

Sunday 6th September 2020

Revd Alan F. Miller

Organ prelude

Call to Worship

Praise the Lord!

**Sing God's praise in the assembly of the faithful,
for the Lord takes pleasure in the people.**

Let the faithful sing for joy.

Prayer of Approach

Almighty God,

whose ways are far beyond our understanding,

help us to trust your judgments

so that we may do your will

by loving you and one another.

In the name of Jesus we pray. **Amen.**

Psalm: Ps 149

Praise the LORD!

Sing to the LORD a new song,

his praise in the assembly of the faithful.

Let Israel be glad in its Maker;

let the children of Zion rejoice in their King.

Let them praise his name with dancing,

making melody to him with tambourine and lyre.

For the LORD takes pleasure in his people;

he adorns the humble with victory.

Let the faithful exult in glory;

let them sing for joy on their couches.

Let the high praises of God be in their throats

and two-edged swords in their hands,

to execute vengeance on the nations

and punishment on the peoples,

to bind their kings with fetters

and their nobles with chains of iron,

to execute on them the judgement decreed.

This is glory for all his faithful ones.

Praise the LORD!

Prayer of Confession

Amid the countless things
that human beings cannot fully comprehend about God,
there stands this:
God so loves us
as to bathe us with grace
and feed us with mercy
and forgive us our sins.
Confident in the love of God,
let us pray together.

**Lord God,
while we were still slaves to sin,
you died for our salvation.
Yet we still worship the false gods of the world,
forgetting that you are Lord.
Loving worldly wealth,
we have not loved you with our whole heart
nor loved our neighbors as ourselves.
Trusting worldly strength,
we have not trusted your word
nor followed the Word-made-flesh.
Forgiving by worldly norms,
we have not shown mercy to others
as you have shown mercy to us.
Forgive us yet again, we pray in Christ's name.
Amen.**

Friends, hear the good news of the gospel:
Who is in a position to condemn?
Only Christ. And Christ died for us; Christ rose for us;
Christ reigns in power for us; Christ prays for us.
Friends, believe the good news of the gospel:
in Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

Hymn CH4 110 'Glory be to God the Father'

Reading: Exodus 12:1-14

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbour in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the

number of people who eat of it. Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight.

They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn.

This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the LORD. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgements: I am the LORD. The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.

Reflection

*Holy Spirit,
as your word is read and preached,
pass among your gathered people,
opening minds to increase understanding,
opening hearts to bind us together in your love.
In Jesus' name we ask it. Amen.*

This Sunday marks the beginning of what has for some years now been called the 'Season of Creation' – four Sundays through September leading up to the celebration of Harvest Thanksgiving; four Sundays on which we reflect upon God's work of creation, and the trust that God has given us, in making us stewards of creation, by which God provides us with all we need to live the lives that are God's greatest gift of love.

As I read today's scripture passage from the book of Exodus, which describes the first Passover meal, shared by Israel in captivity in Egypt, the words of Leith Fisher's communion hymn sprang to mind:

'For your generous providing, which sustains us all our days; for your Spirit here residing

we proclaim our heartfelt praise. Through the depths of joy and sorrow, though the road be smooth or rough, fearless, we can face tomorrow, for your grace will be enough.'

In the midst of terror and persecution, threatened with extermination at Pharaoh's hand, God proves to be the protector of Israel, and the One who provides for all their needs, even in the most desperate and darkest of times.

It is a well-known story, that as the time approaches when God will act to set God's people free, forcing the hand of Pharaoh through terrible loss and destruction; when God, not Pharaoh, is revealed as the one who truly has power over life and death, the power to make and unmake, the power to create but also the power to destroy.

In preparation for that moment, for the coming liberation, God commands each family among the Israelites to sacrifice an unblemished male lamb from their flocks, to roast it, and eat it, together with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Most importantly, they are to smear some of its blood on the door-posts and lintels of their houses.

Why? Because it is the preparation for the salvation that God is bringing about – the enslaved Israelites will be set free, and live; but for Egypt the story is one of tragedy and death: in a striking echo of the story of Moses' birth and rescue, now it is the Egyptians who will lose all their first-born.

