

Join me in a prayer please. May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight this day and always amen.

So part one of aspects of the Exodus story. Today's theme is God's deliverance. A few years ago when I was still a tutor at the Bristol Baptist College, I represented the college at the ordination and the induction of one of our students to the Black Majority Church at Handsworth. We had a very friendly and warm welcome. The white faces of the congregation were very few and far between. At one point in the service, very lively, nothing like... no, I didn't mean that... very lively and in another style than you would find at Tyndale, we sang a song, a song I'd never sung before, very simple, I can't remember the words, but it was something along the lines of: 'Jesus found me took away my chains and set me free'. A conventional spiritual kind of language. And we repeated it many times. I normally don't like that sort of thing but it worked in that context, and there really was a level of energy being created as the congregation sing this, and then it suddenly hit me. I realised that I wasn't singing at the same level as most of this congregation. They were operating at a level that I could only imagine but couldn't really experience. Most of that congregation were UK born, and spoke with Brummie accents. The older people had come across from the West Indies. They were the Windrush generation and those immediately afterwards. But all of them, young and old alike, had entered into an experience that they could share. They entered into the experience of their ancestors. They entered into a racial memory of being slaves on the plantations in the Caribbean. Jesus had set them free, not just metaphorically in the way that we use those words, not just theologically, but socially, economically, politically, existentially, sharing a racial memory experience with their ancestors, with their people. Those words resonated in a way that didn't quite work for me. There is a term anamnesis that's sometimes used of that sort of remembering. A calling to mind of past events, with significance in and for the present, bringing the past into the present and the thing works together.

When practising Jews today celebrate the Passover, they are doing a very similar thing, not just recounting what happened to their ancestors when God delivered them from the oppression of slavery in Egypt. They're identifying with that experience. They are there, with their ancestors, present, if you like, in the loins of their ancestors. Brian has just read for us the instructions for keeping the Passover, from Exodus chapter twelve, and it was all very thought out, very well organized. A ritual clearly refined down through the centuries. A ritual that celebrates God's deliverance for those people. The Hebrew people were lost and hopeless in their cruel servitude, but God sees their suffering, and He hears their cries, and sends Moses to Pharaoh. Let my people go! And Pharaoh, like all dictators then and now, refuses to comply.

And so if you read in the earlier chapters of Exodus, we have the nine plagues which come upon the land, all hoping to make Pharaoh change his mind, but unfortunately without success. And so God plays his terrible trump card. He will pass through the land of Egypt, and will kill all

the first-born, both human beings and animals, we read. The Hebrew slaves, however, will escape that fate, will be passed over, if they mark their door posts with the blood of a freshly slaughtered lamb. This terrible visitation finally breaks Pharaoh's resistance. If you went on in that chapter, and read verse thirty, you would find there 'and there was a loud cry in Egypt for there was not a house without someone dead. The Israelites, the Hebrew slaves, are begged to leave the land, even taking plunder from the devastated Egyptians. Now as you well know the story, there's still a tortuous and uncertain path before them, but God's people have been set free. In time they will become a nation, in a land of their own, but for now this is their great moment, their triumph, for God has delivered them from the authority and the malice of Pharaoh. He had promised to execute judgment on all the gods of Egypt, and those worthless false gods had been shown powerless to protect the Egyptian people. God was the deliverer. He's set the slaves free, and made them his own.

So it is easy to see why the Passover narrative has had such great meaning for Jews down through the centuries. For them, this is God's great saving act, showing He's worthy of his people's trust and allegiance, for he had given them victory, an unlikely victory, over their oppressors. And we might note in passing that some commentators have wanted to see the Passover as almost an old testament Easter, such is its place and significance for the Jewish faith.

But - there has to be a but - surely this story raises issues for us, and Brian hinted at that. Can we really feel entirely comfortable with this particular picture of God? Yes, God shows his power, he delivers, he saves his people, but what of those Egyptians? Did all who died deserve such a fate? The children! The ordinary people, who obviously had no influence over Pharaoh, or his decisions. Had God no compassion for them? Is this really the God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ, who prayed to his Father as he was being crucified, for those who were doing it to him, that they might be forgiven, for they know not what they do.

Now there's no time today to engage in considering these things properly. And if we do, we shouldn't let ourselves be satisfied with slick answers. Let it suffice to say that this isn't the only way, of course, that God is portrayed in the old testament. We should remind ourselves that there are also places where God's care of all people shines through. A couple of quick examples. In Isaiah, and many places but, in Isaiah the nation of Israel is reminded that God has called them not to lord it over the other nations, but to lead those nations to God. To bring them to God. 'I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind.' Isaiah 42, verses 6 and 7. And let's not forget how furious Jonah the runaway prophet gets, because God is merciful and doesn't carry out His threat to destroy Nineveh and all its people. But our bibles tell us of another deliverance from God. Not of a single people, but for all human kind.

The Passover story may raise a few ethical questions for us, but nevertheless it echoes at the very heart of our Christian faith. And it's clear that our understanding of Jesus' death is very much shaped by it. Jesus is arrested and killed at the time of Passover, even as the Passover lambs are being slaughtered. And he's the one of whom John the Baptist said: 'behold the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world'. Jesus replaces all those slaughtered lambs to bring about God's greater deliverance. Liberation from the slavery of sin and the overcoming of our estrangement from God, giving us a new identity, by making us his people. Jesus inaugurates what we call the Lord's supper. At a Passover meal. And gives us not roast lamb but bread and wine, to remind us, to help us to recall how his body was broken and his blood was shed to set us free. At the Passover God defeated his enemies by coming as an angel of death, but at the cross, God in Christ comes as the willing victim, accepting death for himself, to bring life to others.

A final thought as we prepare to come around the table this morning. I mentioned earlier how Jews regard themselves as present with their ancestors, back in the time of Moses, each time they celebrate the Passover. It seems to me there must be something of that around when we come to the Lord's table. There a sense in which we are there in the upper room at that Passover meal, with the disciples, with Jesus, in our midst. We are met now in the presence of our risen Lord, and therefore, it seems to me, also in the company of all the redeemed people of God, past, present and to come, made one in Him. And therefore this, what we do here, is for us really, truly, holy ground.

And that's why it's so important that our relationships with one another be kept honest and wholesome and loving though you may not want to resolve the issues in quite the formal way we read in Matthew 18. But of course some churches have done exactly that, they've had a court, where they sorted out the business, but I suggest we do that more personally. At communion, today, here, it is our deliverance, that is set before us. Whether we quite realised it before or not, we celebrate our liberation in Christ.

Ken Stewart

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