

**Downing Place United Reformed Church - Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> February 2020 Sermon**

**“Do this in remembrance of me...” - The Revd. Dr. John P. Bradbury**

Exodus 12: 14-28; Matthew 26: 14-30

The high drama is interrupted for a moment. Those who have been held as slaves for centuries, who have been at the mercy of a tyrant monarch are about to make their bid for freedom. Those who had been forced to make bricks without straw, been beaten, and at times who's first born children had been slaughtered, are about to be led out of slavery, into freedom, under God's good hand.

And, almost as an interlude to the action, Moses gathers the people who are about to be liberated from their captivity. Let us listen for a moment a comment on this moment in Israel's history from the former Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks: “And now the time had arrived. The Israelites were on the brink of their release. Moses, their leader, gathered them together and prepared to address them. What would he speak about at this fateful juncture, the birth of a people? He could have spoken about many things. He might have talked about liberty, the breaking of their chains, and the end of slavery. He might have talked about the destination to which they were about to travel, the “land flowing with milk and honey” (Exodus 3:17). Or he might have chosen a more sombre theme: the journey that lay ahead, the dangers they would face: what Nelson Mandela called “the long walk to freedom.” Any one of these would have been the speech of a great leader sensing an historic moment in the destiny of Israel. Moses did none of these things. Instead he spoke about children, and the distant future, and the duty to pass on memory to generations yet unborn.<sup>1</sup>

How extraordinary that the first celebration of the Passover comes before that which it is to remember. As the people huddle, fearful of what Pharaoh might do next, hardly believing what God might do next, they are told to institute this festival meal by which that which is going to happen is to be remembered for ever. It is for their children, the meal through which their children and their children's children will come to know the story that tells that that God is their God, and they are God's people.

And so it is, that many generations later, as this meal was being celebrated, as that story was being remembered for the sake of the children and future generations, that Jesus takes that meal and transforms it. Like that first Passover, this Passover – this ‘Last Supper’, takes place in a moment of high tension. The storm clouds are gathering, the powers that be are plotting to have Jesus removed. And once again, before the act that was to be remembered had even happened, Jesus commands his disciples to take the bread and eat it, and to ‘do this in remembrance of me’. Jesus takes the logic of the Passover, and fills it with renewed meaning about the events of his own death and resurrection that are about to unfold.

Memory is deeply connected with identity. We are who we are in part because we remember that which has happened to us in the past. We remember who our loved ones are, we remember the stories of our childhood which shape us. Nations remember their national stories – however true or otherwise they might be – and that shapes national identity. The Jewish people remember their foundational stories, and that shapes them into God's people. And so it is with the Church too – we remember our foundational stories, particularly the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ which Christ himself calls us to remember. He does so at that Last Supper whilst those events are still a looming threat, not a past event.

The Passover is a very particular kind of remembrance. It is an act of story telling. An act of passing on the memory to the next generation. Literally, an acting out the story. When Jewish families gather to celebrate the Passover the language is all of ‘we’ and ‘us’, it is not ‘they’ and ‘them’ who fled Pharaoh and crossed the red sea, it was ‘us’ who fled and crossed the red sea. ‘We’ were liberated from slavery. God led ‘us’ to freedom. The memory is so intense, so thick it is as if the past is drawn into the present moment and as if the action unfolds around the Passover table incorporating those at that table into those events. In Greek there is a word that is associated with this very thick form of memory that makes the past present to us in the here and now, it is *anamnesis*. *Anamnesis* is one of the things that we believe is going on too when we celebrate communion. Christ's first gathering with his disciples

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<sup>1</sup> Sacks, Jonathan. Exodus: The Book of Redemption (Covenant & Conversation 2) (pp. 77-78). Kindle Edition.

around that Passover table, his taking of the bread and the wine, his crucifixion and resurrection, these things are all recalled with a vividness such that they are made present to us. We are caught up in that story. We would understand part of the work of the Holy Spirit in Communion as precisely drawing that story from the past so vividly into our present that it shapes and forms us. It becomes a living memory – as if when we gather around the table we do so with Christ and those first disciples at that first, ‘Last Supper’.

