

Passover

At the beginning of chapter seven of the book of Exodus (7:1-5), we read that the Lord said to Moses, “See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be your prophet. You are to say everything I command you, and your brother Aaron is to tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go out of his country. But I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in Egypt, he will not listen to you. Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and with mighty acts of judgment I will bring out my divisions, my people the Israelites. And the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out of it.”

Over the next five chapters, that command to Moses plays out – Moses and Aaron go to Pharaoh, and say to him, “This is what the Lord says: Let my people go.” When Pharaoh denies that request, a plague is sent on the land of Egypt. The first plague is that the waters of Egypt were turned to blood. But Pharaoh was unshaken: Pharaoh’s heart became hard (7:22).

Moses and Aaron went back to Pharaoh. “Let my people go”. Again, Pharaoh refused, and again, a plague swept the land. This time frogs. And again, Pharaoh hardened his heart (8:15).

And so the cycle of the plagues continued: Gnats, flies, the death of livestock, festering boils on the Egyptians and their animals, hail that fell so heavily it killed those outdoors, locusts that devoured everything left by the hail, and then darkness on the land. Darkness so heavy that it could be felt and that lasted three days (10:21-22).

Nine plagues. Nine plagues that brought pain and ruin to the people and land of Egypt. Nine plagues that caused Pharaoh to harden his heart: Still the demand, “Let my people go” remained unmet.

But there was one more plague to come: A plague on the firstborn – chapter 11 tells us: So Moses said, “This is what the Lord says: ‘About midnight I will go throughout Egypt. Every firstborn son in Egypt will die, from the firstborn son of Pharaoh, who sits on the throne, to the firstborn son of the female slave, who is at her hand mill, and all the firstborn of the cattle as well. There will be loud wailing throughout Egypt – worse than there has ever been or ever will be again. (11:4-6)

Loud wailing throughout Egypt. The death of the firstborn. It would be the plague that broke Pharaoh’s heart and broke Pharaoh’s resolve. Chapter 12 tells us “Pharaoh and all his officials and all the Egyptians got up during the night, and there was loud wailing in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead. During the night Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, “Up! Leave my people, you and the Israelites! Go, worship the Lord as you have requested. [...] The Egyptians urged the people to hurry and leave the country. “For otherwise,” they said, “we will all die!” (12:30-31,33)

Our reading today from Exodus 12 tells of how the people were to prepare for the plague on the firstborn – and indeed how to prepare for the Exodus from Egypt.

Moses called the whole community of Israel together and gave them God's instructions.

Each man was to take a lamb for his family, one for each household. This was not just any lamb, but they had to take a perfect male lamb without blemish. They had to bring this lamb into their home. Small households would be invited in by neighbours. The head of the household would take the perfect lamb and slaughter it.

What do you think hearing that would have been like for the people? They had been slaves for generations. They'd watched Moses go back to Pharaoh time and time again with their demand for God's people to be let go. They'd seen the plagues, too: the consequences of Pharaoh hardening his heart to God.

And now Moses came to them with these strange instructions, this was it, it seemed. Now Moses was telling them to be ready and to pack up everything in their lives to follow the command of God. To sacrifice their perfect lamb. To eat quickly. And be ready to go... even though they didn't know where they were going to.

Of course, in normal circumstances, a perfect lamb would be breeding stock. It was the most valuable lamb in the flock. But God told Moses to tell the people to take that perfect animal and sacrifice it.

After the sacrifice, they were to take the blood of the lamb and put the blood on the tops and sides of the doors.

The lamb was then to be roasted and consumed entirely. Nothing was to be left for the next day. Leftovers were burned. They were to eat all the meat, along with bitter herbs and bread made without yeast. It would be a good meal. For people who were enslaved and exploited, it would likely have been the best meal they could hope for. A feast, perhaps, but it wouldn't be a meal to linger over.

Moses shared God's instruction with the people: "This how you are to eat it: with your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand. Eat it in haste; it is the Lord's Passover." (12:11)

God wanted the people to be ready to leave Egypt. The unleavened bread was a sign that they couldn't even wait for bread to rise. The bitter herbs that accompanied the meal served as a reminder of the bitterness of being enslaved. They were slaves, they knew how bad it was, so you might wonder why they needed a reminder of the bitterness of slavery.

