

MAUNDY THURSDAY: EASTER 2010
Exodus 12:1-14; John 13:1-15

Notes: Exodus 12:1-14

- This feast is called Yahweh's Passover (12:11) and that is a significant point in the story. It is a commemoration of what Yahweh has done for the people – he has set them free. This is the time when they begin to exist as a people living in God-given freedom.
- The feast is on the “first month” not because it headed up the calendar used at the time but because it is the month when their freedom and their redemption became real.
- It was the blood of the lamb sprinkled on the doorposts that marked the people in the house as Israelites.
- This is a feast of a nomadic people so the sacrificing of a precious lamb was of great significance. It was an offering of gratitude.
- The meal was to be eaten in haste, by a people dressed for an immanent departure, a people filled with anxiety.
- It is Yahweh's Passover for it is the night he passes through the land and carries out his final defeat of the gods of the Egyptians.
- The blood was to be a sign to the angel of Yahweh who upon seeing the blood would “pass over” the house knowing that a Hebrew family lived there. It is a word that denotes the protection God offers to his people and the deliverance (salvation) that is on hand for them.

In the story so far we have seen a story that would be replayed many times, over and over in the history of the people and their dealings with God. It began back in chapter two where we read: *The sons of Israel, groaning in their slavery, cried out for help and from the depths of their slavery their cry came up to God.* That is what the Exodus story is all about. The people, understanding that they are in a helpless situation, unable to free themselves from what is enslaving them, turns to God for help. This is the theme that will come up time and time again: The people find themselves living in darkness and slavery. They remember their past and the covenant they have with God. They turn to God and seek his help and God delivers them. Throughout the whole of the Bible and indeed the story of the Church, what God normally does to deliver his people from the tough times in which they find themselves is to raise up someone to lead the people back to his ways. In the case of the Exodus it was Moses.

God could have stepped in and delivered the Hebrews immediately but he chose another path altogether. He wanted to teach them something about his ways, about what it was they were to expect from him and how he would be demanding they live if they wanted to inherit the land of Canaan. God first of all revealed himself to them in the burning bush. He told them who he was. He was the God of their ancestors. He was Yahweh – the name meaning the God who is-who was- and who is to come. He was the God of their ancestors, the same God who called Abraham out of his home, who led Joseph down into Egypt and who would lead his people to a new life in a new land. The name is important. This God is a God of history and so could be trusted. He had a track record of caring for his own and of delivering his people.

But the key part of the opening chapters of Exodus is the story of his battle with the gods of the Egyptians. Once again, God could have simply led them to freedom. He chose to make a point. He wanted the Hebrews to know, and to be able to tell the story later on to subsequent generations, that he was a God who was more powerful than any of the gods of the nations. Ten times he does battle with the Egyptian gods and ten times he comes out victorious. They are great stories and well worth reading. The Egyptian's gods put up quite a fight and their priests do all kinds of wonderful things but in the end it is always Yahweh who wins.

You can imagine how important this message would have been to a people who are about to embark on an enormous adventure – crossing the wilderness into Canaan. How could they be sure that they would be successful? Because Yahweh was leading them. He was the God who was victorious over the other gods and he is the same God who chose and called Abraham. Why would they ever doubt his power to save?

These are important messages and they come back over and over again throughout the story of the Hebrews in Canaan. The question that is raised by kings and prophets, judges and holy men and women is this: *when God has done so much for you, why would you not obey him? When God has so much to offer you, why would you go searching for other sources of strength, hope and life?*

The Passover represents a feast in which the people of God gather to give thanks. It is a feast that acknowledges their needs and their powerlessness to change their situation. They gather each year to celebrate it again because they need to remind themselves of two things: (a) God is a saviour. He sets his people free from whatever it is that binds them and holds them captive – if they cry out to him. (b) Having been saved by God they need to show their thanks by offering something of themselves to him. In this case a precious lamb. The message has not changed over three and a half thousand years. We are still called upon to cry to God and to allow him to bring us salvation from whatever “Egypt” we might have in our lives. And, we still need to offer something of ourselves to him in thanksgiving. To continue to take from God and to continue to fail to offer back to him our lives in thanksgiving, is a fatal mistake.

Notes: John 13:1-15

- This section begins with the key message: *IT was before the festival of the Passover and Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to pass from this world to the Father.*
- This verse begins a long session, which is usually referred to as the last discourse (13:1-17:26).
- In John the death of Jesus was the hour of his passing over to the Father and a consummate act of loving self-giving.
- The relationship between Jesus and Peter are highlighted in this section of the Gospel and it is worth noting the relationship as the story unfolds all the way to the resurrection.
- It is significant for John that neither Peter nor the other disciples understand the meaning of the foot washing by Jesus. They are commanded to wash each other's feet by Jesus. They are to imitate this gift of Jesus.
- As Jesus explains it, the foot washing is a commentary on his approaching death. It ritualises a key aspect of that death. They are to lose themselves in

self-giving even to the point of dying for others. This is what is to be repeated and what is symbolized by the actual washing of feet. They have to be prepared to love others, even if it means dying in the process!

