

## ADDRESS FOR SUNDAY 8<sup>TH</sup> MARCH 2020

### 2020 VISION MOSES/PASSOVER/SPIRITUAL BLINDNESS

Last week we left Moses in a state of some anxiety, having been spoken to by God out of the Burning Bush and commanded to go back to Egypt to free his fellow Israelites from slavery. For perfectly understandable reasons he didn't want to go, but God had an answer to all his excuses, so in the end, in obedience, he went, taking his brother Aaron to do the talking! And God told them what to expect when they got there. He said to Moses:

**'Your brother shall tell Pharaoh to let the people of Israel go out of his land. But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, Pharaoh will not listen to you; then I will lay my hand upon Egypt and bring forth my people, the sons of Israel out of the land of Egypt by great acts of judgement. And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I stretch forth my hand upon Egypt and bring out the people of Israel from among them'.**

When I was teaching RS, I much enjoyed dealing with the Ten Plagues, those signs and wonders sent to persuade Pharaoh to let the Israelite slaves go, because the children enjoyed them too! The sequence of events is easy to remember and readily visualised, and many were the lively pie-charts drawn in glorious technicolour, and many were the interesting and often very perceptive discussions about Moses' faith and obedience, the huge responsibilities he had to bear, and the constant frustration in his dealings with Pharaoh, whom the children perceived as a thoroughly selfish man with no thought for the suffering of his people.

Of course, there are other, deeper factors to consider in this vitally important episode in the life of the Israelite nation. Not least, we have to remember that Pharaoh was brought up to regard himself and his offspring as gods – the ultimate power in Egypt, against which nothing and no-one could stand, and certainly not a couple of elderly shepherds and their invisible God! Of course he refuses the request to let the slaves go free to worship in the desert. He knows that once they got beyond the Egyptian border they would be beyond his jurisdiction! But it's worth noting that as the signs and wonders begin to bite, as the sequence of plagues progresses from the mere inconvenience of the first three, the pollution of the Nile, the frogs and the maggots, to the actual loss and physical suffering caused by flies, cattle disease, boils, hail, locusts and, most terrible of all, the blotting out of the sun, there is growing disquiet, even on the part of Pharaoh – for the Egyptian gods are largely the gods of nature, and they are being repeatedly vanquished by the God of Moses. As one commentator puts it: **"Here is no non-moral nature god throwing his weight about, but a deity of incomprehensible might manipulating all the powers of nature to accomplish his purposes".**

Nevertheless, as others have done before him, Pharaoh repeatedly refuses to acknowledge the power and authority of Moses' God. He keeps saying that he will let the Israelites go, and then changing his mind once the immediate threat of each plague is removed. As we are told **"his heart is hardened"** – of which, quite a lot more later. And we should salute Moses' persistent faithfulness and courage in his unenviable role as God's messenger to a dangerously unpredictable man.

And then comes the tenth and final plague, about which God has issued specific warning, and for sheer drama the events of that first Passover can't be beaten. **"On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn of both people and animals, and I will bring judgement on all the gods of Egypt".** Moses gives the Israelites very specific instructions about how they are to prepare for this. The blood of a sacrificial lamb is to be smeared on the doorposts and lintel of their houses with hyssop, the cleansing herb. They are to eat the lamb roasted, that being the quickest way to cook, with unleavened bread and bitter herbs, and be already dressed in their travelling clothes ready for a journey, and they are not on any account to go outside their houses until morning. And by morning they discover that the angel of death has "passed over" the houses marked by the blood and killed the firstborn in every unmarked house, and then they hear that Moses has been summoned by Pharaoh and told to get them all

together and go! We can never know what causes the death of the firstborn, including that of Pharaoh's son, when the whole Egyptian idolatry is attacked and overcome. What matters is that it happens, and that Moses is finally allowed to lead the people to freedom. And Moses gives God the glory. He says to them "**Remember this day that you went up out of Egypt, from the house of slavery, for by a powerful hand the Lord brought you out of this place**". And still today, in obedience to that command, Passover is a significant festival for the Jewish people.

