

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 11 SEPTEMBER 2011

Rev. Anneke Oppewal

Exodus 14: 19-30; Matthew 18: 21-35

“Either Side of the Red Sea”

In Exodus, Egypt is pictured as a dark place of hardship and suffering. A gloomy place of oppression and a place of death for everyone. It is a place where plenty of wailing and gnashing of teeth has been happening so far in the story. Slavery and the murder of innocent children on the side of the Israelites and blood, frogs, lice, wild beasts, pestilence, skin disease, hail, locusts, darkness and finally the slaying of every first born on the side of the Egyptians. In it a mighty oppressor has been forced to his knees. Now the Jewish people have been liberated and can celebrate the victory over the Egyptians.

Over the centuries the Jewish people have remembered their deliverance from slavery in Egypt (and other oppression) at Pesach with a celebratory meal called seder. Last year I was lucky enough to be invited to a shortened version of those celebrations especially designed to help people of other faiths familiarise themselves with the festival. On every table there was what is called a seder plate, with all kinds of foods symbolic of what the Jewish people had been put through before they crossed the red sea.

Charoset is a (delicious) mixture of apples, nuts, wine and spices, reminding them of the mortar that was used for laying bricks.

Zeroa is a shankbone or neck of poultry, roasted, it is a reminder of the paschal lamb that was offered.

Baytzah is hard-boiled egg is symbolic of the regular festival sacrifice brought in the days of the temple and has become a reminder of the loss of two temples.

Karpas is a vegetable, generally parsley or a potato. Dipped in salt water it represents the tears of suffering.

Maror is bitter herbs. Horseradish root or prepared horseradish is generally used. Maror represents the bitter life of the Israelites during the time of their enslavement in Egypt.

Chazeret is a bitter vegetable. Celery or lettuce can be used. Also reminding of the bitterness of life in Egypt. Apart from these symbolic foods many others are served, and in large quantities while the story is recited responsively by children and adults.

During the meal there are also 4 glasses of wine for each person poured. They symbolise the four distinct redemptions promised by G-d to the Hebrews as told in Exodus 6:6-7.

(1) "I will take you out of Egypt",

(2) "I will deliver you from Egyptian slavery",

(3) "I will redeem you with a demonstration of my power", and

(4) "I will acquire you as a nation".

It is a meal of celebration. But not only that. Before drinking the wine, a few drops are taken from the glass and splattered around. Blood red drops of wine, taken out to remember the blood and tears of the suffering Egyptians, mourning the death of the Egyptian first borns and the drowning of the whole Egyptian army in the sea. This symbolises how the suffering of the enemy is taking away from the joy of liberation. A few drops of wine help to remember that the joy of the celebration is not complete because of the suffering of the oppressors.

Thinking about the command Jesus gives to Peter in Matthew, to forgive 70 times 7 times and watching all the news around the remembrance of 9/11 it is this celebratory meal my thoughts wandered back to.

What is forgiveness, and what does it mean? How do you go about it, and where are the boundaries, if there are any?

For me it used to be something fairly easy and straightforward. As a child it meant basically that if somebody did something nasty to you, if someone hit you for instance or called you names, you could resume playing after they'd been forgiven. Sometimes they would ask for forgiveness, sometimes not, but basically, for me, as the offended party, forgiveness meant that I would once again welcome those who had wronged me in the circle of my friends because I had been able to let go of whatever pain had been inflicted.

And I suppose that basically, this still is what forgiveness for most of us, most of the time is about: Somebody has wronged us but we are able to let go of our anger and resentment and can "play with them" again. While as long as we hold on to our anger and resentment over what happened, our relationship with them remains damaged or even becomes broken. In some cases that will mean polite avoidance, in others a total breakdown of communication. Forgiveness then is the reconstitution of relationship by letting go of our ill feelings towards somebody we feel has wronged us and continue with them as if nothing much has happened. To wipe the slate clean and to start afresh.

Unfortunately life is often a lot more complicated than that. Wiping the slate clean and starting afresh may not always be an option. Unless we want to turn ourselves into doormats that will let people get away with anything. Forgiveness becomes tricky, once you've moved into the adult world and life has become a little bit less straightforward than "you hit me but I forgive you and you can still come over for a play" sort of thing.

