The Man in the Middle
Leviticus 8:1-15a; 18-19a; 22-24b; 31-36.

So we're in the Old Testament book of Leviticus. And that word, *Leviticus,* comes from the word meaning 'concerning the Levites', because the priests came from the tribe of Levi, and as you read Leviticus, you keep on meeting these guys, the the priests, who offered the sacrifices or declared things clean or unclean.

And today we're going to look at the ordination service of the very first High Priest, who was Moses' brother Aaron. Now, as you read a passage like this, the temptation – as with a lot of Leviticus - is to think this has absolutely nothing to do with me. I mean, I don't get a mention, there aren't any nice promises that I can stick on the fridge, there's blood being splattered everywhere, and it all comes from a world that's totally alien to me. Well, what I want you to see is that this has everything to do with you.

Read Leviticus 8:1-15a; 18-19a; 22-24b; 31-36

In Need of a Mediator
Now some time ago, as a family we attended a friend's wedding. But between the church service and the reception a fellow guest approached me for help. Her daughter and her daughter's fiancé had had a blazing row, and on this day of all days, the young man had broken off the engagement. And her mother came asking me if I'd go and speak to them and try and sort this out.

So whilst everyone else got to enjoy the champagne I shuttled between hotel rooms. And I went to his room first and spoke to him. Then I went down the corridor to her room, and told her 'well, this is what he says', and she told me what she said. Then I went back to him in his room and told him 'well, this is what she says' and he told me what he had to say, part 2. So then I went back down the corridor to her room and the process repeated itself until I could get them both in one room talking face to face.

Now, apart from missing out on the wedding fun, what was I doing? I was acting as their mediator, their go-between. I was going between two separated, estranged, divided parties and trying to bring them together.

But imagine needing a mediator between you and God. Now, if you're not yet a Christian, you might hear that and think, 'I don't *need* a mediator between me and God.' Because in our current western culture we tend to think that we are doing God a favour coming to him in the first place. Or rather, that we're doing him a favour allowing him some space in our lives. In fact, in the mindset of our western culture, we can sometimes think that rather than me needing a mediator between me and God, God needs a sales-rep to persuade me that I should give him some time. So a famous sportsman or a pop-star, is sometimes wheeled out as evidence that I really should give God some space: 'I've bought into this, and you should too', kind of thing.

But if that sounds a bit too self-absorbed, and maybe you're not quite that bad, we can at least think that we can approach God anyway and anytime we want, can't we?

But Leviticus tells us something very different. It tells us that God is dangerously, awesomely holy and that he cannot abide sin, but we are stained by sin and everything we do is contaminated by it. And so whilst that young man and woman I was acting as a go-between for were divided and estranged from one another because they were both in the wrong, in our relationship with God things look very different, don't they?

When it comes to us on the one hand, and God on the other, all the right is on his side. It's us who've broken all the rules, all the promises, and are all to blame, whilst God is totally blameless in this relationship breakdown. And he is righteously angry at sin, and we desperately need to find a way back to him, but have absolutely no way of doing it on our own.

In other words, we do need a mediator, a go-between, someone who can go to God on our behalf and bring about our reconciliation with him and secure forgiveness and mercy and blessing from God for us.

And maybe, without even knowing it, you know that's true. You see, whilst on the one hand we can be incredibly over-confident, and think God owes us one, and of course he should be delighted if I decide to give him space, when the lights are turned out some of us may feel anything but such confidence. We're full of bravado in the daytime, but when we're alone with our thoughts in the dark we can be wracked by inconfidence and we *feel*, we *know* we are unworthy. And we look at our lives and wonder if God could ever accept us. And yet we long for him to tell us that we're ok, that he accepts us, but we have no way to get to him.

And when we feel like that we're really acknowledging that 'I need someone to go to God for me.' And you know you need a mediator.

Well, the extraordinary thing about Leviticus is that it speaks right into that need. It speaks to our 21st century self-absorption and pride and tells us that we think way too highly of ourselves and we most certainly do need a mediator. But it also speaks to our sense of despair and tells us that despite all our failings and all our unworthiness God himself has provided a go-between.

God's Go-between

And the role of the High Priest in ancient Israel was exactly to act as that mediator between the people and God. Because they needed someone who was like them and not like them. Their mediator needed to be one of them, so he could go to God for them, to atone for their sins. But somehow he also had to be *unlike* them – somehow he also had to be holy, or else he wouldn't survive going before God.

And it was this ordination ceremony that took Aaron and made him holy. Now to us, the thought that a ceremony could do that is bizarre. How could just going through some rituals change his state before God?

