

Approach with Caution

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[0 : 0 0] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 29th of June 2003. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled Approach with Caution and is based on Leviticus 1.1-17.

God, we pray that you'll speak to us this evening through these words in Leviticus. We pray that we may not only understand them but understand how we may approach you with caution so that not only will our minds be informed by your word but our lives reformed by it.

We pray this for Jesus' sake. Amen. Well, before I lived in Doncaster, I lived in England for a bit over three years through the end of 92 through to early part of 1996.

And during those three and a bit years in England, hardly ever did I hear any news of Australia other than sport, let me tell you. Because when we played cricket or cricket or cricket, then that was in the sports pages.

[1 : 2 4] You could even find the AFL in the small print in the Times each Monday morning. But that was about it. With one exception, pretty much. One day, Australia made the front page of the newspapers in England.

The Times, the Telegraph, and so on. Why on that day? What was so significant on that day that somehow Australia got to the front page?

It wasn't sport. Paul Keating was the Prime Minister then and he did a disgraceful thing. So disgraceful was it that it got to the front page of the English newspapers.

Now, it wasn't child abuse. Worse than that. It wasn't declaring war on Tasmania. It wasn't an election victory. It wasn't turning Australia into an economic banana republic.

What had he done then? What on earth could he have done that got him onto the front page of the English press? He touched the Queen.

[2 : 3 0] He touched the Queen. The Queen of England. I mean, the Queen of Australia. The Queen of the British Empire or Commonwealth or whatever it still is, if it's anything at all. He touched her.

On the back. As he tried to introduce her to various people. Scandalous! That's an outrageous thing to do, to touch the Queen. Disrespectful?

Improper? That's the sort of language that was used to describe the Australian Prime Minister on the front page of the British press. Such an outrageous activity, was it?

You see, what had happened was that Paul Keating had broken royal protocol. You don't touch the Queen. She may offer you her gloved hand for a handshake, if you're very lucky, but you don't touch the Queen.

And Paul Keating had put his hand on her back as he was introducing her to people. He'd gone too far. He'd encroached on taboo territory and created this great scandal that reached the front page of the British press.

[3 : 36] Now, I guess in earlier years, Paul Keating can be thankful that he didn't live a couple of hundred years ago. He probably would have ended up in the Tower of London and maybe without his head. Somehow he escaped with his life, though he's no longer a Prime Minister.

You see, you don't just saunter up casually to the Queen, pat her on the back, say, Liz, how are you going? Had a nice day? All that sort of thing. You see, observing protocols is an important part of life.

You don't tend to call your headmaster at school by his first name, I suspect. G'day, Charlie, how are you? As you walk past the headmaster's office? Not sure that that'd be a wise thing to do. And most people wouldn't walk into their boss's office and put their feet up on his desk and so on.

Let me warn Paul Dudley and others on the staff here about that sort of protocol. And there is a sense in which you should have the proper dress, the proper address, the proper gestures when you deal with important people.

The right protocols of approach to them. None more so than with God. If it's important that we get the right protocol, the right address, wear the right clothes, have the right gestures when we deal with significant and important people in our life and in our society, it's even more important that we do so with God.

[4 : 59] How does a mere mortal approach the living and the holy God? In some ways, that's the age-long quest of human beings. It's what's driven people to create various religions and rituals and liturgies.

This question lies in a sense in the human heart. How can a mere mortal approach the living, the holy, the universal God, the maker of all things?

Is that gap too big to be bridged between such a sovereign, holy God and mere human beings? Or can I just waltz into heaven and claim my place, pick out the best room, say, God, thanks for having me here.

Can I have a cup of tea? Strong, white, no sugar. Thanks very much. How do we approach God? What are the right protocols for approaching God?

Well, I've come tonight to what many regard as the most boring book in the Bible, Leviticus. Most people can't even spell it and most people have never read it and I doubt that any of you have heard very many sermons on it.

