

Trinity 15

Sunday 13th September 2020



Readings:

Exodus 14:19-31

The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night.

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. At the morning watch the Lord in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, 'Let us flee from the Israelites, for the Lord is fighting for them against Egypt.'

Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers.' So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the Lord tossed the Egyptians into the sea. The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the great work that the Lord did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.

Matthew 18:21-35

Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.'

'For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand

talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'

Reflection

This week marks something of a milestone – VV26 which means that I have been doing these email reflections for exactly half a year which is something I never envisaged when I began. And I am sure none of you did either. What a strange year it has been. But it is also another milestone as some of us will be meeting in church for the first time in many weeks and actually be able to worship together physically rather than virtually, even though socially distanced and wearing masks. Our church services will be dedicated to Earth Day or Climate Sunday and that will be the theme of the sermon, but to avoid duplication in this VV reflection, I will stick with the Year A lectionary readings.

The Old Testament Reading refers, of course, to the flight from Egypt. Steve McQueen and co may have had their Great Escape, but it was as nothing to this. This is God intervening in world history to preserve his chosen people, not least because one day a Saviour must be born among them – and before that happens, they need to reach the Promised Land. I guess we have all been longing for our own Great Escape this last half-year – escape from lockdown and confinement and escape from the constant fear that we or those we love will succumb to this dreadful virus. It may still seem distant as it did for the Israelites when they were labouring for the Egyptians, - and sadly this week we seem to have taken a step backwards - but our day of escape will come and we will once again know freedom and rejoice in it as they did.

Moving on to our New Testament Reading, we have more challenging teaching from Jesus. After the miracles and tightknit theology of recent weeks we are back on familiar territory as Jesus tells us a parable which was certainly one of his favourite modes of teaching. But it does follow on from the previous two weeks when he has been speaking of the need to forgive the repentant sinner and welcome them back into the church. Ever practical, Peter wants to know what that will mean for him in real terms. Must he forgive the sinner as many as seven times. I suspect Peter thought even that a bit extreme. Not seven but more, much more says Jesus – seventy times. But this is not really about maths. Seventy is hyperbolic - a random number simply to indicate that you must continue to exercise forgiveness as long as it takes, for surely not even the most pedantic amongst us would actually keep such a precise reckoning of our forgiveness. And Jesus goes on to use this parable, of the unforgiving servant, to teach us a lesson about forgiveness.

Sadly, slavery is almost as old as civilisation itself. Many cultures believed you should not enslave your own people though it was a moot point. Some forms of employment, such as serfdom, were little more than slavery under another name. The man in the story is variously called servant or slave but the latter seems more accurate for his Lord had the power to sell him – and his family and all his possessions - when he defaulted on his debt. That debt was for an incredible amount, ten thousand talents, roughly £3billion in today's terms. It could never be repaid as it would take an estimated 200,000 years' work to amass it, so the slave's promise to pay up if his Lord had patience with him was a totally meaningless gesture. How did the slave pile up such a debt? Surely there is no way the Lord would have allowed such a situation to develop - but this is just a story isn't it! Once again, I think this is Jesus using dramatic hyperbole – which he did often – to emphasise the magnitude of the debt. The Lord is touched by the slave's plight and simply cancelled the whole debt – again incredible! The slave's reaction is not recorded but no doubt he would have made some show of gratitude, and perhaps even meant it at the time. But he fails to follow the Lord's example himself, as, soon after he meets a fellow slave who owes him a hundred denarii – less than £40 – physically abuses him and throws him into gaol till he paid the debt – not much forgiveness there. Of course, the moral is in the contrast. Jesus is reminding us just how great a debt we owe to God. God gives us the world and everything in it, he gives us life – and he gives us that for eternity if we come to him in humility and repentance. We have managed to chalk up a debt much more valuable than £3billion. Our debt to him is immense, immeasurable. Despite our constant ingratitude, he continues to love and forgive us; but he taught us to say “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” We deserve nothing he gives us and all he asks in return is that we respond in love. And the way we can do that is to become as much like him as possible; to show love and forgiveness to those around us, whatever their faults, whether real or whether we simply perceive them as such. It's not easy, especially when we feel hurt or wounded, but the answer, as always is found in Christ. Despite humanity's centuries old rejection of God, his Son still came to save us. How hurt, how wounded he must have felt, and yet he still forgave us. Being forgiven and forgiving, receiving and showing mercy are inextricably linked. They are not just about blind obedience but an expression of God's love and life within us, bursting out and overwhelming our own petty grievances. Peter got it so wrong; God does not keep a score and no more should we.

Amen

Prayers

Today's Collect

God, who in generous mercy sent the Holy Spirit
upon your Church in the burning fire of your love:
grant that your people may be fervent
in the fellowship of the gospel
that, always abiding in you,
they may be found steadfast in faith and active in service;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen

Things Are Different Now

I wish I knew then,
what I know now –
how precious time was
as he walked among us.

There were crowds and questions,
the excitement of hearing and seeing,
and some so blessed to know his touch.

How quickly things can change,
all in the blink of an eye!
From cheers to jeers,
from faith to fear,
from celebrations to mourning.

I wish I knew then,
what I know now –
how precious all time is
as, still, he dwells among us.

No crowds now, but questions remain.
No chance to gather and hear and see
in ways we have always known.

Things are different now.

The days are long,
the nights are dark -
now testing times are here.

Fears still need their release,
hands still long to be held,
and in private mourning,
death is keenly felt.

Things are different now.

With those who once waited,
we must wait,
trusting,
in the life which will rise again.

For we will declare
now, as before,
that he is risen -
he is risen indeed!

Rev Dr Lezley Stewart, Church of Scotland

Prayer for our churches and ourselves

As this week, Lord,
we come together once more as a worshipping community,
be with us and bless us.
Help us to adjust to this new way of church
And yet still perceive you in our midst.
Be with those who are unable to join us
Because they still feel anxious or unsure,
Or are prevented by ill health, remembering especially Ken and Jean.
Continue to be with those who mourn,
Especially the families of David Round and George Banks,
And bring them comfort in their loss.
For your mercy's sake,
Amen

Blessing

May God who forgave us so freely,
Give us the gift of forgiveness,
That we may live in love and peace with all.
And the blessing of God Almighty,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
be among you and remain with you always.
Amen