

Behold the lamb of God

Last Sunday in our service we were thinking about Moses, that maverick Israelite whose life had been saved from the tyranny of Pharaoh by the brave action of some Hebrew women. And we were thinking about how God appeared to Moses in a burning bush in the desert, and called him to lead his people out of slavery. And we heard how a voice from the bush commanded him to take off his shoes, for the place where he was standing was holy ground. And in a way this whole story of Israel's liberation from Egypt is holy ground, not just because it is found in Holy Scripture, but because it is a core narrative that lies at the very heart of the Jewish faith, one that is repeated and celebrated over and over again.

So let's begin by reminding ourselves where we have got to in this story. Moses has gone to Pharaoh and demanded that he release the Israelite slaves so that they can travel into the wilderness and there worship the God of their ancestors, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. Pharaoh refuses, and there follows a test of muscle between Pharaoh and this God of the captive people. God sends a series of plagues upon the Egyptians to force Pharaoh's hand, but Pharaoh resists. Until, finally, God sends one last plague, the one we read about in today's passage, one final calamity that forces Pharaoh to surrender to God and to Moses. And in preparation for this decisive act God tells Moses what the Israelites are to do. They are to perform a kind of ritual: on the night of their release they are to gather in their homes and they are to take a lamb, and at twilight they are to slaughter it, and they are to take some of the blood of the lamb and daub it on their doorposts and lintels. And then they are to eat the lamb, roasted over a fire. And that ritual is one that has been enacted in different ways and with variations throughout history and is still enacted today: known as Passover for reasons that are explained. And it is a ritual that is essential not only to the Jewish faith but to the Christian faith too, and I want to consider it today under three headings, for it involves a death, a mark, and a meal.

So let us start with a death. A lamb is slaughtered, a lamb without blemish. At the heart of the ritual of Passover is this death – but actually there is far more death than this in the passage. God says that he will pass through the land that night and strike down every firstborn in the land, human and animal, except the firstborn in the Israelite houses marked out with the blood of the lamb. God will 'pass over' these houses and spare their firstborn. Later in this chapter it refers to the destroyer, sometimes translated the angel of death, that will do God's work for him on that fearful night.

So there is death galore in this passage – not only of an innocent lamb but also countless innocent Egyptians, and animals, and perhaps at this point some of us are wondering what this story is doing in Holy Scripture. How can God act like that? What kind of a God destroys human life like this? And we have to confront this issue honestly: what kind of a God are we dealing with here, and is it one we want to believe in? And we could spend any number of sermons addressing this and we could discuss many possibilities. Is this in fact just the way God is? Does God have this dark side, associated with judgement, which not only inflicts punishment on the wicked but also on those who are innocent and guilty only by association? Have we over-tamed God and domesticated him? After all, we thought last week of what God said to Moses when Moses enquired of his name. He said, 'I am who I am, I will be who I will be', so who are we to question God? Or, alternatively, is there some difference between the God of the Old testament and the God of the New? Has God changed in some way, revealing himself differently in Jesus Christ? Or maybe what we have here in this passage is not a true portrayal of God at all. Maybe something terrible indeed happened that night in Egypt, with the death of countless Egyptians, and the Israelites interpreted this wrongly, projecting onto their God their own violence and destruction and making him out as responsible for the appalling events. Well, these are some of the possibilities, and we could and should grapple with this issue – but we can't here and now.

Let me, however, say something about how we might deal with this passage. In a sermon a couple of weeks ago I mentioned that there are two narratives running through this exodus story: a narrative about death and a narrative about life. And in the story Pharaoh represents the power of

death: everything about Pharaoh's Egypt reeks of death, from its gods to its voracious economy to its treatment of the vulnerable. And God represents the power of life and God's good purposes for the world. And later, when he has released Israel from Egypt God will give Israel a law which provides a contrast, an alternative, to Egypt's deathly regime and to live by that law is to choose life. The crucial thing, however, in this contest between Pharaoh and God, Egypt and Israel, death and life, is that Pharaoh and Egypt are destined for defeat and God and Israel for victory. And whether you take it literally or as a metaphor, the death of the Egyptian firstborn symbolises the inevitable defeat and death of Egypt and its ways. Pharaoh and Egypt will not prevail. Their days are numbered.