[6 : 11] It looks pretty dull. I mean, it doesn't even start in an exciting way. It starts by sacrifices and killing an animal from the herd and then killing an animal from the flock and killing a bird and then you think, oh, I might have got over this.

In chapter 2, there's more sacrifices. In chapter 3, more sacrifices. In chapter 4, more sacrifices. Chapter 5, the same and 6, the same and 7, the same. Most people don't even get that far.

They skip over to the New Testament or the exciting bits of the old when maybe people are being killed rather than animals. You see, there's a dull book. It looks to be dull, dreary, and for most people on their shelf, it's probably fairly dusty.

Not only are there sacrifices, there are all sorts of bizarre laws, odd rituals, strange clothes that have to be worn or not worn in different times. said, well, you get a bit bored with all the detail that seems so old-fashioned and remote and foreign.

And yet, this book was one of the most central books in the Old Testament. One of the most important books for the life of Jewish people, the Israelite people of the Old Testament and even for Jewish people beyond those days.

[7 : 22] It's one of the most frequently quoted books in the New Testament even. And it's highly significant for understanding Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world.

You see, this book tells us how to approach God. It is God's set of protocols for approaching God. That is, it's God who sets the rules.

It's God who speaks. Look at the beginning of the book. The Lord summoned Moses and spoke to him. That is, it's God speaking to Moses who realises what God says to the rest of the Israelites and through the whole of the book, more or less, with a couple of exceptions probably, it is God speaking.

It is God setting the rules. It is God setting the parameters by which people can approach him. This is not Moses' flight of fancy to work out some way of trying to get into God's throne room.

It is God saying how people can approach him. It is God's protocols. And therefore, we ought to approach this with deadly seriousness. It's the same God we worship.

[8 : 25] How does he expect people to approach him? And that's why the topic tonight is titled Approach with Caution. Because in many ways that summarises what these rules are saying.

Approach God with caution. Up to this point in the Bible, God has brought out for himself amongst all the nations of the world one people descended from Abraham to whom promises were made and this people descendants from Abraham God had rescued from slavery in Egypt brought them towards the promised land promised way back to Abraham but they haven't yet got there.

They've left Egypt they're in the no man's land in between the Sinai Peninsula gathered around Mount Sinai where God has given various laws already to the people of God and in the book preceding this in Exodus he told them to build a great big tent basically called the Tabernacle the place where God would reside at the heart of the Tabernacle and now in this book Leviticus still at the same place God still speaking his rules God says in effect what will go on in that tent how people will approach the God who condescends to dwell in the tents that the people of Israel have built and God is not to be taken lightly you can't just waltz into his presence willy nilly however you feel when Moses approached God at the burning bush in the previous book Exodus he was told to take off his shoes at least when Pharaoh took God too lightly in Egypt the king of Egypt that is he suffered the consequences and severe were they and the disobedient

Israelites in the wilderness when they took granted some of the things about God they suffered the same consequences and indeed beyond Leviticus the same thing in the wilderness happens later on when a temple is built hundreds of years later and a prophet comes into the temple and sees a vision of God he falls down prostrate acknowledging his sinfulness before a holy God later on in the Old Testament when somebody approaches without caution the holy box that was centered later in the temple and earlier in the tabernacle the ark it was called he was struck down dead God is a consuming fire utterly holy how on earth do we approach such a holy God if not with caution the book of Leviticus is in a sense like the warning sign a few years ago I was on the Israel-Lebanon border and there just across a few meters were do not proceed beyond this point in effect land mines in this area the same thing

I saw a couple of years ago in Cambodia on holidays there a warning sign for my health ignore that warning sign and you could well lose a leg or a life as you walk across an unexploded land mine Leviticus is like that warning don't come too close to God unless you're approaching him the way he tells you to Leviticus is like that orange knitting that gets up around road works that warns us off the potholes in the road or the bits of footpath that have been dug up it's that sort of warning sign to keep us away from a dangerous place Leviticus is like flashing signs or neon signs saying slow down road works ahead or something like that to keep us away to keep us at a distance so that we may approach with caution and care a place that otherwise is dangerous if not lethal approaching God is dangerous territory and Leviticus is telling us to approach

