

Lessons Exodus 12: 1 – 14

St Matthew 18: 15 – 20

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

Embrace and envelop us in Your love. Lead us on our journey of inner transformation. Bless us with the Spirit of Jesus. Amen.

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron, 'It is the Passover of the LORD. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt.....The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you...'. In the Old Testament, we are not short of dramatic, powerful, bloody stories. Looking back into the Book of Genesis we read of the patriarch Abraham raising a blade above his son Isaac, who is bound to the altar for sacrifice. Looking forward to the Book of Job, we read of a faithful man tested to the limit with the death of his children, the loss of his income and the serious deterioration in his health. Today's narrative is that of the Jewish Passover: it was on this night that the LORD passed through the land of Egypt, passed over the houses of the Hebrew people, and murdered the firstborn male in every Egyptian household.

What sort of deity slaughters the firstborn of any people? How are we to interpret this ancient text? The Passover is the tenth of ten plagues. Before this, the Nile had run with blood; there were infestations of frogs, lice and flies; animals were diseased; men were tormented with boils; thunderstorms of hail, clouds of locusts and, before the Passover, three days of darkness covered the land. The plagues were sent by God to persuade the Pharaoh to release the enslaved Hebrew people. Pharaoh had hardened his heart. It was not until the final plague, the night of the Passover, the night on which the children of Egypt died, including the Pharaoh's own firstborn son, that he agreed to release the slaves. How are we to interpret such stories? Would we worship such a god, a despot, a Moloch?

If we step back from the story for a moment, we are confronted with an interventionist god, one that meddles in human history, a god who plays with people and causes intolerable suffering and death. In the Book of Exodus, it is recorded that 600,000 men left Egypt, plus women, children and livestock. Scholars tell us that, in total, this means a population of around two million. The God of Exodus saved

two million Hebrew slaves. Two millennia later, six million Jews were murdered in the Holocaust. Hitler was not plagued by frogs, lice, and flies or tormented with boils. In other words, read literally, the God of the Exodus is dead. There were no dramatic interventions in the concentration camps. God does not desire human suffering but neither can we say that God prevents it with miraculous interventions.

Leaving aside any interventionist god, in the nineteenth century, the British mathematician and Anglican Bishop of Natal, Alexander Colenso said that the numbers leaving Egypt could not literally be true. Colenso calculated that there must have been around 2.5 million Israelites with two million sheep and oxen. 400 years earlier there had been only 70 of them and, Colenso said, with 2.5 million people and two million of livestock, it would have taken a very long time to cross the Red Sea!

There is a scientific theory about the deaths on the night of the Passover. Some have suggested that it is significant that the hailstorm preceded the arrival of the locusts. The hailstorm would have left what remained of the harvest in a very wet state. The

locusts will have eaten much of the crop and the remainder would not only be sodden but contaminated with locust droppings.

Mycotoxins can be lethal and it is just possible that, once calm was restored, the first people to be fed would have been the firstborn males, the eldest, those culturally most important. Internal bleeding would bring a rapid and sudden death. The slaves would not be affected because frogs, lice, hail and locusts are localised phenomena, and the Hebrews did not live among the Egyptians: they lived in Goshen which was some distance away. Possible? Maybe. If the story of the Exodus is not to be read literally, what might it mean?

The former Archbishop of Cape Town, Desmond Tutu, said that in South Africa and in other parts of the continent, the story of the Exodus, of the God who had heard the cry of the oppressed slaves, who saw their suffering and who would come down to deliver them, was one that resonated among the people and was recalled at mass funerals after yet another massacre by security forces. If not read literally, the story of the Exodus, amidst all its drama and colour, may be a story of human behaviour: oppression, suffering, hope and freedom.

Besides reading the narrative literally or ethically, for many centuries, the story of the Passover has been interpreted by the mystics. The story is to be read with the heart; we are to unearth the hidden and unseen meanings in the text. What have the mystics heard and seen? Always, they place themselves in the story: the narrative is lived out in the soul. The Hebrew word for Egypt is *Mitzrayim*, which means a tight place, a place of constriction. If we feel the story, perhaps we can begin to think of aspects of our own life which are constricted, in which we are confined, suppressed, oppressed, suffering and in need of hope and freedom. Part of us will always want to stay with the old, in our comfort zone, but part of us will want growth, freedom and change.

Remember the story of the Exodus was written hundreds of years after it supposedly happened. It is not minute by minute history but a theological and spiritual reflection on what it is to be human. As a species, as a nation and as individuals, we can be in a tight place, a place of constriction, desiring a new life. The entire narrative is about life: our relationships and career. In our mother's womb, we thrived and then it became a tight place. If we can free ourselves from literalism, the story of the Exodus and the Passover is about our

inner journey. Rabbi Hanoch of Alexander said, 'It was easier to take the Jews out of Egypt than take Egypt out of the Jews'. Sometimes, even when we change our external circumstances, all that hinders us, diminishes us, remains alive within. Often in life, we need to wrestle with and change the deep-seated images of ourselves. It is the soul that needs healing. One mystic suggests that we need to move from the bondage of the ego, from Pharaoh, to the higher self, to Moses; from a narrow, constricted consciousness, into a wider, fuller humanity, a more inclusive consciousness.

The teacher of Jewish mysticism, Estelle Frankel, says that each morning she wakes to herself. After a moment's meditation, a moment in which she is still, prays, is open to the Spirit, she wakes a second time with an expanded identity, an awareness that she embodies the Divine. The more she is at peace in the Sacred, the more she feels drawn into eternity. Frankel says, 'This is the goal of spiritual practice. This is the goal of the Passover'. The tenth of ten plagues, the Passover is a leaving behind of all that constricts, diminishes and dehumanises us. On the inner journey, God sets us free. On Friday evening, I attended an event with Arun Gandhi, the grandson of Mahatma Gandhi. Arun said, 'Each day I say, 'I shall be a

better person today than yesterday’.” This is the inner transformation that lies at the heart of all the world’s great faiths.

I believe that the Exodus story, including the Passover, is one which seeks to show that, whatever befalls us, God is there with us, in the midst of our suffering, loneliness and aloneness. Whether historical or not, Judaism emphatically states that, whatever the horrors that come our way, the Eternal, the Holy One is there mysteriously in the midst of us. That same claim is made by Christians when we point to Christ on the Cross: God was in Christ, there in the darkness.

Not long after the devastation of the Twin Towers in New York, the Church of Scotland minister, Johnston McKay was there reporting for the BBC. McKay went to St Paul’s Episcopal Church which sits at the corner of Ground Zero. He wrote:

The priest celebrated the Eucharist at the altar, while in the side men slept, and sausages and scrambled eggs were being served at the back of the church, and in [what had once been] George Washington’s pew feet were being washed, and on walkie-talkies contact continued between respite volunteers in the chapel and the rescuers still with work to do at Ground Zero. And the priest spoke the words of the institution, ‘This is my body. This is my blood.’

Perhaps the blood of the lambs smeared over the lintels was the blood of God, shed for the suffering – God bleeds when we bleed - for humanity broken by sin and selfishness and ego. The Passover is about our inner journey: leaving Egypt within us and stepping out into a wider consciousness.

Amen.