

"There is a Redeemer"

<u>Occasion</u>	Evening Service at Therfield Chapel
<u>Day, Date & Time</u>	Sunday 4 may 2003 at 18:30
<u>Basis</u>	Exodus 12:40 – 13:16
<u>Readings</u>	Exodus 12:40 – 13:16 Genesis 17:1-14; 22:9-13
<u>Hymns</u>	13, 19, 93 from Mission Praise
<u>Songs</u>	6, 481, 52, 673, 155 from Mission Praise
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As you probably know,

I am passionate in my view that the ministry of this church has to address what the world outside the church walls is thinking.

We need of course to address the spiritual needs of the church,
its people

and those within our walls who are seeking answers as to what the
Christian message is all about
and help one another to find Christ,
firstly as Saviour,
then as a loving Lord
and then to introduce them to God as Father.

We need to build the church and its people
and encourage them through thick and thin in their relationship with God
and their growth in holiness.

But at the same time we have to 'climb the walls'
and look outside the door
and speak into what is going on out there.

And there are two reasons for that:

Firstly, if we do not understand what unbelievers are thinking
we shall never be able to effectively carry our Gospel into enemy territory.

And secondly, we live out there.

We don't live in here,
we live out there
and we absorb worldly and secular ideas
and we bring them into the church with us whether we like it or not.

And it is here
in the ministry of the Church
that these ideas are held up against the light of the word of God
and exposed
if they prove to be inconsistent with what God thinks.

So when I looked at tonight's passage and saw that there were in fact two fundamental ideas here; namely

- 1) the insistence by God that no uncircumcised person should eat the Passover meal, and
- 2) the idea that the firstborn belongs to God and hence if he is to live, then he must be redeemed.

- when I looked at these ideas,
I looked in vain for any parallel in modern thinking
where we might find a point of contact with the secular mind.

So we have to ask ourselves,
"Do we understand what this is all about
and if so how on earth might we explain these things to an unbeliever
or a seeker after God?"

For a start where do you ever hear the idea of redemption discussed outside of the Christian Church?

I looked in vain for another faith,
religion
or cult
which included the idea of redemption and drew a blank.

I guess the closest you can get is the rare news story,
or in a film,
where a bodyguard
aware that his charge is about to be shot
will throw himself into the path of the bullet
and maybe die in his place.

In the case of a kidnap,
and a ransom being demanded,
you might redeem your child or wife
by paying over a million dollars.

In a defensive war,
a soldier may give his life to save his fellow countrymen back home.
Or you may hear the father of a murdered teenager say
"I would willingly have died in her place.

All of these contain the idea of redemption,
but largely the concept is anathema to the modern mind.
We live in a society that is largely self-dominated.
It is what makes *me* happy that is important.

If I am in a relationship,
I will only tolerate it while it gives *me* what I want.
Only what satisfies *me* is worth pursuing.

Yet the idea of redemption is central to the Christian faith,
because Jesus died for our sins in our place on the cross.
There is no other faith that makes such a claim.
In this respect, Christianity is unique.
No other world view includes this concept.

So let us now look at this part of the book of Exodus.

What we have here is an insertion by Moses the historian
to set these points in the context of their history.
Both the rules of Passover and the rules for redemption will be amplified later
but some of these basic rules are never repeated.

The Passover and the dedication of the firstborn are new developments in the faith and
practices of the Israelite people,
but circumcision and redemption are not.

Both of these ideas can be traced back to Abraham's covenantal relationship with
God.

We need to go back to Genesis 17:10.
"This is my covenant with you and your descendents, ...
the covenant you are to keep.
Every male amongst you shall be circumcised."

God had promised that Abraham would become a great nation
and that they would occupy the land of Canaan,
and here in Exodus,
Abraham's descendants,
through the selected line of Isaac and Jacob,
had become the people of Israel
A nation was being born and sent by God to the land of Canaan
to occupy the land of promise.

The firstborn sons of Egypt are all dead.
In spite of repeated warnings by Moses,
Pharaoh had failed to heed God's word
and all the nation's firstborn had died.
But Israel were leaving Egypt with their firstborn sons alive and well.
They had been redeemed by the Passover lamb
The blood had been sprinkled on the doorposts and the lintel of their houses
and the angel of death had passed over them, and they were saved.

That much we have covered in earlier chapters and verses.

But here, Moses adds these instructions that no uncircumcised person is to eat the Passover meal in the future.

Circumcision was a sign of belonging to God's people.
Of itself it was nothing.

It was merely a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham,
when God said to Abraham,
"I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless."

To belong to the people of God is to be obedient to him,
submit to his word
and to walk in his ways.

As the prophet Micah asks:

"And what does the Lord require of you,
but to do justly,
to love mercy
and walk humbly with your God.

So only God's people are to eat the Passover.

It was a defining moment in the history of the Israelites.
That is why it was so important to them and to God

In fact they didn't keep it very well.

As far as we can see, they kept it until the days of Samuel
and then it was lost.