[12:17] God with extreme caution and yet God is not completely unapproachable it's not that God is absolutely remote a ball of consuming fire alone and we have to just keep an absolutely remote distance from God not at all these rules and parameters here actually tell us that we can approach God but with caution and on God's terms not on our terms we're to approach God meticulously cautiously carefully exactly as he determines and so if you read through Leviticus and you see page after page of detail about sacrifice about cutting up an animal or putting your hand on it or slitting its throat or tearing its wings or washing its entrails or putting it on the altar or where the blood goes whether it's the north the south the east or the west side of the altar all that detail may seem remote and foreign and absolutely bizarre to us but approaching

God for the ancient Israelites was to be done exactly as God determined on his terms with caution approaching the living God now from the opening paragraph of this book Leviticus tells us the basic way we approach God blood you need blood to approach God sacrifice that is to approach God and not any old sacrifice either notice what chapter 1 verse 3 says if the offering is a burnt offering from the herd you shall offer a male without blemish not the scungiest stupidest looking animal in your herd that you think oh I don't really need that let's get rid of that one a male the most costly of the type and without blemish not one that's lame or blind or something deformed about it the best that you have the costliest sacrifice that you could make only the best will do something that later on in Old

Testament history the people of God completely forgot and ignored and the prophet Malachi at the end of the Old Testament rebuked severely the people of God as some of you may have heard recently in our morning services it costs a high price to approach God you don't have lots of cows and picking the best one to sacrifice would be an expensive measure the male bull would be the prize possession a source of creating impregnating female cattle to produce little cattle cows whatever they called it would be a source of income and clearly too a source of food meat probably wouldn't be on the diet as regularly as it is for us today and yet expensive though it is which tells us that there is a cost involved approaching God it's not a God for the rich alone and that seems to be why in the next paragraph chapter 1 verse 10 you may offer an offering from the flock because you may not have been able to own cattle and then again the same for the birds in chapter 1 verse 14 it may be that you were so poor you didn't own sheep or cattle and so being able to catch a bird and to offer a bird and certainly later on in Leviticus in other sacrificial laws in chapter 5 it's very clear that your economic situation wouldn't prevent you from offering a sacrifice because at some point if you were really poor you could offer a sacrifice of flour probably with oil and water as well poverty is no barrier to approaching God but nonetheless it is a costly exercise and let me suggest too that when you gathered as

God's people or came to the tabernacle on a Sunday or Friday probably it would be or whatever day you probably wouldn't wear your Sunday best or your Friday best or your suit and tie because you the offerer it seems had to kill the animal you see you can't just handball a calf to the priest and say can you do the dirty work I'll go and sit outside where it smells a bit nicer thank you very much and watch from a distance most probably you the offerer had to kill it certainly verse 4 tells us that you lay a hand on it hand singular it seems so verse 4 says you shall lay your hand on the head of the burnt offering and it shall be acceptable in your behalf as atonement for you the bull shall be slaughtered before the Lord and I think that means the offerer slaughters the bull but some might think the priest and it's a bit open for debate and maybe it varied from sacrifice to sacrifice but then the priests have their role in the second half of verse 5 Aaron was the chief priest his sons were priests and they shall offer the blood so you having killed the animal they would drain the blood out from it collected in a great big basin or bowl and they dash the blood against all the sides of the altar that is at the entrance of the tent of meeting that was described back in the book of

