

FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST Sunday 6 September 2020

Exodus 12: 1-14; Psalm 149; Romans 13: 1-10; Matthew 18: 10-20

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This morning's reading from Exodus and its surrounding passages tell the story of the Israelite people in Egypt -slaves to the Pharaoh but calling to God for freedom.

We are party to this story. It's as if we are looking on through a glass window as we follow the struggle between Pharaoh and God, mediated through Moses and his brother Aaron as they partner with God in pursuit of freedom for the Israelite people.

We stand alongside Moses and Aaron as God gives the instructions for Passover – a liturgy highly crafted through God's instruction to Moses and Aaron.

This story is set some 300 or so years after Joseph's death. The place of Joseph and his family is long forgotten by the current Pharaohs of Egypt. The Israelites are now slave nation under a new dynasty of Pharaohs ruling over Egypt.

In fact, the growth in numbers of Israelites living in Egypt has become a threat to the Pharaoh, who managed their presence as slave labour for brick making in support of the large new building programs as the Pharaohs built their store houses to accumulate their wealth.

Pharaoh also made efforts to reduce the number of male Israelite children through his instruction to the Hebrew midwives were to kill the baby boys born of Hebrew women and let the girls live. However, according to the biblical narrative, two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, did not obey the Pharaoh's instructions - and Moses was born and lived! He was hidden nursed initially by his mother, then at the Palace.

We are privy to the argy bargy between the Israelites and Egyptians as we read of Moses taking matters into his own hands. As a grown lad, out one day from the palace, Moses saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew. He killed the Egyptian and hid him on the sand. Word passed around and Moses fled from Pharaoh, and from Egypt and settled in the land of Midian, a neighbouring land to Egypt - and in terms of the biblical record all is quiet – simmering below the surface.

The Biblical narrative tells us the Israelites groaned under the weight of slavery, called out to God and God heard their groanings.

Moses was in Midian with his wife and family by this stage. God called him to return to Egypt - and with Aaron, to speak on God's behalf to Pharaoh to seek the release of the Israelites.

This request only emblazoned Pharaoh further and the battle lines were drawn:

God vs Pharaoh

In the first contest, there was the miracle when Aaron in demonstration that God was God threw down his rod and it become a snake. Pharaoh summoned his wise men and

sorcerers.. tit for tat ..Aaron threw down his rod and it became a snake ... but then Aaron's snake ate that of Pharaoh's magicians

Round 2 – God, speaking to Pharaoh through Moses and Aaron, asked Pharaoh to 'let my people go'. Pharaoh refused and God sent the first plague, water turned to blood.

And Pharaoh called his magicians and turned the water to blood.

Again God sent Aaron and Moses in and asked Pharaoh to let the Israelites go to worship God. Pharaoh refused. God replied 'If you don't - I will plague your whole country with frogs'. Again, Pharaoh's magicians were called and they managed frogs!

It was the plague of gnats next! While Pharaoh's magicians had been able to generate the blood red water, and also the frogs, they could not generate gnats.. or the marks of the plagues that followed ... flies, or livestock killed, or boils, or locusts - and then there was the warning of the final plague .. the death of the first born throughout the land....

And at that point of high drama in the God vs Pharaoh rounds and all the actions is paused: .. and we come to the reading set down for today.

Exodus Chapter 12, the instructions for Passover:

'On the fourteenth day of the first month the household (or group of households) is to set aside a lamb or young goat, butcher it, roast it, and eat it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs - with loins girded, sandals on feet staff in hand, and to eat with haste.

The blood of the lamb is to be put on the two doorposts and the lintel of the doorway, as a sign for the household, and the Passover of the Lord.

All with the instruction 'This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.'

In the midst of this strange story of struggle between God and Pharaoh the liturgy through which the Jewish people, and subsequently the followers of Christ 'remember' is instituted in a perpetual ordinance.

