

**Sermon for Summer Sunday Morning Worship
7th August 2011**

Exodus 12:1-13

Being prepared for Freedom to walk with God!

(Think Spots and Sermon)

THINK 1

In the last few weeks, we've been learning about bits of the story of Moses.

We've learnt he was found in a **basket** in the reeds on a river bank and raised by the daughter of the Egyptian Pharaoh;

We learnt last week that having tried in the wrong way to protect some of his fellow Israelites, Moses had to run away. He then got married and herded **sheep** for 40 years - at which point God spoke to him & sent him back to Egypt to rescue all the people of Israel!

Now, Moses is back in Egypt. God has been helping him, and his brother Aaron, to convince Pharaoh to free the Israelite people, by sending a series of plagues - nasty horrid things - on the people of Egypt.

There have been plagues of (slide for each)

- **Blood** (which turned all the flowing water in Egypt to blood and killed the fish)
- an infestation of **Frogs** that got everywhere
- next, in my book was worse than infestation of frogs - it was gnats or lice (depending on which translation you read) we've got... **Gnats - biting things like this horrid mossie!**
- Next was **Flies** - equally nasty if not quite so itchy
- Then there was a **plague on all the livestock** - something like the dreadful Foot and Mouth disease
- Then everyone suffered from **boils**
- Then it **hailed** - which must have been quite a shock in Egypt - and ruined all the crops
- Then it was **locusts** - that devoured anything that was left after the hail
- And then God had plunged all of the Egyptians into **darkness!**

Each time Pharaoh made promises he didn't keep - still God's people had not been allowed to leave Egypt. So now, God had decided he was going to kill the first born son of every household in Egypt.

Now we're all suitably uncomfortable and cringing - let's listen to what God wanted **his** Hebrew people to do:

E would you like to pick up the story from there:
Exodus 12:1-13

THINK 2

The people of God were being prepared for FREEDOM!

Would the children like to come up for a few minutes please?

God was making it possible for his people to stop working for other people - the Egyptians - and go on a journey with him to a place where they would be FREE.

Hidden in the story we just heard are the things God wanted them to have for the journey.

Volunteer

They needed.... a cloak and a belt

- Belt first
- What's a cloak? Something that covers your ordinary clothes to keep you warm and dry (it was invented a bit before the waterproof) My cloak is a bit big - won't go in the belt, so put it on.
- Sandals on their feet - protection from the sharp stones on the road ahead
- A staff in their hand - to help them up the hills, round the rocks, over the streams.

Right - ready?

And then once they were dressed like that, they needed to eat a special meal. Can you remember what was in it?

- **Lamb**
- **Bitter herbs** - something a bit like horseradish
- **Bread without yeast**

So, there you are (offer them the bowl of food)... not quite what you want right now? No, I thought not! Can you hold it though.

Before they went on their special journey with God, they were all together in their families, prepared to leave - right down to a slap up BBQ before they left!

God does the same for us - though don't expect a BBQ in the next hour!

God gets us ready for what he wants us to do. He gives us stories in the Bible, our families and friends, he gives us the church here, and elsewhere, where we can learn about him, share music, and think spots and food; all of this so that we can be ready to go with God into the rest of our lives.

Shall we thank God for that - let us pray (say after me):

Thank you God

That you want us to be free

To go on a journey with you.

Thank you God

For all the stories in the Bible

of the things you have done.

For our clothes, our families and friends.

And thank you God for our church here at St Peter's.

Amen

Time to go for an activity. Shall I pray for you all, and those that have prepared something more fun than dressing up? PRAY

Would you like to swap that plate for a JELLY BABY? Yes!

The children can all have one AFTER service with your drinks!

SERMON

Shall we pray:

Lord, if you haven't already, speak into our hearts and our minds, so that we can journey from this place in FREEDOM, knowing you better .

God's people, Israel, were being prepared for FREEDOM.

FREEDOM **for** what?

- To be the community of Israel. Verse 6 of this passage is the first time that God calls his people a community - they are no longer a single family, or a collection of 12 families but a community, whose identity is as God's. When Moses arrived back in Egypt, God told him to describe Israel as his "first-born son" (Exod 4:22) .They were very special people to God, and God had made that quite clear to Pharaoh.
- To go on a journey, a journey to somewhere - they weren't told where.
- It was a journey, a walk, with God - the consistent thread throughout the plagues is that the Israelites should be freed so that they can worship God - their journey was to be walk of worship with God.

God wanted Israel to be behave FREEDOM **from** what?

