

ACACIA

Reading

Exodus 25.10-22

They shall make an ark of acacia wood; it shall be two and a half cubits long, a cubit and a half wide, and a cubit and a half high. You shall overlay it with pure gold, inside and outside you shall overlay it, and you shall make a moulding of gold upon it all round. You shall cast four rings of gold for it and put them on its four feet, two rings on one side of it, and two rings on the other side. You shall make poles of acacia wood, and overlay them with gold. And you shall put the poles into the rings on the sides of the ark, by which to carry the ark. The poles shall remain in the rings of the ark; they shall not be taken from it. You shall put into the ark the covenant that I shall give you.

Then you shall make a mercy-seat of pure gold; two cubits and a half shall be its length, and a cubit and a half its width. You shall make two cherubim of gold; you shall make them of hammered work, at the two ends of the mercy-seat. Make one cherub at one end, and one cherub at the other; of one piece with the mercy-seat you shall make the cherubim at its two ends. The cherubim shall spread out their wings above, overshadowing the mercy-seat with their wings. They shall face each other; the faces of the cherubim shall be turned towards the mercy-seat. You shall put the mercy-seat on the top of the ark; and in the ark you shall put the covenant that I shall give you. There I will meet you, and from above the mercy-seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the covenant, I will deliver to you all my commands for the Israelites.

Talk

I suspect that more people have heard of 'The Raiders of the Lost Ark' than have heard about the Ark of the Covenant itself. We have just heard the instructions about what it was to look like – an Acacia wood box roughly 4' by 2 ½' by 2 ½'. Over the wood was a golden cover, and it was to be carried on golden covered acacia wood poles. In it were to be placed the two tablets of the Ten Commandments, as they had been given to Moses. On top of it was another acacia construction, this time the mercy-seat. But we also gather from the letter to the Hebrews that the Ark also contained Aaron's rod that budded, a sign of God's favour for the Aaronic priesthood, and also a pot of the manna which God provided in the desert for the hungry children of Israel. The instructions we heard were given at Mt Sinai, so it was from that point on a symbol of God's presence with his people, and had a significant part to play in the crossing of the River Jordan into the Promised Land – whilst the priests stood in the water holding the Ark, the waters were held back, and when they went out of the water, the river started to flow again. The Ark was kept variously at Gilgal, and then Bethel, but was taken to Shiloh during the time of the Judges. It was captured by the Philistines on the battlefield at Ebenezer, but because the Philistines then had seven months of plagues, they returned it to Kiriath-jearim, where it stayed for twenty years. David installed it in a tent at Jerusalem, and Solomon eventually placed into the Temple with great ceremony. It was lost presumably during the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587BC.

It represented the presence of God, and when it was finally installed in the Temple, it stood in the Holy of Holies, that central sacred place which only the High Priest could enter, just once a year on the Day of Atonement. And it is that which connects it to Good Friday, because we talk about the death of Jesus as being an atonement. Let's just think about what it meant in Jewish thinking first of all. It was a day which summed up dealing with the sin of everyone in a once-and-for all annual event. So it wasn't a feast, but a fast. And it was a complicated ritual. After the usual daily sacrifices, the High Priest divested himself of his normally rich vestments, and wore a simple linen robe. A bullock was brought, and he placed his hands on the bullocks head and confessed the sins of the people, as well as his own. Then two goats were brought, and an urn which had two tokens within it. One was drawn and tied to the neck of the first goat. It was labelled 'For Yahweh', for God. The other goat had a label saying 'For Azazel' – a mysterious name, because it only occurs here. Most scholars think it was the name of a fallen angel. Then the bullock was slaughtered. The High Priest went into the Holy of Holies with incense, then came out and took the bullock's blood in a basin and sprinkled it in the Holies of Holies, and then he came out and killed the goat labelled 'For Yahweh'. He took its blood and sprinkled that in the Holy of Holies. Then he mixed the blood from bullock and goat and sprinkled it on the altar in the outside Holy Place. Then he laid his sins and the sins of the people onto the other goat, the Scapegoat as it became known, and that was sent off into the desert, carrying the sins of the people away. After some more prayers and sacrifices, he then went for a fourth time into the Holy of Holies, and removed the incense burner. Then in the evening there was a feast, celebrating the miracle that he had been in the presence of God and had survived.

As one commentator has said - it was a noble and dignified ritual, but one that was only a pale foreshadowing of the sacrifice of Jesus, who went, as the writer to the Hebrews says 'once and for all' into the presence of God to make the one eternal sacrifice of himself. In Jesus' time of course there was no Ark of the Covenant in that Holy of Holies, but the ritual remained the same, and it still stood for the awesome presence of God. The word atonement is happily easily broken down into three bits. If we read it as at-one-ment it expresses exactly what that ritual was intended to do, and what we believe Christ's sacrifice has achieved for everyone for all time, rather than for a specific group for that year in the High Priestly version. And in the story of today, when at the death of Jesus we are told that the curtain which separated the Holy of Holies off from the rest of the Temple was torn in two, we have a symbol of at least two things – that nothing can contain God, and nothing can separate us from God. People have tried to keep God under control, and have tried to lock him up in some way or other. But as Sidney Carter said in his song: 'Catch the bird of heaven, Lock him in a cage of gold, look again tomorrow, and he will be gone.' God is not located and confined anywhere. And nor can we be separated from him any more. It was sin that drove God

and man apart – symbolised as we have heard in the story of Adam and Eve being driven out of the Garden of Eden. But in Jesus Paradise is regained, and in Paul's words to the Romans, 'nothing in heaven above or on the earth beneath.... can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.'

We are still answerable to God, and we have to come to his mercy-seat. But we come with the confidence that Jesus has entered into that heavenly sanctuary for all time. God is not to be found in an acacia box, or behind a curtain, but wherever we are. The curtain was torn from top to bottom. The sacrifice was effective and we are at one with God once more.