God will wreak a terrible revenge on Pharaoh for his refusal to listen to Moses' command to let Israel go free: a terrible punishment for the persecution and oppression of the Israelites, when God passes through Egypt by night, but 'passes over' the houses of the Israelites, identified by the sacrificial blood of the lamb.

And God's deliverance of Israel from slavery is not without great risk for the people. Pharaoh may be compelled to free the Israelite slaves, but he, too, will seek revenge for so many deaths among his own people. For this reason, God instructs the Israelites to eat the Passover meal prepared to flee, their loins girded and their sandals on their feet, ready to move quickly when the time comes.

The Passover marks the beginning of a new era in the life of Israel; the working out of God's promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, that they will be God's people in a promised land. A land in which, if they live in a right relationship with God, they will know God's blessing; a land, as the saying goes 'flowing with milk and honey', rich and fertile, where they will flourish, live in safety, prosper, and grow in number and strength.

That is the promise of God to the Israelites in their time of great fear and suffering, and it is a promise of God's gracious providing that will be fulfilled in their future, although not before they have been put to the test on the long journey out of Egypt, out of slavery, out of death, towards the life and the land for which they hope.

The story of the first Passover in Egypt is the story of God's redemption of Israel, of liberation for a people chosen to be an example to all the nations and peoples of the world. It is a story of promise and of hope for a better future, and of Israel's trust in God's steadfast loving faithfulness as the Creator and Sustainer of all, in whose hands is held the life of the whole creation and of every creature.

It is a story of salvation, and of preparation for a journey out of death towards life: the life that God intends for every person, in world made new. It is the prefiguring of what God will do in Jesus Christ, who at the time of the Passover in Jerusalem met with his friends in an upper room and shared a meal with them together; at that last supper together, before Jesus was betrayed, tried and executed, he took bread and wine and shared it with his disciples, as the people of Israel had shared the Passover feast in Egypt so many years before.

In the bread and wine, God in Christ tells his friends that these are his body and his blood; he is preparing them for what must come: the sacrifice of the cross, on which Jesus offers his life for the life not only of his closest friends, but of the whole world, and the whole of creation; an offering made for love of those who need to be set free from the power of death, to set out on a journey towards a different promised land – the kingdom of God, which is eternal light and life, joy and peace.

There are some communion liturgies which contain these words, as the bread and wine are prepared: 'fruit of the earth and work of human hands, it will become for us the bread of life; fruit of the vine and work of human hands, it will become for us our spiritual drink'. We take the bread and wine as gifts from God's creation, brought forth from the rich fruitfulness of the earth, fashioned by human labour into the elements that God then transforms to become for us the communion of the body and blood of Christ, which is for us a remembrance of all that God has given, and all that God has done.

Once again, to quote the communion hymn with which I began:

'Round your Table, through your giving, show us how to live and pray; 'til your kingdom's way of living/ is the bread we share each day; bread for us and for our neighbour, bread for body, mind and soul, bread of heaven and human labour – broken bread that makes us whole.'

it weaves together the wonder of creation with the wonder of God's love, to provide each one of us with food for the journey that lies ahead. It is spiritual food for the people of God renewed for the life of the new creation that is the reign of Christ in the kingdom of God.

Creation, life, redemption, salvation, all these are the promises of a loving Creator God, and they are woven together into the story of our of God's people, from the first day until the last, when all things will be made new, whole, and perfect.

Prayers of Intercession

All-knowing God,
you know our needs before we name them in prayer.
All-caring God,
you care enough to hear our prayers anyway,
knowing that all we truly need is your love.
All-loving God,
hear now these prayers that name the needs of your people:

Your people need health . . .

Your people need peace . . .

Your people need hope . . .

Your people need blessing . . .

Your whole creation needs your powerful presence.
All-powerful God,
the need is so great;
we rejoice that you are greater.
Hear these prayers we offer in Jesus' name. **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Do not lead us into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory
are yours, now and for ever.

Amen.

Hymn 113 'God the Father of Creation'

Benediction