Exodus and then the priests would cut it up verse 6 says into its parts and the priests the sons of Aaron that is shall put fire on the altar they'd arrange wood on the altar and they shall arrange the parts of the animal that's been killed and cut up with the head and the suet on the wood that is on the fire on the altar but the entrails the inner bits that's where the stomach churns and its legs presumably because of excrement would be washed first before being put on the altar for a total sacrifice of this animal it's a messy business not for the squeamish not sure that I would want to have trained to be a priest in Old Testament times it's a bit easier standing up here in sort of clean environment and clean clothes with clean hands rather than getting my hands dirty chopping up animals and having a great big barbecue now you may think how cruel you may think what a waste of animal life you may be a vegetarian and think this is an absolute abomination how awful it is

[18 : 41] I remember a couple of years ago acting out a sacrifice with a stuffed animal in my Old Testament class at Ridley College and half the ladies especially in the class going oh when I got the knife out and slit the throat of a stuffed animal imagine what they would say if it was a real animal and the blood really squirted and was more than tomato sauce what this is saying to us is that sin matters the basic thing behind this sacrifice is that we are sinners and sin matters because God is holy and sinless and sin is the big barrier between people and God sin matters and this burnt offering described in chapter 1 is the basic offering that people would offer by way of a sacrifice to God probably not each person every day they wouldn't have enough animals for that maybe once a year when they made a special journey to the temple later on or the tabernacle in early days or maybe just for special occasions but it's the basic offering that is offered that acknowledges that I the offerer am a sinner and that God himself is holy now if sin doesn't matter then all this is nonsense if sin doesn't matter then we can wander up into

God's throne room and pat him on the back and sit down and ask for a cup of tea no sugar please but sin is serious sin does matter it is a barrier between us and God and therefore we must approach God on his terms because he is holy and we're not now if you read on in Leviticus and it looks very repetitive in fact it's not quite as repetitive as we think chapter 1 gives us three types of burnt offering sacrifice the herd the animal from the flock or the bird and probably that depended on what you had and what you could afford as well chapter 2 describes an offering that doesn't actually have blood but would usually if not always be associated with offering a burnt offering then you'd offer what's called in chapter 2 a grain offering here it's not so much to deal with sin so much as an act of dedication some of the offering would be kept by the priests for them to eat in some ways it's a response to having offered the burnt offering already and so in a sense our sin being dealt with now a grain offering is offered after the burnt offering maybe as an act of dedication now in a sense our sins are atoned for and then chapter 3 you'll see are offerings of well-being some translations call them offerings of peace or offerings of fellowship and again fundamental to those sacrifices is not so much the atonement for sin but actually having a celebration meal with your fellow

Israelites in the presence of God and with the priests as well so in this case the animals that are sacrificed are not totally burned up on the altar that happens for the burnt offerings in chapter 1 there's nothing for you to eat nothing for the priests to eat it all goes all consumed but in chapter 3 the animals that are sacrificed are some part of it consumed that in a sense symbolizes what God himself has in this fellowship meal but large parts of it are kept for the priest and parts of it for the people who offer and one of the notes of those sacrifices is the great joy that people will have so there's a sense of sequence you come as a sinner before a holy God and this animal is totally consumed dealing with your sin being atoned for and then a grain offering part of which is kept for the priest to sustain them an act of dedication having had your sins atoned for and then thirdly now that your sins atoned for you've made an act of dedication now there's a sense of a fellowship rejoicing meal and part of the animal indeed much of the animal that was sacrificed you would eat chapters 4 and 5 deal with more sacrifices for specific situations sin offerings chapter 4 and chapter 5 guilt offerings or offerings with restitution as the heading in our bible suggests the difference here is a bit debated but largely the sin offerings are sins directly against God and the guilt offerings or sins with sin offerings with restitution where you've sinned against a fellow

