

Sunday, March 30, 2025

THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT (LAETARE)

Festal Evensong

4:00 pm

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Alison Turner

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The Temple: Incense as Prayer

This sermon was read by Fr. Moretz in Mo. Turner's absence.

Throughout this Lenten season, we have been meditating on the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ in relation to the Temple of Jerusalem. Today, we turn our focus to incense as a beautiful poignant symbol of prayer offered upon the altar of Incense of the Temple and recall the words of Psalm 141:

"O Lord, I call upon you; hasten to me! Give ear to my voice when I call to you! Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice!"

Incense has been used in ancient religious ceremonies for thousands of years across many religious traditions. Although seen principally as a symbol of prayer rising to God, nevertheless, it also had a very specific practical use since, in many ancient religions, including the Jewish Faith before the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem in the year 70AD by the Romans, the offering of prayer was principally through animal sacrifice. In the Jerusalem Temple, the Altar of Burnt Offering was outside the Temple itself, and the animals sacrificed to God were then burned on that altar. The thick smoke from burning animal carcasses would, itself, have been a powerful symbol of the offering of prayer to God. The Book of numbers describes animal sacrifice thus, *"a burnt offering or a sacrifice, to fulfill a vow or as a freewill offering or at your appointed festivals—to make a pleasing odor for the LORD."* (Numbers 15:3). While the Hebrew scriptures describe the smoke produced from the burning of animal flesh and fat as a 'pleasing odor' to the Lord, it most certainly would have not been quite so pleasant for those ministering in the Temple; thank goodness smoke detectors were not invented 2,500 years ago! The burning of flesh and skin and fat and hair would have been quite overwhelming. This brings us back to the other kind of smoke used in the Temple itself – the fragrant incense that would have masked the pungent smell of animal sacrifice – thus giving the burning of incense a very practical function.

But Incense was also used as an offering in itself. We read in the prophet Malachi,

“From the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering; for my name is great among the nations, says the LORD of hosts.” (Malachi 1:11). Pure frankincense is very expensive, made from the resin of very particular trees, and mixed with expensive spices, and burned on red-hot charcoal to create a white fragrant smoke. This offering of incense was a ritual in the Temple in addition to the offering of burnt sacrifice. Last Advent, we heard the story of Zechariah, a priest of the Temple – the father of John the Baptist – and how he encountered an angel of the Lord in the Temple as he attended to the altar of incense: *“Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense.”* (Luke 1:8-11).

Incense was offered to the Lord twice a day in the Temple as a symbol of honor and devotion and prayer, but also symbolic of the presence of God; for it was placed before the most sacred part of the Temple – the Holy of Holies. If you remember, after the Exodus from Egypt, God led his pilgrim people through the desert by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. When the Hebrew Tribes were in that wilderness and pitched camp, they carried a portable square altar of incense, overlaid with gold, that they placed in the Tabernacle or Tent which housed the Ark of the Covenant. We read in the Book of Exodus, *“You shall put the golden altar for incense before the ark of the covenant, and set up the screen for the entrance of the tabernacle.”* (Exodus 40:5). So, from the earliest of days, the offering of incense was associated with **God’s presence** through the Ark of the Covenant, journeying with his people.

Incense was also to be a symbol of prayer rising before the Lord. We also read in the Book of Exodus, *“Aaron shall offer fragrant incense on it; every morning when he dresses the lamps he shall offer it, and when Aaron sets up the lamps in the evening, he shall offer it, a regular incense offering before the LORD throughout your generations.”* (Exodus 30:7-8)

Our forebears in the faith saw in this a beautiful picture set by a regular pattern or rhythm of prayer.

Pondering on this during this season of Lent and preparation for Easter, incense is a simple yet powerful reminder of the need for a regular pattern of prayer and devotion in response to God’s call and invitation to worship. It is also a reminder of coming close into the presence of God. At Saint Thomas, in Lent and Holy Week we use incense more frequently not simply to echo that pattern and rhythm of prayer that echoes what we see in the Hebrew Scriptures but as a powerful reminder of our own self-offering to God. That is why, in the Christian tradition it is not just the altar that is honored with incense, but the people of God also.

In the Second Temple of Jerusalem, behind the curtain in the Holy of Holies was the ark of the covenant, where God promised to meet with them. Between the cherubim on the top of the ark was the space God promised to dwell, known as the mercy seat. The altar of incense was still placed close to the ark, as it had been in the Tabernacle in the wilderness, but still separated by a curtain. Even though they could not see the mercy seat when the incense was offered, it was offered toward the mercy seat, toward the God who promised to meet with them there. Even though unseen, the incense was offered before the throne of God.

Even though the practical use of incense was not available for the first Christians who were persecuted, and who had no buildings in which to worship, nevertheless it features time and time again in their exploration of the worship of God and his presence revealed through Jesus Christ: *“When he had taken the*

scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. (Revelation 5:6-8).

So too with our prayer. When we pray, we come before the mercy seat of God, even though we cannot see it with our eyes. When we pray, we are as close to the throne of God as we come in this life, just as the incense was offered as close to the mercy seat as possible. And this prayer is united with the prayer of Jesus who taught us how to pray and whose life was an offering of true prayer and devotion to his heavenly Father. The life and ministry of Jesus is characterized by prayer and his whole life and ministry is an offering to the Father; from his prayer and fasting in the wilderness to his agony in the garden; from his prayer before choosing his twelve disciples to his, so-called, High priestly Prayer in the upper room; from his prayers associated with miracle to his prayer of forgiveness coming from the cross; the life and ministry of Jesus is fragrant offering of prayer rising to the God of love.

So, today, when we pray, we encounter the Lord and plead his mercy. The offering of incense in Christian worship is an offering; a symbol of prayer rising to God; and a recognition of our encounter with the holy. Incense also reminds us that our prayer is not offered in isolation, but draws us together with those who are holy and with those who have gone before.

As we draw to Passiontide and Holy week we will encounter afresh the prayers of Jesus, from a place of, anger in the temple betrayal at the table, loss of friendship loneliness in the garden humiliation pain and exhaustion on the road to calvary words of abandonment from the cross.

Whatever your prayer or burden is this night, and in these coming weeks of journeying with Jesus, take time to let it rise as a prayer, with or without words. Let the things that trouble your heart be lifted to God. Like the offering of incense in the Temple, let them rise and combine with the prayer of others – with the prayers of the saints – for God delights in our prayer, and God delights in you.