Of course, we can see the obvious parallels between Passover and our festival of Easter – but there are significant differences as well. At that first Easter, Jesus, God's first born son, was *himself* the sacrificial lamb; redemption and subsequent freedom for believers was accomplished by the shedding of *his* blood; and the spiritual freedom he still leads to is very different and infinitely more rewarding than forty years in the desert! Here's a quote from Tim Mackie's book "Exploring my Strange Bible" which sums up the whole message very succinctly.

"The story of the Passover provides images that will be picked up and used again in the rest of the Bible story. **How does Yahweh redeem his people from a world of sin and injustice? He's going to bring justice and set things right. But he's also going to provide a substitute, a lamb. And those who put themselves under the blood of the lamb find themselves rescued and spared from justice**".

And so to our second reading from the 12th chapter of John's Gospel. In previous chapters John has been telling about the "signs and wonders" which Jesus has performed by the power of God. The water into wine, for example; the bread in the desert; the man born blind and the raising of Lazarus. And there have been other signs as well, all pointing towards what John sees as a new creation, new life, a **new Exodus**, and yet very few are paying any attention; they aren't interested; they don't believe. And as John tells us about this, he thinks again about two Old Testament themes.

In Egypt, by the power of God, Moses does a whole string of signs in front of Pharaoh and his courtiers and still they don't believe. Many years later, the prophet Isaiah, faced with the rebellion of the people of Israel against God, takes them to task but knows what he says is falling on deaf ears. They've become like Pharaoh, their hearts are hardened, and John comes to the conclusion that much the same thing is happening to those who see Jesus' signs and fail to respond or to believe. At first it seems to Isaiah that God is actually allowing all this heart-hardening, that he *wants* to bring the people to judgement, although he can finally see that through that judgement there will be salvation, as indeed when by judgement on the firstborn of Pharaoh and the Egyptians, the freedom of the Israelite slaves was procured.

"**Hardening of the heart**" can mean many different things; selfish disinterest; a closed mind which cannot even consider other points of view; a stubborn refusal, for whatever reason, to recognise the truth; persistent spiritual blindness. John mentions those who believe that Jesus is the Messiah but can't admit it, because they're more concerned about other people's opinion than about what God thinks of them. And what about that puzzling suggestion that there are times both in the Exodus story and in events of Jesus' day when God actually does the heart-hardening, that he ordains that certain people will not believe, Surely not? Surely that would be contrary to the divine nature? Well, here's what William Barclay has to say about that. "**We would not say that unbelief is God's purpose, but we would say that God in his controlling wisdom and power can use even our unbelief for his purposes. As, for example, he used the unbelief of the Jews for the conversion of the Gentiles.**"

So, by the same token, we can say that Pharaoh was not an accidental obstacle, but a **God-willed** means to demonstrate the power of Yahweh, and to set his people free. Egypt wasn't totally destroyed because God's purpose was to show his power in **deliverance not in destruction** – an ever-recurring theme not only in Scripture, but in life as we know it. Those who foresaw that Hitler would not ultimately win in his effort to annihilate the Jews understood that. As do those who firmly believe that the Church of God will survive against all the odds as opposed to those who proclaim that the Church has had its day! There's a well-known hymn,

“Onward Christian Soldiers” which is seldom sung these days because it’s not considered to be politically correct – mostly, I suspect, because of its militaristic overtones. But just consider the words of this verse:

**Crowns and thrones may perish, kingdoms rise and wane,  
But the church of Jesus, constant will remain  
Gates of hell can never ‘gainst that church prevail;  
We have Christ’s own promise and that cannot fail.**

If we in the church really consider those words to be politically incorrect then all I can say, in all sincerity, is “God help us!”

That first Easter, by the power of God, Jesus defeated what Tom Wright describes as the greatest Pharaoh of them all, the power of death itself; hard hearts were softened by amazing, sacrificial love, and the new Exodus began as God gave his freedom to the world. It’s a plan God has been working on since the first days of Creation; working through people of faith, like Abraham and Isaac and Jacob; like Moses, who, as Adrian reminded us last week, became such an obedient, trusting and trustworthy member of God’s team; and through many others we’re going to hear about over the next few months, all of them obedient and blessed in their obedience. And importantly, God is still working on his plan today through those who believe. May we be obedient and blessed in *our* obedience, and supportive to each other in our prayers and our actions as we do our bit in passing on the story of that plan to a hard-hearted world.

Amen