Well, this brings me to the lamb that was slaughtered and whose blood was smeared on the doorposts and lintels of the Israelite houses. What is that all about? Why this strange ritual? Well, later on we are told that for the Israelites blood represented life. It was believed that life was carried in the blood. And to release blood from a body was to release its life. So in daubing the blood of a lamb on the doors of the Israelites they were, in effect, daubing them with life. To take a rather crass but current analogy, it was like smearing them with anti-viral gel as we do when we enter houses and shops at present. Here we are protected. The destroyer, the angel of death, is like a virus – deathly. But it must pass over for these houses for it can do nothing here – here life prevails. And of course all of this points forward: forward to one who will in due course come, identified as the lamb of God; one whose blood will be shed, whose life will be spilled out on a cross, but whose blood over-rides and defeats death in all its manifestations.

Well, that brings me, much more briefly, to a second feature of this Passover ritual: along with the death there is a mark which sets apart the Israelite houses as belonging to God, claimed by God. And of course we could see reflected here our Christian practice of baptism, where we are marked out and claimed and identified as belonging to God. And just as the lamb's blood carried the lamb's life, so the waters of baptism carry new life, and the baptised are like the Israelites houses in Egypt, marked out and sealed by God. And that mark also signifies protection. Death cannot ultimately hold sway where this mark is found. So beware of harming or oppressing one so marked. And beware those who would harass or unjustly imprison or kill Christians: the angel of death is trespassing on protected property! And indeed we can go much further than this: whatever trials and tribulations we face, whatever hardship or pain or abuse we may suffer, whatever blows we endure, we know that we are marked with the sign of life and we will not therefore be overcome. We will not be destroyed.

So we have a death, and a mark – and finally a meal. This ritual that accompanies the Israelites' liberation that night involves a highly symbolic meal in which the lamb who provides the blood is eaten. This lamb who gives its life to counter the spread of death must be roasted with unleavened bread and bitter herbs and consumed. And what is the significance of that? Well, surely it is in eating that something is internalised. By eating something, it lives in us. What is eaten is digested and it becomes absorbed by our blood, and by our flesh and our bones and becomes part of us. And these momentous events on this sacred night are not just to be told and recounted. They are not just to be listened to and heard. They are to be internalised, carried by us. They are to live in us. They are shape our identity and form who we are. God's purpose for Israel was that in internalising this story they should be so shaped by it that they would become bearers of life in a world threatened by death.

That brings us to this meal that we share today here at this table. It is, of course, rooted in the Passover meal. It recalls a night when Jesus met with his disciples in an upper room to celebrate the Passover. And on that night too, just like at the first Passover, the angel of death was at work. The angel of death was on the loose, cornering Jesus, and a couple of days later his blood would be shed on a cross. What the angel of death did not realise was that this Jesus was the true Passover lamb, the lamb of God. And what the angel of death did not realise was that his blood carries life, life for the world. So come, and eat, and drink. Come and feed on him. Become carriers of his life. Behold the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. Amen.

Holy and gracious God,
Creator, Saviour, Redeemer,
we praise and worship you –
sovereign ruler over all the earth.
If we were able to peer into heaven, we would see you enthroned in power and might and
majesty;
we would see you in all your glory
and we would be dazzled by the sight.
But as we look we see on the throne a lamb:
meek and lowly, slain from the foundation of the world.
We see one who rules with a different kind of power,
one whose nature is love,
and who bears the scars of love -
one who takes away the sin of the world.
Come to us, lamb of God,
and seal our lives with your life-giving blood.
Over-ride the power of death at work in our lives;
cleansing us from all that defiles us;
sprinkle your blood on the doorposts and lintels of our lives,
and lead us out of captivity into newness of life.
And we pray in the name of Jesus, the lamb,
and we pray in the words that he taught us, saying...