How are victims of 9/11 going to forgive those who ruined their lives? And who exactly should they be forgiving? The hijackers? The systems that breed terrorism? How are the parents of children who are dying from preventable diseases as near by as Papua New Guinea going to forgive those who withdrew help from their region, and who exactly should they be forgiving in the intricate world politics of foreign aid? How are the families of victims of substandard conditions in mental hospitals going to forgive those who didn't have their act together? And who do they need to forgive? The individuals who actively abused or passively failed to care, or a system that didn't protect some of the most vulnerable people in our society? And these are only a few examples I picked up from the papers this week.

And while we are talking about 9/11 after a week where the word "unforgivable" has been uttered too many times: Let us remember that on that day in 2001

24,000 people died of hunger

6,000 children died of diarrhea, 2,700 from measles

1.1 million African children under the age of 15 were living with HIV

100 million children had no access to basic education

1,410 women died in childbirth

14,000 children were malnourished

1,100 million people had no access to safe drinking water

2,400 million people had no access to sanitation

1,200 million people were living on less than \$1 a day

Who and how are they going to forgive?

Not to speak of all the victims the war on terror has claimed in the last ten years?

But we don't have to go that far, or that big. You yourself may be wrestling with forgiving in your own life. And not just a slight, or a simple offensive comment, although these can be really hard to let go of as well. But things that have really, deeply, changed your life and have left such deep wounds that you can't even begin to imagine how healing could take place. Think of child abuse, unfaithfulness, bullying, violence. Think of things that may have happened to you that make you tremble even to think of them.

Cases where forgiveness is not a band-aid that we can just apply to the wound to then forget anything has happened.

Forgiveness in these cases can only take place through a long drawn out process of slowly growing towards acceptance, acknowledgement and letting go of past hurt. On both sides.

The Jewish way of celebrating passover remembering the story we read today somehow has, for me, everything to do with that. The Israelites had every reason to be bitter and resentful about what the Egyptians had done to them and they had every right to celebrate their release from bondage and slavery. And never, ever forgive the pain they had suffered. But their joy was tempered by the sadness and suffering of their enemies. Even where the story leaves room for an interpretation that says those Egyptians just got what they deserved.

I think that's what forgiveness is about in the grown up world. Be hurt, deeply wounded at times but able to look with compassion on those who did the hurting. Able to let go of the desire for retribution, of feelings of resentment and revenge and feel that your own joy is diminished because there is a gap between you and the other that is filled with pain and suffering. On your side, but also on theirs.

There is another aspect to forgiveness I'd like to mention here which, in the Exodus story, is symbolised by the roasting and consuming of lambs, indicating that the neither the gods of Egypt, nor the pain they have caused, have any power over the Hebrew people anymore. The Israelites are called to let go, to roast and digest a representation of the chief Egyptian god Amun Re, as part of

their liberation. Indicating that the source of their suffering and pain no longer has any power over them. It is ironic that the blood of these lambs, after they have been slaughtered and eaten whole, then become the safeguard against the angel of death.

I may be reading too much into this, but I do know from experience that non forgiveness compounds the hurt. That forgiveness is as essential for the well being of the victim as it is for the offender. Anger and resentment are toxic things. They spoil everything. In that respect it is of utmost importance to let go. To swallow whatever it is that has caused you harm whole and then burn whatever remnants there may be left - 7x70 times if need be. Because otherwise we move from the hurt of being wounded into the hurt of being filled with negative emotions.

Emotions that can be so strong and overwhelming that we feel helpless in the face of them. That, for me, is where God comes in. The God that saw his son killed but could forgive can help us to forgive whatever needs forgiving in our lives. Be it something somebody has done to us or be it something we find it hard to forgive ourselves for. God's forgiveness is greater than ours and will support and strengthen ours if we seek to fulfill that far reaching commandment of Jesus: To forgive more than we can really manage.

That will not only give peace to those who have wronged us and build bridges and reconstitute relationships and community between hurting parties. It will also bring peace and liberation to ourselves. Forgiving may sometimes need time, may sometimes be too hard for people as vulnerable and fragile as us. We may know however that all that time God is there, forgiving for us, working on reconciliation and peace. Even when and where we can not. Amen.

Recipe for Charoset:

To make charoset, prepare 1 cup of walnuts, 1 granny smith green apple, 2 tsp. cinnamon, 2 tsp. sugar, and red wine to moisten. Chop the nuts and apples to the consistency you want (a food processor can be used). Sprinkle with spices, and moisten with wine. The texture of the charoset should remind us of mortar. Eat with unleavened bread or Matze.