

This morning our Old Testament lesson takes us into the Book Exodus and the beginnings of the story of slavery of the people of Israel in Egypt and their release from captivity. At the heart of this story is the figure of Moses and the central role he plays as an instrument of God in the liberation of his people. We will be following this story for much of the rest of this season of Trinity. What I want to do this morning is to give something of an overview of this whole period and the meaning it has for the Jewish people right up to the present time.

Up to this point in the Biblical narrative, it has been hard to locate the stories of the Patriarchs precisely in time. Did they in fact represent actual historical figures or were they representatives of different tribal groupings that came together to form the people of Israel. Now we have arrived at a point in the history of the Jewish people where the events described in the Bible can be identified with events in the history of other peoples in this area.

Egyptian records of this time speak of a people called the Hapiru, or Habiru, who have been linked with the Hebrews, a nomadic people who came to settle in Egypt. They tell us of a Pharaoh, Rameses II, who lived from 1290 – 1244 BC. He used, among other foreign slave labourers, these Habiru in the construction of cities, including the city of Rameses, referred to in our Old Testament Lesson this morning.

This was a period of great suffering for the Jewish people. It was a period, culminating in their eventual deliverance, that was to be a formative one, very much defining their understanding of who they were as a people before God. It

is worth noting that as the Biblical writers speak of their seemingly hopeless position of bondage, they begin to tell us the story of Moses, the central figure in this whole saga. We will be reflecting on the ministry of Moses over the coming weeks. We will come to see him not just as a national hero, a liberator of his people but also one who acts as a mediator between God and his people.

There are two strands to the story as it unfolds a story of suffering but also one of redemption. There is the increasing severity of their bondage and the plagues that God brought upon the land of Egypt. This period of their history is remembered in the Passover Meal, celebrated each year. Along with the Passover lamb a number of foods are eaten that remind those at the table of their suffering and their redemption.

A number of glasses of red wine are drunk. Red is the colour of blood, reminding them of the blood of slaves beaten without mercy, as well as the blood of the first Passover lamb, smeared on their door posts to mark their houses as ones that the angel of death was to pass over. Some of the food is dipped in salt water. This calls to mind the sweat and tears of the slaves but also the sea through which they passed to their freedom. Charoset is a mixture of crushed almonds, dates and apple, sprinkled with cinnamon and wine. It has the appearance of mud, reminding them of the mud they had to sue to make bricks; the fruits making up the charoset represent the fruits of the Promised Land they were about to enter. There are bitter herbs that also call to mind their period of suffering in slavery. They usually use a long leaved lettuce for this. The stalk is bitter but the leaves are crisp and pleasant. The taste of the stalk is that of slavery, the leaves of the freedom that was to come.

There are reminders in this meal that even in their darkest hour, God was with them. It is a memory that has sustained the Jewish people in dark periods in their history; during times of persecution when they were expelled from many countries in Europe, including our own, during the Middle Ages; the pogroms they experienced in Eastern Europe in the 19th century; the abomination that was the Holocaust, the attempted extermination of the Jewish people in the concentration camps of the last war.

The Jewish people have much to teach us in the way they remember the past. They do so in a way that brings it to bear on the present. As they recall the tragedies of the past, they also recall how God was with them in even the darkest times. Looking back on their time in Egypt, God's presence, God's help may not have been obvious at the time, but looking back they can see God's hand. As the slaves were toiling, building the city of Rameses, their situation apparently hopeless, they could see no hope for their future. But looking back they can see in the birth and preservation of Moses, God beginning to act even in this time of suffering.

I would draw from this the lesson that no situation is hopeless. God never abandons those he has called to follow him. Sometimes those he has called turn away and bring suffering and tragedy upon themselves. Sometimes communities and nations turn away and we witness breakdown in social order such as we see in our own day. But, as we are reminded each time we celebrate communion, God never abandons us. There may be hard lessons to learn. We may as individuals or as communities have to repent, to acknowledge that we have failed, that we have forgotten the Lord, that we have

not given him the priority in the way we order our lives. I am not saying God inflicts the suffering; rather we bring it upon ourselves; it is the fruit of our own disorder.

As I said, in the coming weeks we will be reading the unfolding story of the deliverance of the People of Israel from their bondage in Egypt. Even as God lead them out of Egypt, as he gave them the Law on Mount Sinai and lead them through the desert, there were time of disobedience, times when the people resented what God was doing and even harked back to the security of their days of slavery, demanding ‘Why did you bring us out into this desert to die? We had plenty to eat in Egypt.’ But the God of the Exodus stayed with them, through all their suffering and pain, their resentment and disobedience, and brought them into the land he had promised.

In our own experience, in our own journey through life, there are times when God’s word to us is one of comfort and encouragement; times also when God’s word to us is one of reproof and condemnation and we can resent it and the messenger. But God is always there and his abiding purpose for us is good. May we as individuals and as a community draw comfort from his encouragement and respond to his correction, that we may walk in his paths and in them find our peace.