It had a brief revival under Josiah,
but then was lost again
and probably restored in the days of Ezra.

But by the time of Christ it had become a great feast
and the people poured into Jerusalem to celebrate it.

The last supper,

the meal we remember in our communion service,
was the Passover meal which Jesus ate with his disciples.

Today,

orthodox Jews still celebrate Passover.
It is a very special family time.

If you look on the internet,

you can find a timetable of dates and times
when each part of the ritual is to be performed.

They search the house to remove any sign of yeast.

They get the special Passover utensils out of the loft.
They use different cutlery,
different tableware,
different cooking utensils and implements;
so that none of them are contaminated with yeast.

It is a special day for them,
because on this day,
God redeemed their firstborn sons,
and by his great power brought them out of the slavery of Egypt
and on their way to the freedom of the promised land.

All the firstborn of the Egyptians were condemned by God
due to their disobedience as a nation to let God's people go.

But the firstborn of the Israelites were redeemed by a lamb.
The lamb was killed in their place.
At every Passover feast, Israelite males would look back
and they would know that if that lamb had not died,
they would have.

Therefore, says God,
all of your firstborn are mine.
They are special to me.
I want them set aside to be holy and to serve me.

Again we go back to Abraham.

Many of you will know that for many years Abraham's wife Sarah
didn't bear any children.

And Abraham's faith was sorely tried,
because God had promised him a great nation
and a new land.

But he couldn't see how this could happen if he didn't have any children.
So he lost patience with God and had a son by a servant girl Hagar.

But God said "No, not this one"
and Hagar and her son Ishmael were driven out.
And today, Moslems trace their faith back to Abraham through Ishmael
and they remember Hagar's flight every year at the Hajj.

But finally, when Abraham and Sarah were very old,
Isaac was born, and Abraham was over the moon,
for now it was possible for God's promises to be fulfilled.

But then (in Genesis 22),
God ordered Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac as a burnt offering.

Child sacrifice was not uncommon in the ancient world,
so it is not surprising that Abraham obeyed.
What is amazing that he did so,
knowing that this very God who demanded the death of his son
was the same God who had promised to make of him a great nation.
Abraham's faith in God was so great that he knew that God would find a way.
And so it was that at the very last moment,
God stayed his hand and provided a ram to be sacrificed in Isaac's place.

So Abraham was allowed to buy his son back,
so that God could make of him a great people.

And so here in Exodus at the very birth of that people.
God once more claims the firstborn males as his own.
But unlike the false religions of their day,
God wants his people alive and willing to serve him.
And so the Israelites were commanded to buy their sons back with a lamb.

For everything else, the firstborn must be sacrificed to God as a burnt offering.
The firstborn males are his,
except for donkeys.

Why donkeys are singled out is unclear,
but we do know that they were regarded as unclean
and hence unsuitable for sacrifice.
But if they were needed as beasts of burden,
which was their primary purpose in ancient times
then they could be redeemed by a lamb.

And so the day was to be commemorated for ever.
No yeast was to be eaten in the seven days of the annual festival
and all the firstborn sons were to be redeemed.
And these ideas were to be remembered
and passed down through the generations as a permanent reminder
that on this day all the firstborn sons of the Israelites were redeemed
for God
by the death of the Passover lamb.

God always places great importance on what we tell our children.
Do we tell them the great truths of Christianity?
The idea that they can make up their own minds when they are old enough,
is a modern idea,
which presupposes that they will have the information available to
make a reasoned choice.

But children today are growing up totally ignorant of the basic historic facts of
Christianity.

We, as Christian parents have a God-imposed responsibility
to pass on to them what Christianity is all about,
who Jesus was
and why he came.

Armed with that knowledge,
they can then make their choice.
And we pray of course that they will choose to follow Christ.

So what are we to understand from this small portion of God's word?

When Christ came, the Jewish writers understood the symbolism of the events that took place.

It was not for nothing that Jesus chose the Passover meal in the upper room to finally announce his impending death.

It was not for nothing that he chose to break the bread at that meal
and explain that this was his body which was broken for us
for he was the Passover lamb.

This is the significance of Passover for the Christian.

History had shown that we were inexorably sinful
and were incapable of satisfying the righteousness of God
so all of us must die,
unless like the firstborn of old we are redeemed.

So Jesus himself, God's own firstborn Son became our Passover lamb
and we who were doomed to die were redeemed by the sinless Son of God
and the justice of God is satisfied forever.

I do not think we shall ever understand this fully,
but this is what God has decreed.

But just as only those committed to follow and obey the living God
should eat of the Passover meal;
so in Christianity only those who accept the judgement of God on their
sinfulness,
who recognise their guilt and submit and repent before a holy God ,
can receive the redemption and forgiveness offered freely by Him,
acknowledging that Jesus died in my place
as my own Passover lamb.

My prayer tonight is that everyone here either has made
or will make
that commitment to God in true repentance
and so accept the redemption and new life,
through Jesus Christ the Lamb of God
and the Saviour of mankind.

Amen

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