

The story of our lives

In our recent midweek Bible Studies we have been studying the Book of Exodus, a book which contains stories that lie at the very heart of our faith and from which we have read this morning. Here in these verses we are transported back to where it all began, to the land of Egypt, where a community of people is being held captive and bitterly oppressed by a powerful ruler known as Pharaoh. And Pharaoh believes that he is in charge and that he can treat this people with impunity.

Our passage, however, introduces us to another character in the story and who is the God of this people's ancestors. And this God has resolved to humble Pharaoh and to liberate the community of captives. And in our passage instructions are being given by God to two men, Moses and Aaron who are leaders of that slave community, about events that are soon to take place, about a night of dark memories when strange and fearful things will happen. The upshot will be release for the captives and death and disaster for the Egyptians. And God is telling Moses and Aaron how future generations of this liberated community are to remember the events of that night. The story of what happened that night, known as the Passover, is to be told from generation to generation so that it lives and reverberates at the very heart of their life together.

Now, what we see here is that Israel was a nation that was shaped and formed by stories, stories they remembered and told over and over again. And those stories, while often strange and mysterious and frequently disturbing, were accessible to all from the youngest to the oldest, to the most educated to the least. And from them Israel derived its notions of justice and peace, the good

society and the good life, shaping their identity and making them different and distinctive. And when Israel spoke of God it told stories. In other words Israel learnt about God not by engaging in philosophical speculation but in telling stories of what God had done. God acts, God liberates his people, and those actions are remembered and recounted, and so those actions live on and are carried into the present world. And furthermore those stories were embodied in rituals. Every year the story of the Passover and the Exodus was remembered and retold in a ritual meal, where food was eaten and actions performed, for it is through rituals that a story enters our blood and our bones and lives in us. In rituals words become flesh and become part of us.

And of course in the fullness of time there came Jesus who absorbed these stories, and they formed and shaped his identity, and he told new stories that grew out of the old ones. And from him there grew a new Israel out of the old one, stocked with narratives and traditions, some ancient and some new, which fund the life of God's new community of liberation. And so we, the Church, are a storied people. And these ancient stories feed our imagination and become crucial to how we understand our world. To give an example: it's interesting that in our reading this morning from Paul's letter to the Romans he is talking about how to live well – how to live faithfully and graciously. And to do this Paul talks of slavery and being set free: in other words he draws on the language the Passover and the Exodus to speak of how we are to live. So steeped is he in these ancient stories that they provide the language, the vocabulary, the grammar with which to speak of the world and of our lives. And so as Christians we interpret the world through these stories. Technically they are known as myths – not because they are untrue, but a myth is a deep story through which we learn to read and to interpret the world.

All of which brings us to today's world, one described as secular – in other words one in which religion is banished from public life. And one problem with a secular society is that it lacks good stories: it lacks myths in this sense of the word. Put simply, it doesn't have any deep, foundational stories – they've been banished. But how then do we live? How then do we imagine the good life, the peaceful and just community? To give an example: the Passover story is about people known as the Hebrews and they were an underclass of displaced, marginalised people. And in this story God is their champion, their liberator. Well, without this story, from where do we derive the impetus to champion the poor and the marginalised, the slave and the refugee - especially in a world of the survival of the fittest? Our secular world would drain the deep wells of myth and story from which the good life is imagined and directed. And where does that leave us?

So we, God's new Israel, come today to this table. Here in this ritual the ancient Passover story is reimagined. And as we eat and drink this ancient story comes alive and becomes flesh in our lives. Indeed the God who acted in these ancient stories becomes flesh in us through the bread and the wine. And so we carry this story out into the world and we live it out to the glory of God. Amen.

Holy and gracious God,
eternal, loving Maker of all things,
we praise and worship you,
heaven-dweller,
enthroned in power and might,
sovereign in majesty, and before whom
heaven and earth bows the knee.
We praise you who have made us in love
and created us to be free –
free to live fully and joyfully.
Yet we confess that we have become enslaved:
captive to alien powers and lords
and we have forfeited the life
for which you have made us.
Yet you do not leave us in captivity:
you have come to us in Jesus Christ
to liberate and to release.
And so hear us, we pray, as
we confess to you our need;
come to us afresh and lead us out
into newness of life.
Come to us here today in word and in song,
in bread and wine,
and gather us to yourself and make us yours.
We pray in the name of Jesus,
who came to save,
and in his words we pray, saying...