



ST HELIERS CHURCH
& COMMUNITY CENTRE



TAKEAWAY SUNDAY SERMON

10th September 2023, 15th Sunday after Pentecost

12 The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, 2 “This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. 3 Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. ... 6 You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. 7 They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. 8 They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. ... 11 This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand, and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the Passover of the Lord. 12 I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, from human to animal, and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord. 13 The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. 14 “This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance. Exodus 12:1-14

18 Now when Jesus saw great crowds around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side. 19 A scribe then approached and said, “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.” 20 And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” 21 Another of his disciples said to him, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” 22 But Jesus said to him, “Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.” Matthew 8:18-22

Sermon: With sandals on your feet and staff in your hand

It can sometimes be hard to focus on the scripture readings when you hear them first thing Sunday morning. If you found your mind wandering during the Old Testament reading today, you wouldn't be the only one.

What we heard was essentially a list of quite detailed instructions on how to prepare and eat a particular meal. An important meal undoubtedly. But a list of instructions, nonetheless. I actually removed chunks of it, because otherwise it would have been about twice as long.

Anyone who has dipped into the Bible will know there are many pedantically specific parts like this that make for pretty dull reading, particularly in the Old Testament; whole swaths of instructions, rituals and obscure laws that seemingly have very little relevance today. Who talks about girding up loins today?!

In the case of our reading from Exodus this morning, this detailed description of the Passover feast really breaks the flow of the narrative. Just as we reach the climactic point, where the final plague is about to sweep over the land of Egypt and the people of Israel are about to escape ... we hear about how to cook a lamb and what to do with its entrails.

Is this simply an example of bad storytelling or at least storytelling from an era before block-buster movies and fast-paced action? Or is there something else going on?

As you might suspect, I want to suggest the latter. The story of the Exodus makes for gripping reading. It is an incredible tale of liberation, as it recalls the journey of a people from slavery under oppressors into freedom and new life.

For the people of Israel, it is a – if not the – formative story for its identity as a people. Not only that, but the Exodus has gone on to become a kind

prototypical narrative of liberation for oppressed peoples all over the world. It is timeless and universal.

It seems to me that this detailed list of instructions at this crucial juncture in the story is saying something very important. That is, that the story of the Exodus is not simply a story of the past to be remembered, nor is it merely a mythological tale of an ancient culture fading into the mists of time. No, it is a present reality. A story that is actively shaping the self-understanding of the present-day generation as much as generations past.

One commentator says that the liturgy is as important as the story itself. In other words, the Exodus is intentionally written to be lived and embodied as a present reality rather than just a memory of the past.

The story of the Passover Meal is told in a way that every successive generation is invited to become actors in the story; to re-enact the drama; to be active participants in God's ongoing work of bringing freedom and justice into the world.

So the author of our passage today, emphasises that the Passover Meal is to become a “perpetual ordinance” throughout the generations. A ritual that is done again and again and again.

Not only that, we’re told, this meal is so important, it is to begin their new year. It is to be the orientation point, the starting point, for the events of their lives. They are to see themselves as a people who have been freed from the forces of evil, and whose lives are a journey towards the promised land and to life in fullness together with their God. What a wonderful way to view the world.

As Christians, we don’t celebrate the Passover as such. But for those of you who know your Easter story, you’ll know that the Last Supper that Jesus celebrated with his disciples before he was crucified – Holy Communion – was the Passover Meal. And so, for Christians too, the story of the Exodus and imagery of Passover is utterly central to how we understand what Jesus achieved through his death and resurrection and to how we understand ourselves as the church.

Like the people of Israel in the Old Testament, the church is also a people who, in Christ, have been freed from evil, sin and death and who are on the way to life and life in fullness together with our God.

The significance of the Exodus for both Judaism and Christianity can scarcely be overstated. And it’s enshrined in both the Passover and Communion meals respectively.

So if our reading today is not only instructing the people to remember, but instructing them how they are to remember, how they are to embody this story in the present, what might we have to learn from these instructions?

The thing that stood out to me was the way in which the people are to eat the meal. We’re told they are to eat the meal hurriedly, with sandals on their feet, with loins girded, and with a staff in their hand.

In other words, they are to eat this meal as if they are on the road. This is a meal for the journey.

The commentaries on this passage said very little about these instructions except that it served to remind the people of God’s deliverance: they were a people delivered from slavery and a people being delivered into freedom and new life. It conveys hope and faith and a sense that we are on the way.

