyond the human condition? Verse 8 reminds us that we can be holy because God Himself will help us. Holiness is a valid calling and it is not beyond our ability or reach.

In verse 1, God speaks to Israel and addresses both the native Israelite and the stranger who reside in the Land. Who are these strangers that the Lord speaks to? According to Jewish tradition, there are three types of people called *ger* in the Bible. Israel is called a 'stranger' in Egypt and Abraham is called a *ger* and thus we can see that the term stranger can definitely refer to Jews. Gentiles that live within the Jewish community can be called *stranger* and the Gentile who converts can also be called *stranger* as the verb to convert in Hebrew use the root (*shoresh*) of *ger*. The word *stranger* is גֵּר the verb to convert to Judaism is רִיגַתְהוּ.

The first acute threat to the moral and holy fabric of Israel was the worship of Molech. Who or what is Molech and why is he singled out from amongst the pagan pantheon? There is a plethora of commentary on the identity of Molech and his relationship to ancient Israel. Most likely, Molech was a fertility god of the Canaanite peoples. Fertility gods were in high demand in Canaan, due to the scarcity of rainfall and lack of a major river system for agriculture and food security. Worshipping Molech involved the abhorrent practice of child abuse and sacrifice. Unfortunately, we note in the sacred history of Israel that the continued dependency on rain led the Israelite monarchy to embrace the worship of Molech as part of their religious tradition, including the wise king Solomon. The penalty for worshipping Molech was execution by stoning. The members of the community would enforce the punishment. This demonstrated in a

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very visual and powerful way that the sin of child sacrifice against the community was punished by the very same community. To ignore such a great evil was also a great evil. Thus to tolerate Molech was also a threat to the nation. Those who turned a blind eye, even if they did not participate in the worship of Molech were held accountable. God Himself participated in the punishment of those who tolerated evil by setting His face against them. God would prosecute the case against the idolator if the people of Israel did not!

Toleration of sin and evil is referred to in the Revelation to John. One of the criticisms that Jesus has against the Church in the opening chapters is its tolerance of Jezebel, a pagan queen in antiquity who led Israel astray. Unfortunately despite warnings not to do this in both the Hebrew and Greek Bible, we continue to tolerate sin and are silenced into not declaring sin to actually be sin. We should note that just because we call out a sinful activity to be sinful does not imply that we now 'hate' the sinner. But that is the charge that leads to our silence much of the time. We are condemned into silence and inactivity as 'judges', but we are not judging. Instead, we are actually telling the truth. Our call to holiness includes the activity of discernment, a gift of the Spirit. As the people of God we do not call out evil with a 'judging spirit' but we continue to distinguish the sacred from profane with a humble truthful spirit. And we invite people to join us in a life of holiness with the blessing that God Himself will dwell in and amongst His holy people. And with that we continue to study Leviticus chapter 20 and the call to holiness.