That is why, in the prayers that surround the communion service, they always reference aspects of salvation history, parts of the story of God’s ways with the world as unfolded to us in scripture. As we are told that Jesus gave thanks, so we give thanks in a prayer of thanksgiving which is, in all kinds of ways, a prayer of memory. That prayer will reference key figures in the story of God’s ways with the world, and it will always bring us to the point where we recall Christ. In that memory of those who have gone before us in God’s story, we recognise that we are in some way united with them, and with all believers in all times and places. That remembrance is a collective one which stretches way beyond the walls of this church. *“And therefore, with all God’s people in heaven and on earth we sing the triumphant hymn of your glory....”* We sing to God’s glory because we have remembered God’s good deeds to us, and those who have gone before us. What other response could there be, but to glorify God?

The absolute centre point of our remembrance is the remembrance of Christ and all he was for us, and all he did for us. His death upon the cross and resurrection to new life. The prayer of thanksgiving continues, holding before us that foundational memory, that will be held before us signified in the bread and wine that we will literally hold and share. And so at that moment we proclaim the mystery of faith: *“Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again”*.

*“Christ will come again...”* This reminds us that this is indeed an odd and stretched sort of memory. As the Israelites celebrated the first Passover before that which it was to remember had happened, and as Jesus celebrated the Last Supper before that which it was to remember had happened, so we too, when we celebrate communion remember that which has not yet happened. The Kingdom of God has not yet come in its fullness. Christ has been raised, but the lion does not yet lie down with the lamb. We look to the moment of God’s inbreaking into history, and its transformation, when there will be crying no more. When human divisions and violence will be washed away. And what is more, as we gather around that table, rich and poor, old and young, black or white, gay or straight, for just a moment, in however a broken fashion, we image something of what that Kingdom might look like. The remembrance that forms our identity is one which calls us to remember God’s future with us, to look for that future, and to pattern our life in the here and now on the promises of that future.

And let us not forget where all this started – for the sake of the children. This Passover meal, that Jesus takes and transforms, is for the sake of the children. It is for them that the story is told; that the identity is passed on; that the faith lives from generation to generation. How sad it is when that which was initiated for the sake of the children excludes the very people it is for. That is why it is so vital that children find their place at the heart of our celebration of Communion. Judaism continues itself precisely through its children – it is not a religion that seeks converts. Its logic is to be the people of God set apart from the rest of the world for the sake of the blessing of the rest of the world. The logic of Christianity is different – it is about drawing the rest of the world into the midst of the Christ story. So the remembrance we take part in at Communion is not just for our literal children, it is for all those who have not yet been drawn into the heart of God’s ways with the world in Christ. We remember at the table so that our identity might be formed ever more in Christ, so that we might tell and live out that story for all who will be our children of faith. Communion feeds us for our witness, our evangelism and our service to the world.

When Christ was about to leave his disciples, he gave them the means by which he was to be remembered. He did not write them a book, he gave them a meal. I will never cease to find it odd that we expound the Word of the book that Christ did not directly, himself give us, week in, week out, but we do not celebrate the meal he gave us to remember him by, week in and week out. For we are, as a tradition, often just so good with our words and our ideas and our talking. What Jesus gave us was a practice: a gathering together, a taking of material, physical things of the world, bread broken and wine poured, which become signs of Christ’s very presence with us and the means by which the Spirit fires us to remember. To be, indeed, re-membered – re-ordered once more into the members of Christ’s body, through the telling again, in Word and sign, the wondrous story of God’s ways with the world in Christ. A meal to celebrate with our children for their sake, so that they might live the story. A meal to catch us up in God’s vision of the future, that we might be Christ’s people: a sign and a foretaste of God’s kingdom in the here and now. Amen.