

Now the Lord said to Moses, 'I will bring one more plague on Pharaoh and on Egypt. After that, he will let you go from here, and when he does, he will drive you out completely. <sup>2</sup> Tell the people that men and women alike are to ask their neighbours for articles of silver and gold.' <sup>3</sup> (The Lord made the Egyptians favourably disposed towards the people, and Moses himself was highly regarded [!] in Egypt by Pharaoh's officials and by the people.)

<sup>4</sup> So Moses said, 'This is what the Lord says: "About midnight I will go throughout Egypt. <sup>5</sup> Every firstborn son in Egypt will die, from the firstborn son of Pharaoh, who sits on the throne, to the firstborn son of the female slave, who is at her hand mill, and all the firstborn of the cattle as well. <sup>6</sup> There will be loud wailing throughout Egypt – worse than there has ever been or ever will be again. <sup>7</sup> But among the Israelites not a dog will bark at any person or animal." Then you will know that the Lord makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel. <sup>8</sup> All these officials of yours will come to me, bowing down before me and saying, "Go, you and all the people who follow you!" After that I will leave.' Then Moses, hot with anger, left Pharaoh. <sup>9</sup> The Lord had said to Moses, 'Pharaoh will refuse to listen to you – so that my wonders may be multiplied in Egypt.' <sup>10</sup> Moses and Aaron performed all these wonders before Pharaoh, but the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he would not let the Israelites go out of his country.

12 <sup>1</sup> The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in Egypt, <sup>2</sup> 'This month is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year. <sup>3</sup> Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a lamb for his family, one for each household... <sup>12</sup> 'On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn of both people and animals, and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the Lord. <sup>13</sup> The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are, and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt.

### **Luke 22**

<sup>7</sup> Then came the day of Unleavened Bread on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. <sup>8</sup> Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, 'Go and make preparations for us to eat the Passover.' <sup>9</sup> 'Where do you want us to prepare for it?' they asked. <sup>10</sup> He replied, 'As you enter the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him to the house that he enters, <sup>11</sup> and say to the owner of the house, "The Teacher asks: where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?" <sup>12</sup> He will show you a large room upstairs, all furnished. Make preparations there.'

<sup>13</sup> They left and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover.

<sup>14</sup> When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. <sup>15</sup> And he said to them, 'I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. <sup>16</sup> For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfilment in the kingdom of God.'

### **Signposts in the desert - finding Jesus in Exodus**

#### *2. Desperate times, desperate measures -The death of the first-born*

We all have particular events which shape our identity – the way that we think about ourselves. Most obviously our birthday. Two key factors in the way we think about ourselves are first our age, and secondly our family. So, we tend to celebrate or at least remember, our birthday each year as it certainly reminds us of our age and often we celebrate it with family members and maybe use the occasion to remember family stories – perhaps sometimes about previous birthdays. For those of us who are married, a key life event is of course our wedding and again we tend to commemorate that every year on our wedding anniversary

We also have events which shape our identity *as a nation*. For the UK, even after all these years, it is still the two world wars – of brave, courageous, sacrificial Britain standing up against tyranny (*just this last week, the Queen referred to the "war-time spirit"*). And we remind ourselves of this every year with *Remembrance Sunday* and *Armistice Day*

For Jews, especially in the time of Jesus, the great event that shaped their whole identity, was the one we heard about in our first reading – *the Passover* – when their ancestors were dramatically

and miraculously rescued from slavery in Egypt. And, as we also heard, right from the very beginning God commanded them to commemorate this every year with the Passover meal.

Similarly, for us as Christians, the great life-defining event is the death and resurrection of Jesus. We commemorate this in *Holy Week* and *Easter*, but also more frequently of course through *Holy Communion*.

It is very clear, not least from our gospel reading, that Jesus understood his own mission to die on the cross *in terms of the Passover*. He carefully timed his approach and his arrival in Jerusalem as the 7 day festival was beginning. He made careful secret arrangements to share the Passover meal with his disciples. And as the supper started, *he said to them, 'I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. <sup>16</sup> For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it (i.e. the Passover) finds fulfilment in the kingdom of God.'*

And then of course it was at that Passover meal that Jesus instituted the *Lord's supper* – our Holy Communion – as a vital way of not only remembering, but understanding his death.