But think about it. Even today we use ceremonies to change someone's status, don't we? I mean think about a wedding. The bride and the groom put on special

clothes. They make vows together that are hundreds of years old, they exchange rings, and for what? Because it changes their state from single to married. Or in the UK, if someone is to be rewarded for a lifetime of service, the Queen makes them a knight, or a dame. And they go to the palace, wearing special clothes, and they kneel before the Queen and she takes a sword and she taps the sword on each shoulder. Why? (Apart from the fact that the British are odd!) Because when they stand up their status has changed – now you address them differently, it's sir this or lady that. And it's the ceremony that does it.

And it's this ordination ceremony that moved the High Priest into the highest ritual state. He's not unclean anymore, he's not even just clean, now he was ritually holy, able to approach the Lord on behalf of the people.

And look how it all happens. The Lord tells Moses in v1 and 3, to "Take Aaron and his sons with him… And assemble all the congregation at the entrance of the tent of meeting." So this wasn't a good idea cooked up by Moses and Aaron over a pint, was it? And it's not that the people realise the hole they're in and come up with the scheme to send someone into the tent of mediate for them. It's God who initiates this. And just think for a moment what that tells you. You see typically religion is about you taking the initiative and trying somehow to connext with the divine. But here it is God who makes the move to bridge the gap. It's God who provides the go-between. It's God who wants to see this relationship healed. And time and again the phrase is repeated in chapter 8, 'As the Lord commanded.' Why? Because God is a gracious God and this is his idea, it's all his doing.

Then look at v6: 'And Moses brought Aaron and his sons and washed them with water.' And it's as if their impurity and unworthiness was being washed away. But did you notice who does the washing? They don't wash themselves do they? Moses does it. And think about that, if you have a kitchen pan and it's all greasy, you won't get it clean by taking a cloth that's already covered in grease and cleaning the pan with it. And just as the greasy can't make the greasy clean, so the unholy can't make the unholy holy. Aaron needed someone else to clean him. And, spiritually speaking, we all need that, don't we? I mean when you take a look at your life and you see these areas that you are powerless to change, we need a power outside ourselves to change us. And so Moses takes God's place and does it for him.

Then Moses dresses Aaron in the special priest's clothing. Now, if a ceremony changing someone's state before God seems bizarre at first, what about putting on special clothing to make you more holy? But when you see a young lady wearing white, being led on her father's arm, you know she's a bride, don't you? Or, when you see a policeman in uniform, you know he's acting for the state. Or when you see a high court judge, wearing his gown, and in the UK his wig, you know he has the authority to decide your fate. In each case their clothing sets them apart for a specific role, just as the priest's clothing set him apart, in Leviticus' language it made him holy, for his specific role.

And v7-8 tell us he put on the ephod and the breastplate. And the ephod had two gemstones on the shoulders, engraved with the names of the 12 tribes, and the

breastplate had 12 gemstones each representing one of the tribes. So every time the priest went before God he went as the nation's representative, their go-between.

Then v9 tells us that 'he set the turban on his head, and on the turban, in front, he set the golden plate.' And engraved on that gold plate were the words 'Holy to the Lord.' So right on his forehead, imprinted on his brain, if you like, was 'I am set apart for God.' Then Moses anointed Aaron: v12, 'And he poured some of the anointing oil on Aaron's head and anointed him to consecrate him.'

Now why does anointing Aaron with oil consecrate him? Well, in the ancient world, if a guest came to visit you, if you were a gracious host you'd offer them oil for their skin. Because if they've travelled any distance their skin was going to be dry and sand-blasted. So giving oil was a way of saying, 'you're welcome in my house'. And as Moses anoints Aaron, it's the Lord saying, 'you are my guest and you're welcome to come'. But there's something more than that, because as the Old Testament continues, there's this link between anointing someone with oil and them receiving the Holy Spirit to equip them for the task they're being anointed for. So Samuel anointed Saul with oil as king and the Spirit came upon him. He does the same for David and the same thing happens to him. And then Isaiah the prophet looks forward to the coming Servant of the Lord, and says of him, 'The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me' (Is 61:1). So as this oil was poured on Aaron's head it was a picture of God's *Holy* Spirit equipping him with everything he needed to be holy to the Lord.

But then the ceremony finished with 3 sacrifices and one meal. The first sacrifice was a bull for a sin offering. Now think about that: Aaron's been washed, he's changed his clothes, he's been anointed, isn't that enough? Why does he need a bull to be sacrificed for him? Because in and of himself Aaron was no more holy or righteous than anyone else, was he? And he needed his sins to be forgiven and atoned for just as much as the people. As the writer to the Hebrews said, 'He is obligated to offer sacrifice for his own sins just as he does for those of the people' (Heb 5:3). So this bull becomes his substitute, and the bull dies so that when Aaron goes before God he doesn't die.