That does seem a little oversimplistic though. I was talking to a friend about this passage during the week. And she made the perceptive comment that people eat hurriedly when they don’t know where their next meal is going to come from; they eat hurriedly when there’s a scarcity of food and they’re scared their meal might get stolen from them; they eat hurriedly as a survival instinct in dangerous or fearful circumstances.

Very perceptive, I thought. So while there may be a sense of God’s deliverance and faith and hope ... there is also undoubtedly fear and unknowing and desperation.

This is the story of a people on the run. Running for their lives from Egypt's hostile armies; running into the wilderness where is no reliable source of food or water or shelter; running into the unknown with nothing but a vague promise of a home at the end of it all.

This is more than a meal for a spiritual pilgrimage. It is a meal for refugees. For people fleeing for their lives. For the displaced and the homeless and the desperate.

It's a meal that Jesus owned for himself at the last Supper. This Christ who was born a refugee, fleeing his hometown at the risk of death. This Christ who we're told in our gospel reading today, "has no place to rest his weary head". This Christ who knew he was journeying into the unknown, into suffering, into death – with nothing but faith in the promise of new life beyond. Christ is the refugee. Christ is every refugee. Every displaced and homeless and lost person.

So the question that has been on my mind this week is: what does it mean to be a people instructed to re-enact as a "perpetual ordinance" this refugee meal in the celebration of Communion? What does it mean to celebrate the meal in a way that we evoke feelings of fear and unknowing and desperation? What does it mean to allow this meal to form our life together and to shape our imagination and worldview? What does it mean to become actors in the story of the Exodus? Or as our gospel reading suggests, to follow the homeless and travel-worn Christ into the unknown?

Tough questions to ask. Questions to sit with. I want to suggest three things.

The first is that, for those who have known what it is to be homeless or to be displaced, this meal is primarily for them. It is, I think, intended as a comfort and reminder and sign that God is with them. That God has not forgotten them, but knows their fear, and is working towards justice and peace.

We know that there are many in Auckland and even within our own extended community who have been physically displaced because of the flooding earlier this year. People who are experiencing fear and unknown and even desperation. For them, this meal may serve as a promise of the faithful presence of the God of the Exodus, who is working to bring justice, freedom, and homecoming. Literal homecoming.

And of course, homelessness and displacement can take on many forms. Physical homelessness, yes. But also, emotional or spiritual homelessness. And there will be people in our community who feel entirely lost right now for any number of different reasons. This meal is for them as well.

So that's the first thing. For most of us, though, we don't know what it is to be displaced and homeless. We don't have to worry about where our next meal is coming from. And therefore, our experience of the meal and the story is very different.

To embody the story of Exodus means I think to place ourselves alongside, in solidarity with, the last, the lost and the least. To have compassion for the refugee, for the homeless, and for displaced peoples in our world.

An example close to home would be in Dunedin. South Dunedin is a lower socioeconomic area and one of the most densely populated parts of the country. It also happens to be incredibly flat and below sea level. As the sea level is projected to rise, South Dunedin will become increasingly unliveable.

To its credit, the Dunedin City Council is now talking about a substantial adaptation plan which will gradually buy-out residents so that they have the capacity to move elsewhere. It will be a huge undertaking and very expensive, very complex, but nonetheless necessary.

And if climate adaptation is complex and expensive in a wealthy country like New Zealand, it is even more so in poorer countries like some of the Pacific Islands which will much more severely affected by changing and intensifying weather patterns. It raises the question of what our responsibility is to our brothers and sisters in the South Pacific.

At the very least, the Communion meal, I think, compels us not to look away, to place ourselves in spirit alongside those most vulnerable people – both in this country and globally – and to actively pursue their best interests, their freedom, their flourishing life.

That's the second thing. The third thing is that we are never to forget that we are all people on the way, being delivered from evil and oppressive forces, and being led by God into freedom, justice, and new life together.

The Communion meal, you may have noticed is not a lavish feast. You get a little cube of bread. A little shot of juice. It keeps you wanting more. It's a reminder, I think, that we should never get too comfortable. We are to travel lightly and simply on this earth as mere pilgrims on the way; people of faith, ready at any moment to drop everything and follow the wayfaring Christ into the unknown.

So, let's gird up our loins, put on our sandals, take up our walking sticks, and wolf down our cup of tea, for God is calling us on an adventure into freedom and flourishing life together. Amen.