

DEEP END - HIGHLIGHTS (text not audio)

Numbers 15 - On Running between the Living and the Dead

Augustine's famous aphorism on scripture that "the New is in the Old concealed, and the Old is in the New revealed" is dramatically illustrated by the actions of Aaron in Numbers as he "runs between the living and the dead" to stop a plague caused by the rebellion of the people. The only problem in passages like this is that "the Old [might be] in the New revealed" but not as obviously as we would like it to be! So what are we to make of such passages, and how do they apply to us living some 3,500 years after the event?

Many of us know the story well. In Numbers 15 Israel again grumbles against the Lord and he sends a plague among them. However, Aaron is called to fill his censor (a container for burning incense) with fire from the altar of incense and run between the living and the dead. And as he ran, we can visualize the incense trailing behind him, almost like a barrier of smoke between the dead and those who were still alive.

So with that in mind, let's try and see how "the Old is in the New revealed". To do so we need to move all the way to Revelation 5:8 where we read of those before the throne "holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God's people". Then build on this as we read in Revelation 8:3 that an angel with a golden censer "was given much incense to offer with the prayers of the saints..." and that "the smoke of the incense, which came with the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God" (8:4).

So it would seem that when we worship something happens before God: our prayers are like perfume (in Hebrew, the "altar of incense" is called the "altar of perfumes"). But something also happens on earth: we stand between the living and the dead and hold back the "plagues" in society: all that leads to corruption, moral pollution and death.

So Augustine's statement that "the New is in the Old concealed, and the Old is in the New revealed" now becomes dramatically illustrated by the actions of Aaron in Numbers (in the "Old") and that of the saints in Revelation before the throne of God (in the "New").

So what's the point? Simply that if we fail to embrace our calling to be a "royal priesthood" not only do we fail in bringing "perfume" into the heavenly court, but we also allow the "plagues" of the 21st century to ravage those for whom the Son of God poured out the perfume of his incarnate life by his hard dying on the cross. In the third century a church leader by the name of Marcion tried to get rid of the Old Testament. I for one am so glad that he did not succeed!