It wasn't anything they had done wrong! He wasn't dealing with Israel's sins. (God focused on that will come later!!) It was FREEDOM from slavery and the burdens that had been placed on them by Pharaoh - freedom from someone else controlling their lives, constantly making their work more difficult to achieve. (Exodus 5)

It was FREEDOM at a price!

The cost to the Egyptians was a 10th plague - the lives of their first-born sons.

But there was a price for this new community of Israel too!

On the surface the price was cheap - a lamb. Well, OK a lot of lambs!

But there's an awful lot of detail in our reading this morning about those lambs. Four whole verses from v3-v6. So they must be important to Israel's FREEDOM.

- The lambs had to be sourced and sacrificed at exactly the right time. According to v3 and v6 the 10th and 14th days of the first month of a new year in a whole new era in the lives of God's people.
- The lambs had to be of exactly the right quantity according to v4, to match the number and the needs of the families of Israel. They were a replacement or substitute for the first born sons of Israel when this plague came to the land of Egypt, and there had to be nothing left to waste, nothing left behind, because this was a new start.
- The lambs had to be of exactly the right quality according to v5. God demanded perfection from these sacrificial lambs, just as he would hope for perfection from his people.
- The lambs had to be used in exactly the right way - their blood smeared on the doorframes, then roasted whole.

Only after all that, were the lambs to be eaten, with the people totally ready and prepared to leave, as we've seen with the children earlier!

So yes, on the surface, the price of FREEDOM was a lamb. But to achieve that freedom they had to show themselves capable of two things:

Firstly they had to show their FAITH in God who was giving them these instructions. But how could they be so sure of God? Well because of his track record; because he had protected them through each of the 9 previous plagues **without** the need for any special measures on their part. For example, in the plague on the livestock in Exodus 9 v4 and 6, God knew whose cattle were whose; In Exodus 9 v26 God shelters the Israelites from the hailstones without them needing to hid indoors; and God gives the Israelites light when he plunges every Egyptian into darkness.

Since the Israelites believed in the God who had already done so much to show how important they were to him, the second step to achieving their freedom was easy: all they had to do was OBEY God's instructions!

By following every single detail of God's instructions they would be free - free from slavery - free from the burden of doing someone else's bidding - free to leave and walk with God in worship to him. And if you want to read on later, that's just what happened.

By **obediently** carrying out these copious and comprehensive instructions, God's people the Israelites, establish their relationship with God.

In John's Gospel, Jesus is killed at the same time in the Passover celebrations of the Jews that the lambs would have been sacrificed in The Temple as the Jews made their memorial of the story we've had this morning.

St Paul likewise makes it clear in 1 Corinthians: "Christ our Passover Lamb has been sacrificed for us." (1 Cor 5:7) Jesus is THE Lamb!

Jesus was sacrificed on the cross

- At exactly the right time, to reveal to all humanity that we are God's chosen people, his special community - for as the land was covered in darkness, and the curtain of the temple torn in two, so Jesus died (Luke 23:44-47) and as he was "lifted up from the earth" so he drew men to himself (John 12:32)

Jesus was sacrificed on the cross

- In the right quantity. How, how can one man take the place of all of us? The only way that he was able to take the place of all of us was by not just being a young man who did good things, but by being God's own Son! In John 14:10 Jesus says: "I am in the Father and the Father is in me... It is the Father living in me, who is doing his work."

Jesus sacrificed on the cross

- Was of just the right quality to satisfy God - human like us, but totally without fault, free from sin! As Isaiah had prophesied "he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities" (Isaiah 53:5)

Jesus was sacrificed on the cross

- To be used in exactly the right way - the memorial of his broken body and shed blood is shared as a community in our services of Holy Communion, just as he instructed us to in Luke 22:19 "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me."

All that so that we can have the FREEDOM to go on that journey with God.

But we also need to pay a price if you like. We need to respond to that offer of freedom with FAITH and through OBEDIENCE.

It is good to remember the times in the past when we have known and really understood God's activity in our lives, or seen him active in the lives of other members of our Christian community. These are the stories that God has provided us with to give us the FAITH we need for our journey with him.

In my life, for example, I **know** that

- **Only** God could have made things happen so I went to University, and specifically University in Aberystwyth - because believe me it had little to do with my A-level results!
- Once there, I **know** that God introduced me to all sorts of things and people that have been really important to me in later life - and I'm not just talking about Graham!
- I know that God freed my Mother of her suffering, so that she died when she did, giving Dad and I the freedom for new parts of our journey with God and other people.
- I know that God wanted me to be in this sort of ministry for him, so that he could reveal more of himself, and the relationship he wants with me, and with other people - ideas that I might otherwise have been too busy to notice!