The heart of our faith story is held not only in words - written in ink on parchment.. or popping up on our social media platforms but in the enactment / the liturgy of the Passover.

Our foundational faith story .. that God acts to bring us and all people, us and all creation from slavery to freedom, remembered year upon year, is part of our collective memory, our energising memory through which we are able to envisage the saving freeing, restoring work of God in the present and into the future.

The strength of this foundational lived and liturgically repeated memory of God as one who acts in history to bring people from fear to faith, from slavery to freedom joins hand with hope and we and all creation are held, nurtured for life in a bigger, safer, more exciting, creative, joyous place than we can really imagine.

Why is this important – for you, for me, for the church, for our community and our world?

This narrative tells three stories. They are not just stories of a past realm, they are our stories:

1. The First the story of Pharaoh:

The Pharaoh was one who accumulated more than he could use in fear that there would not be enough – he invested in more storage to hold more grain; he used slave labour to build his resources, he locked people into providing his excess in a way that tyrannized and diminished the lives of the slaves who worked for him.

It would be nice to think that the Pharaoh was a gentleman of long ago... but we don't need to look very far in our world to see who uses and accumulates resources in a way that impacts and diminishes the lives of others, who lives with very little, who has secure housing, those who are forced from home and country by regimes of force or acquisition.

We have used / stockpiled the world's resources and today we live with emissions that are growing at threatening levels, across the globe colour has impacted life, domestic violence is becoming louder... and we could go on and on.

I suspect there is a little of Pharaoh in each of us. I suspect God is calling us to let go, to find community with all God's creation and to trust God for tomorrow.

2. The second story speaks of God:

God, who sets us free in Jesus Christ and calls us and all creation to freedom, freedom to choose to leave the places that diminish us as the people God has called us to be, freedom to enjoy and celebrate new possibilities, new relationships, freedom to imagine, to hope.

3. The third group - Israelite people – slaves to Pharaoh

The Israelite people of old embraced the liturgy of God who brought them from slavery to freedom. By writing themselves into this act of God and remembering it each year their identity was formed. God is still present with them in life today to bring them from slavery to freedom.

The Israelite people responded to the possibility of God's gift of freedom, disentangled themselves from the 'hold' of the Pharaoh, put up the mark of blood – to remind themselves that they have chosen to live not as slaves but as people set free by God. There is new hope, new possibility and faith that energises.

This is our story too. Christ has died, Christ is Risen, Christ will come again.

I want now to look briefly at the readings in Matthew Chapter 18

Just by introduction I look to verses at the beginning of Chapter 18 where the disciples come to Jesus with their question: Who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?

Jesus calls a child and replies – ‘Truly I tell you, unless you like children you will never enter the kingdom of God’ I ask myself is this change required from of all the pharaohs of the world and also maybe that little bit of pharaoh we find in each of us? Jesus said – whoever becomes humble like this child is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

I doubt this is the answer the disciples were anticipating!

Two other vignettes:

Matthew 18: 10-14

In these verses Matthew again highlights the importance of the ‘little one’. Jesus leave the ninety sheep in search of the one who has gone astray, with great rejoicing when it is found.

Matthew 18:15-20

In these verses Matthew emphasises the importance of resolving fractured relationships in the church, of offering forgiveness readily rather than assuming arrogance, superiority and correctness over another.

Where this is not possible, we are encouraged to treat that person as one outside the faith – one who is to be loved, to be welcomed and to be introduced to Jesus Christ.

These verses in Matthew 18: 15 -20 conclude with the words ‘For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them’.

I often wonder what this really means. I doubt it means only that the church meeting has opened with the required prayer. I think Matthew is calling for something far deeper than asking God to grace our Pharaoh moments.

Maybe it is as we gather as people who have been brought from slavery to freedom, we live the journey where one end of the rainbow is anchored in the memory of God’s saving miracle and the other held by God in hope. Under the rainbow, as little ones, fragile, vulnerable and trusting Jesus gathers with us – in the sacred place.

‘Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them’.