Passover was a huge festival in Israel every year – especially in Jerusalem, when Jews from all over the Roman Empire would gather to commemorate how God had liberated them from the tyrants of Egypt. This had particular resonance for Israel now under the jack-boot of Rome and so the city would be packed with both soldiers of both the Roman army and king Herod, to make sure that the celebration didn't turn into revolution. The Roman governor Pilate and Herod himself would be on hand to oversee operations and of course the whole Jewish religious hierarchy to celebrate Passover itself. So you could say it was a time when all those who were most opposed to the mission of Jesus were gathered together in one place. We'll come back to the significance of this shortly. But it is clear that if we are to have a proper understanding of what exactly happened on the cross and the meaning of Jesus' death, we need to understand what happened at the original *Passover* in Egypt some 1500 years earlier.

First, we need to understand the background, the context of the Passover. As we were reminded last week, having emigrated to Egypt to escape a great famine, Jacob's descendants had ended up being abused and oppressed slaves for 400 years. At last God had heard their desperate prayers and called Moses to lead his people out of Egypt. As confronted Pharaoh, it became increasingly clear that the Pharaoh was not going to let God's people go – under any circumstances – well, almost.

God had sent terrible plagues on Pharaoh and his people: the life-giving waters of the Nile turned to blood, frogs, gnats, flies, the mass death of livestock, boils, hail, locusts, and 3 days of darkness. Sometimes, Pharaoh had been on the brink of letting God's people go, but every time he hardened his heart. And so now as I've titled this talk, *Desperate times required desperate measures*: God had to resort to sending the most terrible plague of all: <sup>5</sup> *Every firstborn son in Egypt will die, from the firstborn son of Pharaoh, who sits on the throne, to the firstborn son of the female slave, who is at her hand mill, and all the firstborn of the cattle as well.* <sup>6</sup> *There will be loud wailing throughout Egypt – worse than there has ever been or ever will be again* - the death of all the first-born, the sons and heirs of every single family as well as a further decimation of Egypt's livestock.

In our modern age, we might think this is too terrible a judgement – all those innocent children. But from God's point of view he is simply bringing forward and into sharper focus the judgement that will face any individual that continues to live in sin and worshipping other gods. Pharaoh thought that he was invincible, untouchable. Back in *Exodus 5*, when Moses had first confronted Pharaoh saying *The Lord, the God of Israel, says 'Let my people go'*, Pharaoh said: *'Who is the Lord, that I should obey him. I do not know the Lord'* You see Pharaoh is saying *I don't recognise this God of yours – I'm the Lord around here and anyway we follow other gods here.*

If we don't worship the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, we will worship other gods. Often that god will be our own ego – like Pharaoh. *I will do what I want to do – I'm in charge of my own life.* Or that god will be our own image – whether on social media, or in the world at large or our own local community – our own reputation, what others think of us. Or that god may be money, or career, or social status or drink or food or sex. The thing is whatever we constantly give in to or make a priority in our life, we give power to – we make it a god or an idol in our lives. Jesus himself said: *Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins (or goes on sinning) is a slave to sin.*

And just as the slave-masters of Egypt would work the children of Israel to death, so our sin will lead us to die. Sometimes prematurely, but ultimately for everyone. God said to Adam and Eve that if they ate the forbidden fruit they would die. St Paul said famously: *the wages of sin is death.* Jesus himself said: *if you do not believe that I am [the one sent by God], you will indeed die in your sins.* And so this terrible judgement – the death of the first-born – is for God, for whom a 1000 years is like a day, a foretaste – a bringing forward - of the judgement that the whole of Egypt, that every sinner, every worshipper of false gods would one day face. And Pharaoh was given again and again a way out – all he had to do was to let God's people go. The trouble was that involved acknowledging that the Lord was indeed the God above all gods.

