

*“Let my prayer be set forth in your sight as incense,
the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice.”
Psalm 141.2*

Dear Friends,

A few months ago I mentioned some articles that I had unearthed from my filing cabinet which I had neatly clipped and saved; apparently at some moment in the past I thought they were worth keeping. Some are still quite relevant – and others not so much. But I would like to share some thoughts about one of them which I acquired from the first parish I served as a deacon and then a priest, St. Joseph’s in Buena Park, California. It is about the use of incense: what it means, why we use it, and when. Here is what they wrote:

“The use of incense is no longer an exclusive feature of “high church” Episcopal parishes and is now common in many setting throughout the wider Christian community. It is an easily accessible symbol of the prayers of the people of God rising before the heavenly throne and also helps to complete the involvement of all the senses in worship.

Incense was a regular feature of Jewish worship (mentioned often in the book of Exodus). In the ancient Jewish temple an incense offering was burned by the priest every morning and every evening before the holy of holies. Its fragrance was considered an offering to the Lord and the sight of smoke rising spoke as a visual symbol of prayer. The smoke of incense in both the Old and New Testaments is seen as the manifestation of God’s glory (I Kings 8.10-11, Isaiah 6.6-8, Revelation 15.8). Incense is described in a vision in the Revelation to John (8.3-5) and Zechariah’s (John the Baptist’s father) vision comes at the offering of incense (Luke 1.8-23).

However, during the persecution by the Roman government, burning incense before the image of the Emperor as a sign of his divinity and as a test of loyalty made the use of incense unacceptable to Christians. After the peace of Constantine, in 312 A.D., the use of incense resumed, at first being used to perfume the worship space, and then to honor the presence of Christ in the Gospel and in the Sacramental Bread and Wine. Since the 4th century it has been used in processions and at funerals. The prophecy of 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.(1.11).”

Here at Christ Church we utilize incense on special occasions and holy days. Now when you observe the gospel book being censed before its reading and the bread and wine likewise censed on the altar, you will know that these are traditions that reach back into the very first days of Christendom.

I read somewhere else that incense most probably had its origins in Noah’s Ark. The reasoning went that with all those animals and people crowded together in those confined quarters for such a long time, they most certainly needed the fragrant aroma. They also inferred that as with Noah’s Ark, sometimes we in the church also need a little distracting fragrance from time to time. I’m not so sure of the theological implications of this particular take, but nevertheless, I do enjoy the added dimension of incense in church. I hope you do, too.

Peace,

Mother Lisa+