- Blessing comes to them if they know what Jesus has done and then in turn do them themselves to others. The knowing and doing are part and parcel of the one spiritual demand. IT is not enough to “know” about Jesus. They must “do” as he commanded and taught. In modern parlance, they must not just talk the talk, they must also walk the walk!

Within the Jewish tradition, it was customary for the servant to wash the master’s feet. Walking as they did in sandals along dusty roads, it was inevitable that the feet would be covered in dust and dirt. However, a master could not demand that his feet be washed. It was a sign of devotion that a disciple could offer to his master.

This is why the story we have here makes it clear that Jesus humiliates himself by taking on the role of a servant. It would have been seen as a traditional act of love carried out on the eve of his death as an interpretation of his ultimate act of love.

This washing is actually interpreted for us by Peter in his exchange with Jesus. Jesus explains to Peter that at the moment he cannot understand the meaning of what his master is doing to him but “later” he will understand. This “later on” refers to his death and it is a literary key meant to help us understand the meaning of his act.

Verse 8 is challenging because in it Jesus rebukes Peter and tells him that footwashing is essential for salvation, at least the message behind the footwashing is an essential ingredient of the lifestyle necessary to live in the Kingdom of God. Salvation is tied up with a willingness to express the kind of love displayed by Jesus. If we are not washers of the feet of others, those we like as well as those we do not like, then we cannot hope for salvation.

As well as this there is another message contained: Jesus saves. That is of course his name: Yahweh-saves – Joshua/Jesus. In fact, this is the key message of the whole of the Gospel of John, as well as of the other Gospels and the other books of the New Testament. Salvation is ours in Jesus. He alone brings life. He alone saves and the gift of salvation comes to us through his death on the cross.

Throughout all of this, we should not overlook the most obvious message of the foot washing: the cleansing from sin. His death on the cross was necessary for only by such an act of love could sins be forgiven and men and women once more be restored to God. This is important in the overall Easter story. It is about new life and new beginnings but that new life comes from a response to an invitation to confess and to acknowledge our need of forgiveness. It is not simply showered down upon everyone whether or not they repent. Forgiveness is a free and unearned gift, given by God to those who turn to the him with repentance in their hearts. IF we are unable to acknowledge that we are sinners, if we cannot name our sins, if we are not seeking to repent and working on changing our lives, then how would we ever be open to the gift of salvation? Jesus came to set us free from sin but if we believe that we are already free, then how do we find room for him in our lives?

Conclusion:

The feast of the Passover helps us to keep in mind the key message of tonight's celebrations. In both readings this feast is all about God acting in the lives of his people to set them free. For the early Hebrews it was freedom from slavery in Egypt to a new life in the land overflowing with milk and honey in Canaan. For the Apostles and for disciples of Jesus Christ down through the ages, it is about being set free from the slavery of sin and being reborn into a new way of living in the Kingdom of God, a Kingdom overflowing with the gifts of heaven.

In both readings we are reminded that the inheritance that is on offer from us flows out of a willingness to allow God to lead us in his ways. On our own we have no change of breaking free from slavery or the sins that hold us down and destroy the peace and joy for which we yearn. Only God is capable of saving us. We are called upon to hand over our lives to him, to make him the source of life in all that we do, all that we think and all that we plan. If God is there, then he will lead us to the milk and honey that is hidden in all parts of our lives but which is often hidden by our sins.

And, perhaps most important of all, following on from this is the command that we too must wash each other's feet. This is an emphatic command of Jesus. By it he is insisting that we go out and wash the feet of those we meet. We must love them with the same unconditional love with which Jesus first loved us. Our love must be love "unto death" or it is not acceptable to God. This is why tonight's story is such a tough one. Our salvation is going to rest on our willingness to love others, our willingness to reach out and to be to them as a servant to his master. There is a lot of pride swallowing there, a lot of stepping back from our own sense of pride and a readiness to run the risk of being used and even abused. It is all there in that command. The message is clear. Jesus loved us so much that he died for us. Jesus expects us to love each other in the same way, to the same extent. Anything less will put us outside the possibility of salvation. That is one tough ask.

And so we go from tonight into the Easter story, following the humble servant to his victory on the cross, understanding all the while, that where he has gone, we are called to follow.