

## Sermon - Hexham Trinity Sunday 6th September 2020

Reading: Exodus 12:1-14

Prayer

*'This month is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year.'* (Exodus 12:2)

If you are someone who goes to school or works in a school September marks a new year, for many of our children and young people this week has marked a new school year, a long awaited new year for many families. As Methodists our new year starts on 1st September. This September whether you are connected with a school or not September feels like the beginning of a new year, a new chapter in our life as lockdown eases.

As we begin this new year that verses from Exodus 12 seemed appropriate! *'This month is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year.'* Of course the beginning of something is not significant on its own, it's only significant because of what follows. Starting school is a big moment but what's significant is what happens in the many days and week ahead. The new year which is heralded here at the start of Exodus 12 is significant but it's significant because of what happens next, the new year in itself isn't really anything to shout about, but the great salvific act of God, the Passover through which God brings his people Israel out of Egypt is one of the most significant moments in the scriptures.

I don't know about you, when I read these first 14 verses of Exodus 12, when I read the rest of Exodus 12, I find myself with more questions than answers. I feel more uncomfortable than I do comfortable. I cannot help but ask myself is the God I believe in, the God I follow, the one who passes over, bringing judgement and killing all the first born of Egypt? If all people are God's people, why does he kill so many of them? Am I really comfortable with the people of Israel being so special that all the first born of Egypt are killed? I have more questions than answers? What is going on here? What does this new year in Exodus say to us at the beginning of our new year?

Exodus 12 is one of those passages which lends itself to many different sermons and reflections. In these times of COVID and shorter services there is much I could say but don't have time to. So this morning, with an uneasy feeling about the text, I want to ask three familiar questions to help us see what it might be saying to us today. I want to ask what, how and why?

- What is God doing in Exodus 12?
- How is God doing what God is doing?
- Why is God doing what God is doing?

**What is God doing?** - If we remember back a few chapters in Exodus 3 God has called Moses at the burning bush. God has called Moses and sent Moses saying to him in 3:10 *'I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.'* God's people were slaves in Egypt and the

time has come to bring them out of Egypt to the promise land. Between God's call to Moses in chapter 3 and the exodus that comes later in chapter 12 there are a few challenges along the way. Pharaoh doesn't want Israel to leave and does whatever he can to stop them, God sends a number of plagues to help try and persuade Pharaoh and Aaron's staff becomes a snake to help the cause.

What is God doing here in Exodus 12 through the Passover, God is enabling finally the people of Israel, God's people to leave Egypt. This significant yet horrific act is the end of a time when God has in many different ways sought to bring about God's will.

What is going on here is God saving his people from slavery, bringing them out from the oppression they have been under, bringing them into a new place where life will be better but more significantly they can truly live as God's people.

**How is God doing what God is doing?** As we turn to think about how we have to remember this isn't God's plan A, plan A is back in chapter 5 when Moses first ask Pharaoh to let God's people go but Pharaoh refuses and stops their supplies of straw to make bricks. Following plan A there are many other plans including the staff that becomes a snake and the plagues which you can read about in chapters 6 to 11, in fact by this point there has been 9 plagues.

Whilst I still struggle with the killing of the Egyptian first born here in the passover in Exodus 12 this background reminds me that there have been many other attempts by God to achieve God's plan of bringing Israel out of Egypt. The back story of chapters 6 to 11 reminds us that although God makes plans, good plans for good reasons, they are put into practice by God's people and amongst God's broken world. Put into practice by and amongst people who have freewill to do or not do as God asks or desires. Time and time again this means that God's plan are not always put into practice as God would want them to be.

So how does God achieve bringing God's people out of Egypt, out of slavery?

At the beginning of the new year God directs the people of Israel to prepare for a celebration, a celebration with lamb and herbs, a celebration with unleavened bread, a celebration which all God's people must take part in. This celebration and ritual provides the people of Israel with the blood to put on their door frames to mark out their homes. When God passes over to kill all the first born the blood will be a sign that a house is occupied by God's people and God will passover leaving their firstborn alive and well, ready to leave Egypt. What's interesting in God's instructions here though is that God prepares the people of Israel for the passover and at the same time institutes how they will celebrate this moment in the future, how they will celebrate the passover each year.

This dual 'how' of the passover itself and the future festival to mark the passover are instituted at the same time. In instituting them together God enables them both to be moments of salvation, both to be moments when God's saving acts are made possible. Yes the saving act is when God passes over, when the first born of Egypt are killed and because of that act of power Pharaoh finally lets the people of Israel leave Egypt, verses 31&32. But through the initiation of the Passover festival, which is then to be celebrated each year, God established a festival which God's people can enter into year by year and by entering into can find for themselves the saving nature of God. The 'what' is to save God's people but through the 'how' the 'what' is made possible for generations and generations of God's chosen people.