So, in that final plague we see effectively, the judgement of God, which is to let the effect of sin take its course. For one way or another, sin kills us – either prematurely, or ultimately spiritually. But the Passover enabled the children of Israel to be protected from death. It is clear from the story that they were not naturally exempt from God's judgement, the death of the first-born. The children of Israel were cruelly treated by the Egyptians, but they themselves were not without sin.

We know from the story of Moses how he saw two of his people fighting each other. We know from later in the story of how ready they were to grumble and complain and how quick to lose faith in God and even want to return to Egypt. We know how easily they were led to going back to worshipping the golden calf, which suggests that had been common practice whilst they were in Egypt. They too deserved God's judgement, but because they are God's people, he gives them a way out: for each household to kill an unblemished lamb and smear its blood on the doorposts. This was not just about a religious ritual or making a sacrifice, but showing their willingness to trust and obey God.

John the Baptist said of Jesus: *Behold the Lamb of God.* And so just as in the Passover, we see on the cross the judgement of God in the form of letting the terrible effects of the full sinfulness of man take their course: the betrayal of Judas, the blind self-righteousness and pride of the religious leaders, the callous indifference and cowardice of Pilate, the blood-lust of the crowd, the vicious cruelty not only of the Roman soldiers but the whole system and culture nurtured by Rome. But instead of that judgement, the results those deadly attitudes affecting the perpetrators, they are focussed entirely on the innocent shoulders of Jesus, the Lamb of God.

Some find it hard to understand how a loving and compassionate God could visit such a terrible judgement on his innocent son. But we need to realise that just as it was God who stepped in to rescue his people from Egypt, in Jesus it is God himself who has stepped in to rescue us. Jesus is the Word become flesh, God in human form who has come down to reconcile the world to himself and to take the consequences of our sin on his own head.

So often we stop there, but seeing Jesus' death in the light of the Passover, shows us that this is not the whole of the story. For in that terrible plague, not only Pharaoh and the people of Egypt got what was their due, but also the gods of Egypt. *12 v. 12 'On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn of both people and animals, and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the Lord.* The gods of Egypt were shown to be utterly powerless to stop God doing his work. And on the cross, not only all the worldly powers gathered together in Jerusalem, but all the powers of evil did their absolute worst and, in the end, failed miserably; for Jesus' resurrection shows he utterly conquered death and in so doing defeated Satan and all his powers. No wonder Satan had been so desperate to try and divert Jesus from the cross.

The next meaning of the Passover is that God's people were finally **liberated from slavery**. Nothing else had been able to set them free; they certainly weren't able to free themselves. It was only this terrible intervention by God that led at last to them being able to escape Egypt and the cruel enslavement of Pharaoh and his minions. This is what Jesus' death on the cross does for us: He sets us free from the slavery, the addiction, the destructive power of sin.

Finally, the Passover, not only liberated the children of Israel from the slavery of Egypt, but **it set them free to fulfil their calling to be the children of God**. As we shall be reminding ourselves in the next few weeks, it was a long and arduous journey with many set-backs, but no longer would they be a crushed under-class of slaves, seen as less than human, but they would have the opportunity to start a new life, to become a confident and powerful nation, free to worship the Lord their God without fear, free to become the people God created them to be.

In the same way, Christ's death on the cross has not only saved us from spiritual death, not only set us free from the slavery of sin and the power of the gods which can dominate our lives, but it has set us free to become the people God created us to be – sons and daughters of the living God, witnesses to his love and grace, builders of his heavenly kingdom here on earth.

So, in the Passover we begin to see the full meaning of the cross, of what we mean when we say *Christ died for our sins or that we might be forgiven*. For God's forgiveness is not just a matter of writing off our sin, it goes so much further than that. God's forgiveness means that on the cross He undoes *all* the consequences of our sinfulness, of our worshipping other gods. He rescues us from spiritual death, He sets us free from the destructive hold that sin has over us; He gives us a new identity and a new life, He enables us to become the people we were created to be – children of God: free, confident, united, and filled with his love.