

EXODUS 12:1-14
PASSOVER

The Christian faith has events at its heart. Christmas and Easter are the two great events in Christian faith. We can never be sure as to how we've come to celebrate them in way that we do, but nonetheless these two events are so significant; they shape our faith. Something happened; events took place and these events are all about Jesus. Without these events, the Christian faith would not be what it is. Culturally, Christmas is still a big event in the community calendar, Easter not so much so, but both are hugely significant. These events mean something; what they mean turns these historical events into good news for the world. There are lots of different threads to the meaning of Christmas and Easter, but when we begin to understand that meaning, these events take on a whole new significance for us; they move from being community cultural events to being the foundation of faith. We remember these events to nurture our faith.

Christmas is about the birth of a baby and that helps to make it popular because of the 'aaah' factor in babies. Jesus is born in a stable in Bethlehem and Mary is his mother. Shepherds and wise men come to visit and to worship this new baby. In itself this is an everyday event that happens hundreds of thousands of times in the world. What this means makes this event unique: the Bible tells us that Jesus is the Son of God, that God has become flesh and blood for us in the shape and form of Jesus, He come to be the Saviour of the world. Easter is about death and resurrection: the same Jesus lived and worked in Israel and His ministry came to its climax in Jerusalem when He was arrested and tried and sentenced to death. He was crucified, again an event that happened thousands of times in the Roman world; He died, yet on the third day some people said that He is alive and His tomb is empty. Jesus is the Saviour of the world and the risen Lord and king. It is said that He died to take away the sin of the world and is raised to bring the guarantee of salvation and the hope of eternal life with God. Events change from history to gospel because of what they mean. We see the same in the story of Moses and the Exodus in the event we call Passover.

The story so far: the people of Israel are slaves in Egypt and Pharaoh has oppressed them. They have cried out to God to be rescued and God has heard their prayers; He knows their situation and His answer to their prayers is to send Moses. Moses was reluctant, but he went and with hope and expectation he went to Pharaoh to ask for his people's release. Pharaoh not only refused, but he oppressed them even more: part of their slave labour is to make bricks, and now they are to make the same number of bricks as before but Pharaoh will no longer provide the straw. Moses' faith is stretched: "I told you so!" is his prayer of complaint to God; his relationships with Israel are stretched almost to breaking point because, if life was bad before, it is now 100 times worse. Everything has gone wrong!

Passover is the story of the tenth plague to hit Egypt under Moses' ministry. Blood, frogs, gnats, flies etc, 9 plagues had hit Egypt, God's way of trying to persuade Pharaoh to let the people go. To begin with, Pharaoh's magicians copied the plagues and laughed at Moses. Later, as things got worse, Pharaoh promised to let Israel go if Moses took away the plague, but when, in good faith, Moses took the plague away Pharaoh changed his mind and said "No!" all over again. To begin with, everyone was affected by the plagues, but latterly, God sent some of the plagues only on Egypt; Israel was untouched by some of the latter plagues; but still Pharaoh remained unmoved. The tenth plague came on the firstborn – the last and most destructive plague; this was the

decisive plague; God Himself would do this and Pharaoh's hard heart would give in and Israel would be free!

The event itself has two strands to it. First, there is the promise of judgment on Egypt and the tenth plague will be the death of the first born, of children right throughout Egypt; we could argue that things would never have reached this stage of God's judgement had Pharaoh given in sooner. It sounds awful and it is awful and it offends our sensitivities now, and perhaps rightly so, because then we have a sense of how awful an event this is. But then how awful has been Israel's slavery in Egypt and the pain of oppression and the loss of their sons under Pharaoh's genocide. The second strand of this event: Israel is to take a lamb and kill it and paint the blood on lintel and doorposts of their houses and then to roast it as food to eat for their journey. This is the promise that God makes to Israel: "*On the...*" (*Exodus 12:12f*) The blood is to be Israel's safety. They are to eat the roast lamb with the other parts of the meal and to eat it dressed for the road, wearing their travelling clothes, because as soon as the plague has hit, Pharaoh will not only let them go, but he will send them away. This is an event that shaped their future. "*By faith...*" (*Hebrews 11:28*) Moses' faith is rewarded.

What does the event mean? "*On that...*" (*Exodus 12:12f*) God is saving His people. This is the time for which Israel has been crying out in their prayers; this is time towards which the whole of Moses' ministry has been working. Finally, at last, God works to rescue His people from their slavery and oppression in Egypt and is it by the Passover that He does it. The rest of chapter 12 gives instructions: "*This is...*" (*Exodus 12:14*) They are to remember the Passover every year; it was a one-off event, but this feast is given to remember the Passover and the whole ritual that goes with the feast: food to eat, Bible passages to read, children to ask questions about what these things mean and father to give the answers; this is the way of remembering an event that would shape the life of the nation. Passover was an unrepeatable event, but it was to be remembered and celebrated so that the people would remember that God has saved them and their faith was rewarded. God rescues His people and they are free!