Israelite and rather than just your sin atoned for you need to make restitution for what you've done so if you've stolen something not only do you need to offer a sacrifice for atonement of that sin but you need to pay back recompense for what you've stolen or some act of recompense for whatever the sin is against your fellow Israelite these seem to be for specific sins including unintentional sins as well as perhaps intentional sins as well so the burnt offering in chapter one is a more general sacrifice these seem to be for specific times when you've sinned against God and against your fellow Israelite or fellow person of God now in all of these sacrifices there is a priest at the tent of meeting or the tabernacle you the offerer have some actions to do the priest has responsibilities as well at that place the priest acts in one sense there's a mediator between you and God but the priest himself is imperfect the priest himself is a sinner and so chapters six and seven tell us about sacrifices that the priest makes for themselves and their instructions for these various sacrifices chapters one to five are in one sense for the general people chapters six and seven similar sacrifices for the priests and then in chapters eight and nine what the priest should wear and how they are ordained to become priests to serve and to help make the sacrifices for the people at large and as for the priest so for the people approaching the presence of

God required caution and absolute obedience to the laws that he gives here well what happens if those rules are flaunted what happens if somebody thinks well wouldn't it be nice if I could do this as an act to God and approach God with this that or the other something a bit different you know a bit of creativity here we'll read the beginning of chapter 10 Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu each took his censer put fire in it and laid incense on it and they offered unholy fire before the Lord such as he had not commanded them and fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them and they died before the Lord God is a consuming fire too hot to handle in many respects approach on his terms or not at all see here's what happens when a sinner approaches the living God on the sinner's terms they think well let us offer God a sacrifice of incense for example nice smell you know it's pretty trendy these days sure God will like it it's sort of an added extra if you like but they don't live for long they're consumed at the altar by the fire from God's holiness so they make up their own religious ritual they say in a fact well here's another way we can approach God it looks creative it looks religious we can dress up in our finery but God doesn't like it because he doesn't command it God demands an approach with caution on his terms not ours and no matter how religious we might feel how sincere or devoted or pious we might be approaching

[26 : 49] God on our terms not his is ultimately fatal that's worth asking a question here why sacrifice why doesn't God say I want you to come to me with a poem or I want you to come to me with a bunch of flowers or I want you to come to me with a cherry ripe why a sacrifice one because it's costly it's one of the most costly things that an Israelite could offer their major investment their major capital source of food and income it's costly but secondly a sacrifice because sin demands some form of appropriate payment and the payment for sin from the very beginning of the Bible right through to the end it doesn't change in the New Testament for

Christians the payment for sin is death God said to Adam and Eve in the garden if you do this that I don't command you to do you will surely die and they're not walking around the garden today they're dead and every sinner who's ever lived is either dead or dying death is the payment for sin that's God's economy God can set the rules he's God we're not and so for a sinner to approach a holy God something needs to be done to deal with their sin which deserves death see if God was just to turn a blind eye to it and say look I'm a very forgiving God and you're a sinner I know but let's let's forget about it let's just put it to one side come come anyway God would be horribly morally compromised his moral standard would have collapsed because sin is not treated seriously and what we do doesn't matter but sin does matter the penalty for sin is death and so God in his Old

Testament economy says bring a sacrifice an animal and kill it shed its blood in in doing so put your hand on its head this animal is identified with you but notice what the end of verse three and what the beginning of verse four says you shall bring this animal to the entrance of the tent of meeting for acceptance in your behalf before the Lord you shall lay your hand on the head of the burnt offering and it shall be acceptable in your behalf as atonement for you when the great movie stars are filming their movies they don't do all the nasty bits and pieces they get a stunt man to do it who's paid a pittance you have to endure all the cold or the hot or whatever the terrible conditions are we all think it's the the movie star but it's not it's a stunt man a substitute if you like somebody who's acting on behalf of the

Tom Cruises or Nicole Kidman's or whoever this animal is the substitute for us we should die that's what our sin deserves but God says approach me with caution and kill an animal instead of you and the blood of that animal will be atonement for your sin the other reason why sacrifice is required is because not only is it costly not only is it to deal with a penalty of sin but thirdly because God is angry see God's not like the judge who sits in the law court and hears one case after another and says you've been a bad guy I sent it to you to so many years and he's quite indifferent and he goes home and he's forgotten about it you see sin is a personal offense against God and that's the dimension that sometimes we forget our sin is highly offensive to

