

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 4 SEPTEMBER 2011

Rev. Anneke Oppewal

Exodus 12: 1-14; John 12: 20-33

“Dying to Live”

When I saw the Exodus 12 reading on the lectionary for this morning, my first instinct was to give it a wide berth. What to do with a God who goes around slaughtering first born children? The gentle rural imagery of growing grain from the NT reading seemed so much easier, and so much gentler in its approach.

But, after some reflection I realised there is a message in the Exodus story that needs to be heard. The Jewish tradition has understood this better than us. The text is at the centre of the faith of our Jewish brothers and sisters. For some four thousand years they have told, remembered and re-enacted the story and by doing so reminded each other of the enduring power of God, even in the most desperate of situations. And it has kept them going.

The story has a central place in our faith tradition as well. Much of the imagery and language around Jesus' death and resurrection used in the gospels and by Paul echo the imagery and language of the exodus. The blood and the lamb as agents of salvation from death for one, the journey through the sea, through the place where the underworld was thought to be, another reference amongst many, many others.

We, with our twenty-first century, western, middle class, suburban sensitivities, may find it difficult to reconcile the image of God going around killing people with our faith and with our experience of God. But there is no way we can write this story off as irrelevant to our faith. We cannot brush it off as part of a time and a faith that came to an end when Jesus appeared on the scene, or of reflecting an “Old Testament God” who is different from the one the New Testament preaches.

Let's try to let go of our sensitivities for a moment and look at the story afresh, to see what it may say to us here, now, in our situation, for our faith, and against the background of that other story we read, the story about the grain that dies.

In the story of Exodus the people of God are asked to take risks and leave everything behind. They were slaves, and life was hard, but what they are asked to do is even harder. To let go of what security you have, exchange your home, what little quality of life you have, for an invitation to wander into the desert, God knows where (literally), is no small matter.

It's a journey not so very different from Jesus' journey as presented in the story about the wheat grain. He too is asked to risk everything and rely on God. In an even more radical way than the people of Israel does he have to let go of life, of certainty and security and rise to a whole new way of being.

It is the same journey Jesus asks his followers, asks us, to embark on. A journey that risks everything, prepared to leave the old behind and die to anything that prevents us from entering into a new and different life with God.

As grain has to die to bear fruit, the people of Israel have to die to their old way of being and journey

into the desert where fear and suffering awaits them, to reach the land of God's promises.

As the grain that dies and rises to new life, Jesus will face suffering and death before he will rise and bear more fruit.

And likewise his followers of every age need to be prepared to die to whatever holds them captive and rise to a different existence. When we look at it from that perspective the story may be more about risk taking and trust in God than about revenge. More about being prepared to leave what security we have behind and surrender ourselves to following God's guidance into an uncertain and unsettling future.

There remains the question of a God who kills. However, when considering this side of the passage let's first of all keep in mind that heinous crimes against humanity had been perpetrated. Pharaoh had ordered the killing of all male babies born to Israel. You may recall that Moses escaped this verdict in a miraculous way and was brought up at Pharaoh's court. Killing a whole cohort of male children, would in any circumstance and especially in those days be seen as a justifiable motive for bloodthirst and calls for bloody revenge. Especially where God, after nine previous plagues, had given Pharaoh and his court ample time and warning to mend their ways.

Nevertheless, even if it was justifiable, a vengeful, bloodthirsty God somehow doesn't compute with the rest of the stories about God. The God we know is compassionate, forgiving and slow to anger. It is a God who doesn't kill simply to satisfy his anger. If there is killing, it is always in defense of the weak, and with a view to stop oppression and maltreatment.

Is this killing of the first borns only to convince the Egyptians they have to let God's people go? Or is there more?

The Jews are told to roast a whole lamb in one piece. This is not something they would normally do. Amun Re the chief Egyptian god is depicted with the head of a ram. Jewish interpreters see the roasting and consuming of the lamb whole as a symbol of breaking the power the gods of Egypt have over the people of God. Amun Re, the chief Egyptian god's offspring is roasted whole, and consumed. At a training for spiritual directors I learned that it sometimes helps for people to write down what keeps them captive or oppresses them and burn it in a bucket. And perhaps that's how we need to look at the roasting of those lambs: as an act of liberation and defiance, of taking back the control from those gods they have been subject to for so long by the people of Israel.

According to those same interpreters the whole story is marked by this theme of cutting the powerful down to size and changing the structures that make oppression possible. Killing of the first borns, according to these interpreters, is not so much an act of bloodthirsty revenge for the killing of every male Israelite baby for years, but an act that breaks the power of the oppressor. The eldest son inherited the estate. With the eldest sons dead the Egyptian hierarchy of power and oppression is turned on its head. Suddenly there is nobody left of those destined from birth to be the next generation of oppressors. The invincible, almighty Egyptian masters are shown to be as vulnerable as the Hebrew slaves whom they made lose their children. The continuity of their power only exists by the grace of God.

And after being so liberated, the next remarkable thing to happen is that the Israelites do not go on a bloody rampage. They do not even clamour for blood. Instead they leave their oppressors behind. They let go of their past and step into a future that is as insecure and frightening to them as being sown in the earth like a grain of wheat. What happens to their tormentors and oppressors they leave to God. This is one of the miracles in the story. The Israelites choose to follow God's call without

hesitation or reservation and they don't turn on their tormentors or seek vengeance. They move forward into the future without dwelling on the bitterness of the past.

If only we could do that with some of the things that enslave or bind us. If only we dared to risk leaving the past behind us, not looking for revenge or compensation but leaving behind whatever it is that keeps us from growing into fulness of life. If only we could step out into the future, free of whatever barriers there are in our lives to grow into the people God meant us to be. Free to bear fruit in abundance.

If only we could let go of our fear for what the future may bring, and to live in trust that God will be traveling alongside us wherever we go, even in the deepest pits of death and depression. If only we could leave disappointments and bitterness we carry with us from the past behind and leave them to God to be resolved. If only we could let go of whatever keeps us in our place, even if it is a place where unhappiness and pain keep us from growing into our God given potential. Let the shackles fall off.

As a Church that is full of fear for the future, and full of people who find it extremely difficult to let go of the certainties and securities of the past, I think these stories should be an encouragement to let go and take risks. To step out into the future without fear or hesitation, trusting that although we may die to our previous shape and form, God will bring new and different growth. Growth we may not even recognise because it is so different from what we have been used to, but that will be there. To leave the past behind and take up the journey with God, even if, at first, that journey looks like it may be challenging. Confident that God will be there before and behind to lead us and keep us safe. Amen.