

Third Sunday Service, St Nicolas' Church, Parish of Abingdon-on-Thames.
15th March 2020. 3rd Sunday of Lent.

Series theme: Why read Jesus' Scriptures? Treasures of the Old Testament.

Today's Talk and Discussion theme: Redemption: The Passover and the Last Supper.

Roderick Smith

Freedom! Cry Freedom! People over the ages have sought, or fought for, freedom in a whole range of contexts. From the perhaps relatively trivial cases of young people seeking a life independent of parental constraints, to older people maybe looking forward to the freedoms of retirement. More importantly, of course, whole peoples have yearned for release from oppressive political regimes, such as those of the Communist states in post-war Europe, or of the Apartheid system in South Africa. But freedom has been most keenly sought by individuals and whole peoples trapped in slavery down the ages. "Let my people go, that they may serve me." says God to Pharaoh through Moses in Exodus 9.1, and he repeats this in several other places in the early chapters of the book of Exodus. This exodus from slavery is the context of our Old Testament reading this morning [Exodus 12.1-14 and 13.3], telling us about the institution of the Passover meal and vigil on the eve of the escape of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt. This exodus story has been an inspiration for enslaved peoples in more recent times: Afro-Caribbean and African-American slaves sang songs of freedom and hope based on Exodus texts. That's something to remember if you're tempted to dismiss the Hebrew Scriptures as no longer relevant.

There are two things I'd like to emphasise in the Exodus and Passover stories. Firstly, that slaves have no real power to remedy their own situation - that's sadly part of what slavery is about. It takes the action of an outside power to bring about freedom. Ultimately this power is God's, although He can and does work through natural processes and divinely-directed human efforts. Secondly, the communal remembrance of the act of liberation is very important. The people of Israel went to Egypt as a large but rather divided family, they emerge from Egypt a free and united people [Greek: λαός, (laos)]. What is more, they become more and more what they are called to be (that is, a people chosen by God to serve him and make him known in the world) precisely through celebrating the divinely-instituted Passover meal together and, in this communal context, retelling the story of their liberation. Jews today still do this (although no longer in the context of temple sacrifice). It's an interesting thought that we perhaps become who we are through our habits, rituals and liturgies, no less, probably more, than through what we believe, or through what someone declares we are.

I chose the Benedictus [Luke 1.68-79] for us to recite between the Old and New Testament readings because it so wonderfully links the Old Testament themes of promise, covenant, prophesy, salvation and redemption with their fulfilment in the Gospel. And of course, that's exactly what the Holy Spirit guided Zechariah to do.

You might have noticed that I have just used the word 'redemption'. You'll find this word in the BCP version of the Benedictus as well as several modern bible translations. We also have redemption, or more importantly a redeemer, as a focus in our hymns

this morning. But the Common Worship Benedictus just says 'sets (his people) free'. Now for many people in the past as well as today 'redemption' and setting free or liberation all mean basically the same thing (except perhaps that redemption may have a religious or spiritual emphasis). But some Christians find the idea of redemption, that is a payment made for our liberation, rather unhelpful. (To whom is the payment made? The devil? Surely not.) But as the quotation from the Eucharistic Prayer which we use in St Nic's, (which is on the front of our service booklets) says, we have been freed from the 'slavery of sin' by God in Christ. And redemption has historically been a way of setting slaves free. So the word redemption emphasises both our state of slavery (to sin, as a power) *and* our release. But there may be other ways of thinking about our liberation through Christ's sacrifice which you may like to consider in our discussion time in a few minutes. But any understanding of our liberation or redemption must recognise that we couldn't set ourselves free - it had to be by God's gracious action done in his love for us, as Bishop Henry reminded us in his sermon last week.

And talking about Christ's sacrifice, brings us to the final and, for Christians, most important part of our theme for today: the last supper. Our reading from the gospel according to Luke [Luke 22.7-8 and 14-20] emphasises the Passover setting for this: "on the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed". When we reach the Easter season in four weeks time we'll use the acclamation [from 1 Cor 5.7] "Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed for us" during our Holy Communion service. Again this points to the fulfilment of the Passover in the Kingdom of God through what Jesus did for us and gave us. Christ our Passover Lamb, the Lamb of God, is depicted along with a loaf and a cup on the front of your service booklet for today.

So we can see that there are several parallels between the Passover and Eucharist:

- Both were instituted by God with the command to continue to 'do this' in remembrance of an act of His redeeming or liberating us;
- Both involve a retelling of the events which led to that liberation and institution;
- Both are meals heavy in contextual meaning and bringing the people of God together in celebration, and thereby forming our identity;
- Both involve bread and wine and, at least in memory, a sacrifice [of an unblemished lamb in the days of the Jewish temple and of the sinless Jesus, the Lamb of God, on Calvary].

Of course there are also major differences between the Passover and the Eucharist and we shouldn't press the parallels too far. For Christians there is also the 'real presence' of the divine Christ in the Eucharist, however that is understood, and we are fed with the 'bread of heaven' (as our first hymn said) to enable us to live our redeemed lives in the service and love of God and our neighbours.

There are some questions for discussion, and maybe further thought, on the last page of your service booklets [also below]. We'll now spend a few minutes in discussion in small groups, as is our custom in these Third Sunday services, and then I'll invite comments, questions and feedback.

Questions for discussion and further thought.

1. Do you have a sense of liberation or freedom through becoming or being a Christian?

Think about what that freedom means for you. **From what** have you been freed and **for what** are you free?

2. Is the idea of *redemption*, i.e. buying back or paying a price, helpful to you in thinking about God setting his people free?

If not, how else would/could you think about *how* God frees us?

3. Whatever else the Eucharist/Holy Communion/Lord's Supper means to you, do you have any sense of it being a communal celebratory meal of liberation, like the Passover is for Jews? (And if not, why not?)