God disrespectful scandalous outrageous in his sight and so not only should the penalty for sin be paid death but the anger of God needs to be appeased and we see that expressed here with the little expression an odor pleasing odor to the Lord at the end of verse 9 and a couple of later times in chapter 1 as well when the sacrificed animal is being burnt on the altar we're told that it is a pleasing odor to the Lord not because he likes barbecues but it's telling us that his anger has been changed the offer by transferring in a sense their sin to that animal is now under the divine favor of God and not his anger and wrath in one sense it is like giving someone a bunch of flowers to appease their anger because you've forgotten Mother's Day or something like that like I did sort of well isn't this good news isn't this good news that a holy God invites mere mortals like us to approach him so where are all your animals where's the bleating of sheep and the mooing of cows tonight where are the birds flying around doing their droppings on us before they're sacrificed it's good news this it's good news because you and I can approach a holy God with blood it's a good news because God makes a way for sinful people to draw near to him so all we need is a bull or sheep or perhaps a bird but let me tell you the news is even better than this because God himself provides the sacrificial lamb you see we still have to approach God by blood just because we live in the New Testament times and we don't come to church with our animals to sacrifice them doesn't mean that we can't we no longer have to approach God without caution with caution no it's not as though no longer do we approach God without blood we still have to approach God with blood we still have to approach God with caution but the better news than this is that

[33 : 40] God himself provides the animal for us the sacrificial animal a lamb without defect without spot or blemish a lamb that is perfect a lamb that is a pleasing aroma to God's eyes and ears and nose I guess a lamb that takes away the sins not only of one offer but the sins of the whole world in fact the lamb whose blood continually cleanses us not only on the outside but the inside from our sin and our sinful heart God provides one animal for all people for all time for all sins that's good news that's better news than Leviticus that we still approach God with caution we still approach God with blood but God himself provides the sacrificial lamb so that when we approach

God with caution and when we approach God with blood we can approach God with confidence and so we're told later on in the Bible in the letter to the Hebrews since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith I often hear Christians say they want to draw close to God I often hear Christians say that they want to feel the closeness the intimacy with God we often sing it in some of our modern songs especially hold me close let your love surround me never let me go so where do Christians turn then to be close to God too often today it's to music bit of atmosphere dim lighting bit of smoke silence perhaps some sort of peaceful euphoria not what the Bible teaches us about being close to God we're close to

God only by drawing near by means of the blood of Jesus because he's the sacrificial animal whom God provides for us whose death once for all people for all time for all sins is our burnt offering by which our sins are atoned so if you want to be close to God then come into his presence trusting that Jesus death has dealt with your sin trusting that Jesus death has taken upon himself the anger of God so that we receive his favor and pleasure come believing that by Jesus death we're adopted into God's family embraced as his children all because of Jesus death come to God offering ourselves as living sacrifices all of ourselves our lives our souls our bodies as living sacrifices in response to the mercy of God in Jesus death for us come to God by offering a sacrifice of praise the fruit of lips that confess Jesus name if you want to feel close to God then you have to approach with caution and that means approaching by blood and that means

Jesus blood there's no other way to get close to God no other sincere pious religious religious ritual or liturgy or atmosphere will ever get you close into the presence of God the only way is with a heart that trusts in the death of Jesus the blood of Jesus for you and when you trust in that death and trust in that blood then you enter God's presence not only with caution but with confidence indeed boldness to approach the throne of God that's God's protocol for approaching him dream up whatever protocol you like dismiss this if you will but you're on dangerous territory because the warning lights are there you approach God on your terms and the consuming fire will destroy and devour you but approach God on his terms with the blood that he provides through his son's death on the cross and you come right into the throne room of God into his very presence intimate adopted into the family of God himself sins atoned for the wrath of God averted by means of the death of Jesus alone there's no other way

Amen man he man man I yeah man man man man