Then the second sacrifice was the burnt offering. And as the whole ram was burnt on the altar, it was a picture that Aaron was to give his whole life to the Lord in worship and service.

But the third and final sacrifice was the ordination offering. And Moses took a ram, killed it and, v23, 'took some of its blood and put it on the lobe of Aaron's right ear and on the thumb of his right hand and on the big toe of his right foot.'

Now you might read that and think, 'that's weird!' But is it? I mean, the ear is what Aaron is going to listen with, his hands are what he's going to do stuff with, and his feet are what he'll walk through life with. So putting blood on his right ear, thumb and toe, and the right side was considered the most important side, was a powerful way of saying his whole life was going to be consecrated to God:

that he would listen to God's voice, he would do God's work, he would walk in God's paths. That his whole life would be holy and set apart.

And then they took that ram and cooked it and ate it in the court of the Tent of Meeting. Now today, if you conclude a business deal with some partner, it's not uncommon to take them out for a meal is it. And it was no different in the ancient world. If you entered into a covenant with someone, often you'd confirm that by sharing a meal with them. And here Aaron and his sons sit down in God's house and eat a meal in his presence.

But did you notice verse 33? 'It will take seven days to ordain you.' And what we've looked at was just day 1! For the next 6 days the same sin offering would be made to atone for Aarons sins. That was what it took to enable this man Aaron to become God's go-between.

And yet think about it. Aaron's new found holiness was just external, wasn't it? And you get to chapter 21 and there are a whole raft of laws as to what the priests could and couldn't do, and who they can and cannot marry, how they can and cannot grieve for dead relatives and so on. And whilst all of those laws had a very clear reason behind them, what strikes you is that it's nearly all about externals. They didn't, they couldn't, directly address the problem of the heart. Because laws and rituals, even when done in faith, even when done with a good heart, have no power in and of themselves, to change the inside. And so at the end of his ordination, Aaron would have been *ritually* holy, but his inner problem, and that of the people he's going to represent, would be no different.

What he and they needed, what all of us need, is a much better mediator. One who can go to God on our behalf, who can make the way for us back into his presence, who can truly make us acceptable to God and pleasing in his sight, by bringing about the change we need, not on the outside, but where it really matters, on the inside.

The Go-between God.
Well, the extraordinary message of the gospel is that God himself comes and does it for us, and he leaves his room and becomes the ultimate high priest and mediator.

And in his first public sermon, Jesus read those words from the prophet Isaiah 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor' (Luke 4:18). In other words, I am the anointed one, the true high priest set apart as your go-between.

And just as Aaron was like and unlike the people, so Jesus was like and unlike us, but with one crucial difference from Aaron. Hebrews says that Aaron was 'himself beset with weakness' (Heb 5:2), that just like us, Aaron was fatally flawed, so he had to be *made* holy. But no one needed to make Jesus holy. No one could ever make him more holy that he was or is. Holy on the inside, as well as the outside. And whilst you and I and Aaron have all these skeletons packed in our cupboards, and you open the cupboard door and another one falls out, Jesus

is the only one with no skeletons of which to be ashamed. And he needed no washing, no purifying, no atonement. He wasn't just holy and righteous externally, he was internally, in his very inner being. And God's law that you and I are always stumbling over and falling in, he kept it perfectly. As Hebrews 7 says, 'It was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens' (Heb 7:26).

And because that is who Jesus is, unlike Aaron he had no need to sacrifice for himself first. Rather he gave himself as *the* perfect atoning sacrifice, to once and for all deal with our separation from God. The Son of God, our high priest, took upon himself all our guilt, all our shame, all the stuff that means we desperately need a mediator between us and God, and at the cross he paid for it all. And as he does that, and as the truth of that sinks into your heart, it does something more than external. It begins to change your heart. As Hebrews says, 'How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God' (Heb 9:14).

You see, only the sacrifice of Christ has the power to cleanse your conscience. Dead works can't do it, can they? Trying to atone for your sin by doing good stuff, to cover the bad stuff, never works at cleansing a guilty conscience, because you know it's never enough. But when you know that Jesus has paid the price for all the things you are guilty of, then it's not just your slate that's wiped clean, so is your conscience.

And knowing that Christ is your perfect high priest, who has bridged this gap between you and God, who has made it possible for you to be in the same room together, gives you the boldness and the confidence to come. Listen to Hebrews again, 'Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God… Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need' (Heb 4:14-16).

So what our western mind-set promises, but can never deliver – confidence before a holy God – Jesus does for us. What we fear we could never have, access to the mercy and grace we need in life – Jesus provides for us. Because he is the great high priest, the go-between God.