Going forward, this of course is exactly what God does for all God's people, the people of Israel and everyone else in the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is through Jesus' death and resurrection that we can know the saving power of God, that we ourselves can be saved from the sin and darkness of the world. This is possible because Jesus died on the cross and rose again, because of God's love for us. But we didn't have to be there 2000 years ago to share in that saving act. We can know the saving power of Jesus for ourselves today by entering into his death and resurrection in our lives, through God's word, through our choosing to following Jesus, by sharing in the celebration of Jesus' death and resurrection when we celebrate Holy Communion. These moments of remembrance, of celebration, of action enable us not just to remember what Jesus did but to participate with Jesus in his saving acts, to know his salvation in our lives.

Through the actions of the passover God showed his power to Pharaoh who then allowed the people of Israel to leave Egypt. Through this act God was able to achieve what God wanted to do which was to save God's people, to bring them to the promised land.

**Why did God do what God did?** As I am sure you will have realised by now in so many ways the why is bound up in the what and the how. Why did God initiate the passover, so that he could save his people, so he could bring them to the promise land. Why did he need to do it by killing all the firstborn of Egypt, because the reality of the world meant that all the other plans hadn't worked and God's people were still enslaved in Egypt under Pharaoh. Why did God want to save his people, because God knew life could be better for them in the promise land.

But just like the how, there is also another side to the why. The festival which God initiates through Passover gives the people of Israel a way to celebrate and a way to enter into God's saving act.

For me, however much that I struggle with the extreme nature of the how, what comes across me again and again in this passage is the what and the why. That in the Passover God finds a way to finally get Pharaoh to take notice, finds a way to work in partnership with the broken world so save

his people. Yes it is extreme, but it saves God's people and it finds them a way for them to mark that great act year by year and enter into that great act year by year. The phrase '*the end justifies the means comes to mind*' doesn't it. Whilst it cannot always be applied I think here in Exodus 12 in light of the many attempts to bring Israel out of Egypt, out of slavery, it does and for me at least it helps me to make sense of this extreme act called passover

Just as it was the extreme act of passover that enables the people of Israel to be saved it is the extreme act of the crucifixion of Jesus that enables the salvation of all God's people, enables our salvation. The great joy of Jesus' resurrection of course means that we are not just saved from sin by his death but given new life, new life here and now and new life for eternity.

So what does this mean for us? What can we take from the what, how and why of Passover here in Exodus 12? What does this extreme act, through which we can see so many parallels to the extreme act of salvation in the death and resurrection of Jesus, say to us, here in 2020 as we emerge from lockdown, as we worship in different places, as we seek to continue to play our part in the world being a safe place?

I believe it has three things to say to us:

Firstly, God is at work and God will continue to be at work to bring about God's way and God's Kingdom. The story of Exodus shows us that God doesn't give up, God didn't give up and God will never give up until Jesus returns and the kingdom of God is complete. Most importantly God is at work, we don't need to prove ourselves to God, we don't need to do God's job for God. God is at work and God will bring about God's good plans however many times the broken world thwarts or ignores the plan. This passage reminds us that God is here and God is at work through the spirit, through us, through Jesus to bring the God's good plan, the kingdom of heaven to fulfilment.

Secondly, we have to trust God and play our part. In the Passover the people of Israel had to follow God's instructions in preparation for the passover, they had to do as God asked even if it seemed extreme, to trust that God will honour his instructions, his word. As we begin our new year, as we emerge from COVID, as we seek to share the saving Good News of Jesus, we have our part of play. Yes others may not play their part, that's not our problem, leave that to God! We have our part to play, we must stay close to God, close to the spirit so we know our part and we must be obedient to God and play our part. At the times when what God asks seems odd, extreme, bizarre, when it feels like stopping something we feel is significant, we must trust God and play the part God asks us too.

Thirdly, we must tell God's story, share God's love and invite others to be part of it. For me one of the most significant verses of Exodus 12 are verses 25 to 27 '*When you enter the land that the LORD will give you as he promised, observe this ceremony. And when your children ask you, 'What*

*does this ceremony mean to you?’ then tell them, ‘It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians.’” Then the people bowed down and worshiped.’* As God established the Passover he makes sure that the story of God’s saving acts will continue to be told. God makes sure this is not a one off event, or just something that a single generation will observe but he ensures the story is established and handed on from generation to generation. The risen Jesus does exactly the same when he gets the disciples talking on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24, when he gives the great commission to go and make disciples in Matthew 28. Passing on the story of God from generation to generation and amongst the generations is so important, it’s what helps others to worship God, it’s what enables more people to see that God is God, to see that they to have a part of to play, that they to can experience the saving act of God in Jesus.

The Passover may not always seem like an easy passage but when we dig deeper into the text we see how God was bringing God’s purposes into being in a deeply complex and human situation. It doesn’t mean that the end will always justify the means but here I think we can say that might be part of what was going on. Through this great story we see the parallels with Jesus’ death and resurrection which enables us to be part of God’s salvation.

As we enter this new year, a new school year, a new Methodist year, a new university year, as we emerge from lockdown. Let us give thanks that God is at work amongst us as he was at the Passover, let us remember God calls us with our free will to be obedient to his voice, let us remember we have a story of God’s saving love in Jesus to tell. When the means and the way of God feel a little odd or extreme let us remember that God is God, trust in him and see how God amazes us through his ways. Amen.