

Sermon Archive 532

Thursday 17 April, 2025

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reading: Exodus 12: 1-14

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



The Reflection's First Part: Does tomorrow bring freedom?

I don't know, dear God, what it must have been like for the people of Israel during their time in Egypt. It was a long time. They'd gone there, of course, because of a famine in their own country, and at the early stages, I guess it was tolerably better than starving to death. Egyptian food may not have been marvellous, but a whole lot better than nothing. When I was writing this reflection, God, at this point I wondered how many people have nothing, when it comes to food, or as good as nothing. Mrs Google told me that 2.8 billion people cannot afford a healthy diet - whatever is meant by "healthy diet". Last year 11 million died of starvation - and I guess that's pretty plain. Puts the food on our tables into perspective, doesn't it. Anyway, moving on in obscene quickness from that, where were we? That's right - in Egypt the Hebrews were better off than dead, as they would have been at home. And in between the lines, probably they were doing quite well - well enough for one of Egypt's rulers to begin to resent them - and that's where the trouble begins.

Call it jealousy of people who work hard, or call it fear of those who are different (they're cutting off the foreskins, you know - cutting off the foreskins - next they'll be coming for your baby boys!). So a series of policies are put in place to keep them in their place. Hard labour, poor pay - just recently a policy of throwing their children in the Nile. Good God, can you imagine that? Maybe not in civilized societies where there's rule of law. A bit harder though, in societies where the rule of law is a dictator whom the locals call "God". Save us, dear God, from the dictators.

It's funny, God. I've been wondering about what they might have eaten. Most of the things I've read have said that food or lack of it wasn't so much the thing. A more important thing on the construction sites of the cities they were forced to build was likely to be lung disease from the limestone

dust. Big buildings made of stone - chisels, hammers, dust in the air. They didn't keep health records, of course - though probably it was bad.

Another strange thing is that some time after they left their slavery behind, and things on the road were tough, many of them blamed you (and useless Moses) for taking them away from Egypt. "In Egypt, at least we had food", they cried - rather than the boring food we scrape off the morning earth each day here in the bloody desert. I don't know whether that means things in Egypt weren't all that bad (sign of a grumbling and ambitious people) or whether nostalgia flourishes in the thinking of an ungrateful people. Who knows - the historians don't seem to. Food, food of the gods, slave food - **slave** food.

Following the most bizarre series of exchanges between Moses and the heart-hardened Pharaoh, instruction was given for the people to close the windows and doors of their homes, and to share a special kind of meal. Within the instructions was to take blood from the not-yet-cooked meat, and smear it on the front doors. Is that weird, or what? Welcome to our house - mind the blood as you come - not even angels are going to get past that (well, if not angels of life or angels of opportunity, then certainly angels of death). What a weird night, eating inside while strange flapping things invade the skies over town - horrible - the horrible legacy of hardened hearts - the flapping, grinning stealers of life . . .

Still, we are not out there in that realm, and we've smeared blood on our lintels. For us, the matter of being faithful is as simple as staying put - well, for the moment. Tomorrow may be different - it may be freedom.

Dare we believe it? That tomorrow brings freedom . . . Someone the other day told me, God, that freedom's just an illusion. We only ever exchange one form of slavery for another, he said. And I kind of got what he meant. Maybe whatever is going on outside the house, there is that something within that creates one form or another of slavery - maybe the kind of thing that the apostle Paul meant with his "body of death" thing. We overcome **this**, only to fall slave to **that** - as if there's a common factor that follows us wherever we go. No one's surprised that people freed from Egypt end up worshipping a golden calf. No one's surprised that the heroin addict becomes addicted to methadone. No one's surprised that the woman escaping from a violent man meets,

marries and is beaten by one who's even worse. It's like the slavery follows us - **does** it come from within?

These questions, O God, are almost too distressing. Too much for ordinary people gathered to eat the last of their slave food - before whatever tomorrow brings . . . Does tomorrow bring freedom?

For the slaves, a moment of quiet.

Music for Reflection

The Reflection's Second Part: We wait and see

Well, those gathered around the table now, O God, are a whole lot wiser. The questions considered open by their ancestors had now been closed by history - well, as closed as any lived thing can be . . . These gathered ones, given their placement in history, aren't burdened by the sounds of the mothers of Egypt screaming. Nor are they tortured by memories of chariots, horses and men drowning in the falling back again of the Red Sea. They're spared that first experience of the horror. But they know what tomorrow brought, and tomorrow and tomorrow. The pillar of fire and cloud, the giving of the Law, the crossing of the river and the entry into the land. "Milk and honey" was believed by the ancestors. These gathered ones know that might have been romance and poetry. Life wasn't perfect. Indeed, life's never been perfect, even down now to occupation by the Romans, like a new and equally dis-spiriting form of slavery had come. When are we ever going to be free?! Maybe tomorrow? Ha, no; no longer are we chasing the impossible. More inclined to believe, we are, that the slavery comes from within. "Meet the new boss, same as the old boss" - a la the Apostle Paul . . . That suggestion continues to compel.

But tonight, **he** calls us to observe the slave's meal of freedom. He's spoken a lot about freedom. He's also talked a lot about greatness through service, and picking up a cross, and even dying. So, well, you know, we're not all that sure what he means by freedom. Try being free when you're dead - ha!

But in life, he was so free. Sensible souls might have stayed in Nazareth, followed the pattern set out by his upbringing - the learning of a trade,

the inheritance maybe of a family carpentry business. So many people are chained to following the obvious - but from that he was free.

Sensible souls might have heard the commandments of old, and slavishly (hmm, slavishly) observed them like they were immutable blocks of stone - maybe emanating dust that will clog the lungs. He says "you have heard it said, but I say to you". And it wasn't like he was throwing it away - he was running off in chase of what it really meant. Leave behind what's dead and never working, he said - seek the truth. God, he was free.

Sensible souls might have let the white-washed sepulchres do their work in killing the spirit of the people. They might have left the money changers in the temple. They might have acknowledged at the wedding in Cana that indeed there was no wine left. But he's free - so free.

And now he calls us to the table, to sample what may be the last few morsels of slave food. "Come, follow me", he'd said, and we had. And now, gathered for our slave meal, we wonder, is **this** the day? What, of freedom, calls us from tomorrow?

*For lo! already on the hills
the flags of dawn appear;
gird up yourselves, you prophet souls,
proclaim the day is near:
the day in whose clear shining light
all wrong shall stand revealed,
when justice shall be throned with might,
and every hurt be healed.*

Freedom? Tomorrow?

We wait and see.