

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH
SUNDAY 3 OCTOBER 2010
Rev. Anneke Oppewal
Exodus 16: 2-8; Philippians 1: 27 - 2:5

"Stockholm Syndrome"

Paul writes his letter to the Philippians from a situation of imprisonment. His future is insecure and even his life may be on the line. In verse 22 he says he doesn't really care if he lives or dies, the only thing he desires is that whatever happens will serve the living Christ.

In Exodus 16 we hear of another life or death situation. After their liberation from slavery in Egypt the Israelites find themselves in the wilderness and running out of food. They are starting to realise that slavery may have had its advantages. They are suffering from what has become known as "Stockholm Syndrome". Where people are imprisoned for a long time, or have been kept in concentration camps, or held hostage they start to, after a while, identify with those who keep them captive or become attached to their identity as a victim. It then becomes very hard for them to re-adjust to normal life after they've been liberated.

No matter how traumatic or dreadful a situation of captivity may have been, freedom will put up its own challenges and captivity may, in hindsight, to some, seem relatively secure and "safe" in a way their regained freedom isn't.

These of course are no everyday experiences. But what the Israelites had been through would in all probability have brought up the same sort of responses (proof that scripture knew about these human responses long before therapists of our age started writing about it). Having lived in slavery all of their lives they were ill prepared for freedom. The creativity and independence needed to deal with life in the wilderness probably the very things the Egyptians had tried to beat out of them.

The journey of the Israelites, from slavery in Egypt to a life of freedom in the promised land, has been read through the ages as a metaphor of any life of faith being a journey from slavery through the often challenging and bewildering wilderness of life to the promised land of a life in faith. The story of the forty years in the wilderness regarded by Jews and Christians alike as a story about archetypes of experiences people on their journey of faith will encounter.

Today they are running out of food. They are scraping the bottom of the barrel and suddenly life in Egypt seems not such a bad alternative. At least their slave masters made sure they had something to eat, no matter how meagre the rations may have been at times, they had everything to gain from strong healthy slaves who weren't starving on the job. Why are we here? Life wasn't so bad back then! All this change! And what has it brought us? Wilderness, insecurity, resources running out.....

One thing they need to learn in the wilderness is to trust. To feel secure even where life is not secure. To let go and let God and have faith that, if they follow God's call, God will be with them on their journey and provide enough for them to sustain themselves.

It proves a hard lesson to learn. And even after they find Manna outside their tent in the morning they keep wrestling with the concept.

Manna doesn't keep, it will rot in the container overnight. But on the day of worship it suddenly

does keep and nothing is provided. Manna means “What is it?” and Jewish tradition tells us it was given this name to remind subsequent generations that we don’t know what it is that comes from God and keeps us sustained, but that we can trust it will be there when we need it.

What does this mean for us? For our faith journey?

When we look around the congregation the number of young people interested in and committed to Church as we know it seems frighteningly small. I think we are probably all very aware that the future of what has been so precious to most of us, is not secure. I know some feel really disturbed by the possible changes and the insecurity of what lies ahead. Some of us longingly hark back to the glory days of the seventies and eighties and wish it was possible to go back to the days when Church life seemed so much clearer and more secure. There is no way back however, and the future is insecure, and the only thing to do is to entrust us to God’s guidance and God is taking us somewhere worth going, even if it means facing the wilderness first. To try and see what lies ahead as an exciting and interesting challenge and opportunity to grow in faith.

Reflecting on the texts for the sermon this morning I realised that the main thing for me of growth in my faith over the years has been to learn exactly that: to not let fear and anxiety take hold, but to trust and let go. To not be daunted by an insecure future but to see it as an opening, as an opportunity for God to do his work, and feel excited rather than alarmed. Moving from a feeling of dizzying fright when I first realised what freedom in Christ really means to a feeling of an incomprehensible wideness of possibilities and promise offered through God’s grace.

There is nothing to be afraid of in the whole wide world. The only thing we need to do is, as Paul says, live our lives worthy of the gospel of Christ. Live our life as Eucharistic people who become part of God’s offering of love to the world, who give themselves as Christ has done and share bread and wine remembering his life given for us. And if God chooses to shape that gift to the world differently in future, that is only something to be eagerly looking forward to. Even if it is a shape we cannot yet see or understand at the moment.

We are invited to live like Christ. To leave our prisons and stop harking back to Egypt. To take responsibility and grow up so we are ready for a life according to God’s will and intentions. So God’s Kingdom can grow in us because we are free to receive it and prepared to let it do its work in us without us panicking about what the future will hold and if there will be enough tomorrow of what we receive today. God may have other plans - may have other gifts - may have different directions in mind. For now bread and wine and offering our life to God as part of the living Christ should be enough. Amen.