God does stuff because he loves us, and so that when he asks us to show FAITH in him, we will be OBEDIENT.

Perhaps, despite what I said earlier, OBEDIENCE **is** more difficult than faith. Since when has any child easily learnt to do as they are told in **all** circumstances?

I know what God is asking of me, but I can't know what specific things God is asking each individual to obey him in. But I do know **why** God is asking us to obey him.

It's because he wants to give us that FREEDOM to walk with him, to worship him, to experience his constant participation in our lives. He wants us to be free of the the sort of things Mike Head talked about last week; the slavery to computer games, the expensive cars, money, anything we obsess over. Those are just examples; deep down inside us we know if we are enslaved to something.

For some of us our burdens are different. They're external things that draw our focus and our energy away from our walk with God, but which can't be ignored or set aside - in many cases God wouldn't want us to. It might be the sudden or prolonged illness of a loved one. It could be the paperwork and legal issues that go alongside a bereavement and make it harder to bear. More short or medium term, it could be some unexpected problem with the fabric of home that is expensive and/or time consuming to fix. Some things will seem minor or petty, but they stop us being free to obey God and journey with him.

So here's the thing - the link between OBEDIENCE and FREEDOM:

The Passover was all God's own work. In some of the other plagues Moses or his brother Aaron, had been used by God to make something happen. For example in the plague of boils in Exodus 8:8 the Lord says to Moses "Take handfuls of soot from a furnace and have Moses toss it into the air in the presence of Pharaoh. It will become fine dust over the whole land of Egypt and festering boils will break out on men and animals throughout the land."

But not so here with the plague of the first born, with the sacrifice of the lambs. It says here in Exodus 12:12 God says simply "I will pass through Egypt and strike down every first-born of both people and animals." And what's more there is a specific point where Israel become free - it is the point of OBEDIENCE, the symbol of which was the blood of a lamb smeared on the doorposts; the point where God knew his will had been done.

The same is true of the sacrifice of Jesus. On the surface it may have appeared that the powers of religious mis-understanding and political calculation placed Jesus on the Cross, though as God's Son that only happened because it was necessary for Jesus to die. The point of FREEDOM for all of us was the same: it was the blood of Jesus shed from the cross as he died; that was the point where God knew his will had been done. It was Jesus' OBEDIENCE in our place that gives us FREEDOM to walk with God. And the resurrection to made that FREEDOM really visible was unequivocally all God's own work!

I don't have the blood of a lamb to share with you all.

Nor, I'm sorry to say, do I have enough roast lamb to go round a group this big!

But I do have **this**: *(take up my napkin and pitta bread)*

When the Jews celebrate Passover, and even those Jews who have accepted Jesus as their Messiah and Saviour still do this, they celebrate Passover with this: unleavened bread.

During the Passover meal the children are sent on a treasure hunt in search of piece of unleavened bread, which are then redeemed by the father of the house for a sweet, a bit like I gave X a jelly baby instead of cold lamb and horseradish!

For the Jews, as the lamb took the place of the firstborn of the community of Israel, so that they could have FREEDOM, so the flat bread is redeemed for something better.

For those who accept Jesus as the Lamb of God, we know he died on the cross in our place, and rose again to set us FREE.

In a moment, Andrew and the band are going to lead us in song. As they do so each of you (if I've done my maths right) will be given a piece of unleavened bread, wrapped in a blood red napkin.

It is up to you to decide what you are going to redeem it for, but I am going to suggest that it is something a little more significant to your journey with God than a jelly baby!

- You may have found all the stuff you've heard this morning a new idea, or an idea you've previously discarded, but now want to take more seriously.
- You may know you're a slave to some compulsion you can't kick without God's help.
- You may know there is some burden you carry in yourself, or for others, which draws your focus and energy away from God, or through which you can't see God at all.
- You may know what God has already done in your life and be ready for some new journey or adventure with him.

Whatever it is, have FAITH and be OBEDIENT. I believe we are in the first month of a new phase in the life of this community - and God wants to give us FREEDOM, FREEDOM to walk with and worship him on a new journey. So please, as you see fit, redeem this gift **for** something.

You might redeem it for prayer from others for God to work in your life.

You might redeem it for a conversation to help you with your FAITH or your OBEDIENCE to God.

You might place it somewhere to remind you of its significance, or give it someone as a symbol of its significance to a decision you make.

But please redeem it, as Jesus redeemed you, so that we will all be prepared for the FREEDOM to journey with God.