**St Andrew’s on The Terrace Easter 7 Communion Sunday 2 June 2019**

**‘Prayer is a state of Communion’**

**Readings for the Gathering**

**Hebrew Bible****Exodus 12:1-8, 14 and 17**

The Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread

**12**The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in Egypt, **2**“This month is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year. **3**Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a lamb[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Exodus+12%3A1-8%2C+14%2C+17&version=NIV#fen-NIV-1820a)] for his family, one for each household. **4**If any household is too small for a whole lamb, they must share one with their nearest neighbour, having taken into account the number of people there are. You are to determine the amount of lamb needed in accordance with what each person will eat. **5**The animals you choose must be year-old males without defect, and you may take them from the sheep or the goats.**6**Take care of them until the fourteenth day of the month, when all the members of the community of Israel must slaughter them at twilight.**7**Then they are to take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the doorframes of the houses where they eat the lambs. **8**That same night they are to eat the meat roasted over the fire, along with bitter herbs, and bread made without yeast. // **14**“This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord—a lasting ordinance. // **17**“Celebrate the Festival of Unleavened Bread, because it was on this very day that I brought your divisions out of Egypt. Celebrate this day as a lasting ordinance for the generations to come.

**Gospel Matthew 26:26-29**

**26**While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take and eat; this is my body.” **27**Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you. **28**This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. **29**I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.”

**Contemporary reading https://cac.org/heaven-now-weekly-summary-2019-05-04/** by Richard Rohr
Prayer is not a transaction that somehow pleases God but a transformation of the consciousness of the one doing the praying. Prayer is the awakening of an inner dialogue that, from God’s side, has never ceased. This is why Paul could write of praying “always” (see 1 Thessalonians 5:17). Prayer is not changing God’s mind about us or about anything else, but allowing God to change our mind about the reality right in front of us (which we usually avoid or distort).

**Reflection for the Gathering**

You’ve heard me say that one year, some decades ago, we sent a book of Footrot Flat cartoons as a present to my NZ brother and American sister in law. Footrot Flats of course features The Dog and Wal; the rural farming men who are key to the story, all dressed in baggy shorts, gumboots and black singlets. My sister in law wrote to thank us for everything, including the cartoon book, saying “David is explaining the jokes to me.” And you’ve heard me say that I wondered at the time, how a NZer explained to a Jewish American what a black singlet was and what it stood for in NZ culture.

It’s the same for western gentile audiences trying to understand the significance of lambs and sacrifice and their connection with Christianity

The reading from Exodus comes from just before the leaving of Egypt by the Hebrew people. It is thought these passages were written centuries later at the time when Jewish exiles returned from their Babylonian captivity, *re-*establishing the idea of the Israelites being a people chosen and delivered by God. The whole book of Exodus is regarded by modern scholars as a myth rather than an historical reconstruction of an actual event. There are some similarities to other stories from nearby cultures of the time.

If you re-read the today’s Exodus passage, you will notice the instructions are not only rather too precise for a group of people planning a midnight escape, but also they look into the future when this feast is to be replicated in ritual fashion, suggesting a voice coming into the narrative from way forward in the future. A kind of ‘back to the future’ scenario.

This then is not historical but theological, so it fits our purposes here today exactly.

We do need to understand the symbolism and importance of this Jewish myth because it underpinned Jewish understanding of themselves as a nation and their relationship with God. From within western gentile culture, especially contemporary gentile culture, it is foreign to contemplate animal sacrifice and easy to recoil from it. But the Exodus story was re-enacted to some extent at every Friday Shabbat meal which began the Sabbath observance. There the focus is on the command to not collect manna in the desert on the Sabbath day, creating a day of rest. At the annual Passover festival, the actual deliverance from Egypt was the central motif beginning with the Seder meal where lamb and bitter herbs and unleavened bread commemorate the night of which we just heard. The object of the Seder meal is to tell the story of the Exodus to one’s children, and the during the ceremony, children ask ritual questions to which the adults give the details of this story from Exodus 12.

Right from childhood, an observant Jew would understand the significance of unleavened bread, of roasted lamb, of blood spilt, and of the status of the Exodus as a defining experience of liberation by God.

When Jesus joined his disciples for a meal on the eve of the Passover, all them would have been bone-familiar with the symbolism of the meal. They would have known the wine represented the blood that in the original Exodus myth had been used to distinguish the homes of the Hebrew slaves from others. They would have known that the bread for this meal was unleavened, signified the haste with which the people prepared to leave Egypt in the original myth. There was no time to wait for the usual two risings to leaven the loaf.

These elements were as sacred to them as memorial tokens as the bread and the wine are at our communion. In a sense, at Passover they communed with their past, remembered who they were as a nation and particularly remembered whose they were as a nation. They remembered with gratitude deliverance from bondage and relished again their freedom as a people. (Passover must have taken on a more poignant aspect during the war and at other times in Jewish history when they have been anything but free.)

The elements of the Passover meal were embedded deep in the Jewish psyche, far deeper than black singlets for NZers. Even if we westerners in our contemporary sophistication want to shrink away from animal sacrifice which we might view as primitive, we need to acknowledge the depth of the reverence in which these simple food items were held. Even if we do not completely understand, we need to have respect.