To some extent, perhaps quite a small extent, the Passover is part of our Christian heritage as well as being an event at the heart of the Jewish faith. It does connect with Jesus: it was a Passover meal that Jesus was eating with His disciples in the upper room on the night before He died, a meal that He gave new meaning by the words that He spoke over Passover bread and wine. It was at Passover time that Jesus died and surely that is significant. The early Church certainly thought so: there are two ways in which Jesus is described which connect Jesus to the Passover: "*Look, the...*" (*John 1:29*) and perhaps even more so: "*Christ our...*" (*1 Corinthians 5:7*) Somehow, the Passover lamb is a picture of Jesus and what He has done for us. As God rescued His people out of Egypt by the blood of a lamb smeared on the doorposts of their houses, so God has rescued us from our sin by the death of Jesus on the cross. The sacrifice of Himself is the key to Jesus' completing God's plan to save the world from sin and the events that we call Easter are the heart of that.

There is something important in our make-up as human beings about celebrating events. How did you celebrate your last birthday? Was it a big birthday? There are times when we say that we don't want to celebrate birthdays any more because there is not enough room on the cake for all the candles or that the candles will set off the fire-alarm, but if no-one remembers our birthday we are seriously miffed and disappointed. Birthdays, wedding anniversaries, Christmas etc – the celebration of events, of markers and

milestones in our lives – is important to us and so we mark them, we celebrate them and we mark other events in our lives by these milestones. We are not born over again; we are not married over again: these celebrations are marking unrepeatable events in our lives. Christmas and Easter: we shape the Church year around these events to some extent; we celebrate them to strengthen our faith.

We do the same in Church life. Take the communion service, for example; this is the closest we have to the Passover feast. In the communion service, we repeat the words and actions of Jesus in the upper room with His friends on the night before He died. The communion service begins by telling the story of that event and by repeating the words of Jesus that night. Then we do what Jesus is reported to have done: we break bread and share wine together. Different traditions do this in different ways, but in whichever way we do it, we do the same thing. The event itself is an unrepeatable event and so we are not repeating the event, we're not re-sacrificing Jesus; we are remembering that event in a quite special way and remembering the event to strengthen our faith in Jesus. Communion is not about us and whether we are good enough to stand in the presence of God; communion is about Jesus and that Jesus has saved us and He has made us good enough to stand in the presence of God, forgiven, rescued, redeemed. When we celebrate communion, we give God deep thanks for the love in which He has given Jesus to be the Saviour of the world, our Saviour.

I began my ministry in a part of Scotland where that was done only twice in the year. Historically, the Church had held communion seasons, a series of services on Thursday, Friday and Saturday leading up to the communion on Sunday, with a thanksgiving service afterwards. It is also a part of the country where a significant number of people who came to church didn't come to communion because they thought themselves to be unworthy of the sacrament. Here, we celebrate communion every month in one way or another and we will celebrate it in two weeks time. However the Church does this, it is so important that we remember the events that are at the heart of our faith and at the heart of the salvation that God has given to us and worked for us. We remember the grace, patience and faithfulness of God when we celebrate communion; we remember the love in which Jesus gave His life; we remember that He died and was raised for us; we remember that He is the living Lord who invites us to come to Him and to follow Him. We remember to strengthen our faith in Jesus.

The Passover – the end of things for Israel in Egypt; the day of freedom; they are free at last to go. In Israel's eyes they are going out of Egypt; in Egyptian eyes they are driving Israel out to be rid of them and to lift God's judgment and "here is our gold to take with you!" In God's eyes, they are being brought out of Egypt, with God at their head. This is the end of things in Egypt, but in another way it is just the beginning of things as we shall see. They are to eat the Passover in their travelling clothes, with their bags packed and so begins the journey to the Promised Land. There will be lots of twists and turns along the way before they get there, but the journey has begun; they are on their way; God is going with them. That all lies in the future; for now the Passover is a time for rejoicing: God has kept His promise; the people who came to Egypt in days of Joseph, who came to be saved from famine, the people to whom God promised that He would be with them and that He would take them home – God has kept these promises. They celebrate: God is faithful; God keeps His promises; God listens to prayers; God rescues His people; God is with His people always and everywhere. We also celebrate because God has done all of this for us and more in Jesus – we have even more reason to celebrate!