Well, because these instructions weren't just for this one meal on this one night: They were instructions for a meal that would be eaten every year from then on. A reminder, not just of the bitterness of slavery, but also of the Exodus itself, and of hope for the

future. The last verse of the reading told us: “This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord—a lasting ordinance.”

Throughout the Old Testament we read of people selecting, slaughtering, and eating their Passover lambs. Whatever was not eaten was consumed in the fire. Every year, they ate the bitter herbs and they told the story of how living under the yoke of slavery in Egypt was horrible. They ate the unleavened bread because God told them to be ready. They recalled the time that they had to eat quickly, and be ready to leave.

The Passover continued to be observed Jesus’ time. When Jesus was in the upper room with his disciples celebrating what we know as Last Supper, it was the traditional Passover meal. They were still eating unleavened bread, they were drinking wine, and they would have talked about the enslavement in Egypt, and the Exodus – the freedom from slavery.

They would have remembered the plague on the firstborn, where God had said through Moses: “On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn of both people and animals, and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the Lord. The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are, and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt. (12:12-13)

Since the first Passover was eaten by God’s people in Egypt, Jewish people everywhere have celebrated an elaborate Passover meal as a remembrance. Still today when Jewish people gather for Passover they eat symbolic foods and tell the story of the first Passover again, when God asked them to put on their traveling clothes and get ready to go wherever God would lead.

You might remember that a few years ago here at St Ives Uniting, we had Rebekkah from Jews for Jesus share with us all the symbolism contained in the Passover meal – how she sees, as do the many messianic Jews – Jewish believers in Jesus – Jesus revealed in those the Passover traditions.

Today, we will also celebrate a symbolic meal – and we will remember a story of deliverance. Not deliverance from slavery in Egypt, but deliverance from sin and death. In our service of Holy Communion, we share in bread and wine which are symbolic of the body and blood that Jesus gave up for us on the cross as the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world. (1 John 2:2)

While the Jewish believers made regular sacrifices, Jesus was sacrificed once and for all. When he said from the cross “It is finished”, there was no longer any need of those regular sacrifices. We see that the sacrifices described in the Old Testament were

pointers to what was coming. Once Jesus, the lamb of God, took away the sin of the world on the cross, there was no longer any need for those animal sacrifices.

Our sharing in the Lord's supper is not as ancient as the Passover meal, but it has been celebrated since the church began. It's not an annual event, but it's one that Christians take part in often. As Paul said, quoting Jesus, in his first letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 11:25) "do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

Sometimes, people can confuse such remembrances. They can become dry rituals where we just go through the motions.... Or we can fuss over the details... Or we can elevate the importance of the bread and wine over what they symbolise.

When I began my first ministry placement at Cherrybrook, I wasn't authorised to preside at Holy Communion. I didn't mind that – for one Sunday a month, they would arrange a visiting ordained person to conduct a communion service, and I would take the service at Pymble Chapel that Sunday.

The congregation – or at least the church council – was keen that I be authorised to preside, so they sent me off on the sacraments course, and they – and I – duly jumped through the hoops of becoming authorised.

I realised during the course, as we explored Holy Communion, that something was missing from my relationship with the Cherrybrook congregation – and that was because I wasn't sharing in Holy Communion with them. Not that I wasn't presiding, but that I wasn't sharing in that collective experience.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians "Because there is one [bread], we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one [bread]." (1 Cor 10:17).

It doesn't matter that we might use more than one loaf, or if there's a gluten free option, or the option of wine or fruit juice... it is symbolically one bread that we share. And we share it, not only with each other here, but Christians throughout the world and all the way back to Jesus and the disciples at the last supper.

The Passover meal, as it is described in our reading today, is not simply a remembrance of what has happened, but it's a reminder to prepare for the future. Verse 11, "This is how you are to eat it: with your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand. Eat it in haste; it is the Lord's Passover."

Be ready to go. Be ready. Today, God calls us to be ready as well. Be ready to respond to God's call on our lives. Be ready to help those in need. Be ready to stand up for others. Be ready to share our faith in word and in action. Be ready to be witnesses to Jesus wherever we might be.

In giving the people the instructions for the Passover meal, God was calling his people to respond, to find a perfect lamb and sacrifice it, to share with their neighbours, and to be ready to go – to step out in faith, and be freed from slavery.

We don't need to find a lamb to sacrifice... but our call today is to offer ourselves as a living sacrifice – that God might take us and use us. Our call is also to share what we have with each other and those around us. And to freed from slavery to sin, and step out in faith.

Amen