So observing that supper which would prove to be Jesus’ last with his friends and companions, we can only partly feel the shock his disciples would have felt when Jesus picks up the bread, breaks it and identifies it with his body – not the body of a lamb killed centuries before, not the ancient evidence of God’s care for the people and the power of God’s deliverance, but *his* body. More quickly than we would, they would have discerned that he was saying *he* was the equivalent of the lamb and *he* was a sign of God’s care for them and God’s power to transform. Likewise, “also the cup after supper”, identifying with himself this symbol which for centuries had stood for the saving blood of the lamb on that night of death and escape.

This is a powerful moment which, if it truly happened in a group of real people, must only have been half understood at the time. Like the Exodus story, this account has probably been refined and honed to match the theology which the disciples worked out decades after the fact. But whether the connection was made, it had powerful archetypal; significance.

From whenever they made the connection, perhaps years after the night of the last supper, for them now, it was *Jesus* who was the Lamb of God. It was *Jesus* now who would deliver the nation of Israel and all who chose to be delivered with them. If you were a movie producer filming this moment you would add some kind of computer-generated glow around Jesus and around the bread and wine to symbolise this stunning shift of archetypal power.

What’s more, just as the original Hebrew nation were invited to eat the lamb and unleavened bread, so Jesus invites his disciples to take part in this new supper, this ‘feast of the new covenant’. Just as we use food to bond people together as we eat around tables and trestles and counter tops and in coffee shops, so this ritual meal with all these millennia long associations binds us together as the company of those who follow the Jesus Way.

Churches have treated this meal very differently. In the Catholic tradition it is only fit for priests to conduct and the elements are considered consecrated and sacred in themselves. In the Presbyterian tradition the elements themselves are not considered sacred, but as food made from the earth, served at a memorial meal where we remember. We remember Jesus’ death each time we re-enact this meal, following the words “Do this in remembrance of me”. In that sense, our re-enactment of what we call the Lord’s Supper is more like the original Passover, a re-enactment of that hasty meal before the great escape, though Presbyterians still consider the meal significant enough to restrict its celebration to those who are ordained and specially trained for the task. In less formal churches, such as Baptist and Brethren churches, lay people celebrate the Lord’s Supper.

If the Passover Seder meal was an opportunity for the children to learn about the Exodus and what formed the Jewish nation, so communion is a time where we remember who we are. We may count our blessings and be grateful for all that following Jesus has brought us. We may appreciate the community which gathers around this table here today and all they have brought us. We may use the moment to recommit to the journey if we have been stumbling of faltering a little. We are brought back to remembering whose we are and what journey we walk.

The word ‘communion’ is a good choice. We commune together – with each other, with the Jesus we follow. We connect. We participate in the great myth which has sustained millions of people both Jewish and Christian through the years. We now too become people of The Story – we are part of what we could call the Fellowship of the Table, just as Sam and Frodo and the others formed the Fellowship of The Ring.

Another of the deep ways in which we can commune is through prayer.

If you believe God is up there and out there, external to us, you may still word prayer as if you are talking to another being. You may pray mostly because you think God wants us to and we will be failures if we do not pray. It can also become natural to regard prayer as asking that all powerful being for things which are the desires of our heart, some of them vital and important, some trivial and unsubstantial. Some of our requests may be for others but some will be for ourselves.

Richard Rohr has a view on that expressed in our contemporary reading.

 Prayer is not a transaction that somehow pleases God but a transformation of the consciousness of the one doing the praying.

Prayer is the awakening of an inner dialogue that, from God’s side, has never ceased. This is why Paul could write of praying “always” (see 1 Thessalonians 5:17). Prayer is not changing God’s mind about us or about anything else, but allowing God to change our mind about the reality right in front of us (which we usually avoid or distort).

According to Rohr, prayer is ‘transformation’, the ‘awakening of an inner dialogue’ and us allowing our minds to be changed.

This is easier to ‘get’ if we resist the temptation to regard God as an all- powerful external agent who can tweak the world to our liking. If we allow ourselves to reach deep down inside us, we will find there the God-within – and that movement inwards will transform our world view. Having found that presence inside us we will find an inner dialogue re-awakening. As we gently push our ego aside so we can reach the unconscious parts of our psyche, we will find our minds changing about the reality right in front of us.

It’s a lot to have happen in your life and you might not be ready for that yet, or be afraid of trying it at all. But the adventure is worth it. Prayer as communion is a state to be desired. While in church here we use prayer to express our deepest desires together, using words to let everyone know our thinking, when you are alone in your regular daily spiritual practice, prayer will be more meditation than mouthing words, more contemplative than citing requests, more peaceful than petitioning, more resting than repetitious.

Then in our own way we will experience our own Exodus from the chains of human egotism into the promised freedom of being yourself. In our own way we will experience our own crucifixion and resurrection as we die to all that which is blocking our way to true communion with the God-within-us.

In the words of Richard Rohr:

If we resort too exclusively to verbal, wordy prayers, we’ll remain stuck in our rational, dualistic minds and will not experience deep change at the level of consciousness. Prayer is sitting in the silence until it silences us, choosing gratitude until we are grateful, and praising God until we ourselves are an act of praise.

Susan Jones 027 321 4870 minister@standrews.org.nz