

Maundy Thursday 2019

Exodus 12:1-11

1 Corinthians 11:17-end

I don't have many friends.

That is, I don't have many Facebook friends. But at the beginning of this month I found myself involved in quite a difficult discussion with one of them. It began when he posted a spoof referendum voting card which described Members of Parliament as 'self serving pigs' and 'dripping faced morons'. Now, I have no objection to Members of Parliament being criticised. But I am acutely aware that at the beginning of the referendum campaign one MP, Jo Cox, was murdered and that more recently another MP, Anna Soubry, has received two death threats and yet another, Jess Phillips, has received threats of rape. And in that context it seems to me particularly dangerous to hurl insults at Members of Parliament. And I said so on Facebook. And many other Facebook bystanders joined in to explain why it was absolutely fine to call MPs pigs and morons.

I was at great pains myself not to use any kind of emotional language and to respond in a very factual, rational, even disinterested manner. Looking back on that experience, I would not change my responses in any way. It was important that I was calm and rational while contradicting irrational arguments, hate speech and ill-informed discussion.

But I had in a sense missed the point. I had responded as if the Brexit debate was about rational argument. I had responded as if what really mattered was exactly how many million pounds we contribute towards the EU budget. I had responded as if what mattered was whether we have a growth rate of 1% or 2%. And I was wrong. What motivates those who feel so passionately about leaving or remaining is not any kind of material or economic gain but our sense of identity. That's why there are protesters outside the Houses of Parliament wrapped in European Union flags. That's why there are marchers carrying union flags. It's not about how much money we have in our pockets: it's about who we are.

This sense of who we are is often expressed in stories. So who are we? What stories do we tell? Your experience will not be the same as mine but I recall growing up in the 1960s with stories about World War II. I knew all about Colditz, the Great Escape, the wooden horse, and Douglas Bader.

We have never ceased to tell those stories but I'm quite sure in recent years we've told them more often, in films, for example, such as *His Finest hour* or *The Kings Speech*. What the stories are saying is that we are defined by our role in World War II. The narrative is that Britain saved Europe from enslavement to the Nazis. That is our identity. That is who we are. Whether that is true is a matter for another time because I want to turn to another story.

Holy Week is about telling stories and indeed about acting them out. The story of the passion is told twice, on both Palm Sunday and Good Friday. But today we tell what appears to be a different story. Today we tell the story of the escape of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt.

At any level it's a good yarn - some of you may remember that a few years ago the cartoon film of *Moses Prince of Egypt* was enormously popular. But the best stories go being a good yarn. The best stories are those that we recognise as being our stories. And that's the point of the story of the Exodus. The most dramatic illustration of that was the way it was taken up by black slaves in the southern states of America. They sang this

When Israel was in Egypt land,
let my people go!
They worked so hard they could not stand,
let my people go!
Go down Moses,
way down in Egypt land.
Tell old Pharaoh,
let my people go!

The words are about Egypt and Pharaoh. But the reality was that they they were singing about their own slavemasters. . They were singing their own story

For the Jewish people the story of the Exodus was something to retell every year. In part this was because without the Exodus they would have had no existence as a nation. But it was also because the experience of slavery was continually repeated for them. They were enslaved to the Assyrians; they were in slaved to the Babylonians; in the centuries before Jesus they were enslaved to the Greeks; at the time of Jesus they were

enslaved to the Romans; as the centuries progressed they were successfully dominated by the Crusaders, the Turks and finally the British.

But why do we remember the Exodus? We are not Jews. We are not slaves. Perhaps we need to seek the answer in the events that we now know as the Last Supper.

As it was happening, the disciples did not know it was the Last Supper. From their perspective it was yet another Passover celebration, another remembering of the Exodus. In the usual way Jesus took bread and wine and gave thanks. But in a very unusual way he added some words of his own: as he broke the bread he said

This is my body that is for you. 1 Cor 11:24

As he took the cup he said

this cup is the new covenant in my blood. 1 Cor 11:25

We will never know whether the first disciples made any sense of that at all. But over the centuries the Christian church has worked out its own explanation. It's something like this: the Jews were in slavery in Egypt: they were rescued by the power of God; to enable that to happen they had to sacrifice a lamb and smear its blood above the doors so that the angel of death would recognise their homes and pass over. That key event was celebrated every year by telling the story and sacrificing a lamb.

We too are slaves but to a spiritual power we know as sin; we are rescued by the power of God; to enable that to happen a lamb has to be sacrificed, a lamb of God, the Lamb of God and that lamb is Jesus Christ. That key event is recalled every time we celebrate the Eucharist and especially when we observe Holy Week and celebrate Easter.

I said a few minutes ago that the story of the Exodus appears to be a different story from that of Christ's passion. What I have just said makes it clear that in fact the Exodus and the Passion are the same story.

This story, the Exodus or the Passion, expresses our identity as Christians. And the Christian story is, for us, more significant than the British story. My identity as a Christian is greater than my identity as a

Briton. Over the last fifty years many dioceses in the church of England have sought to strengthen this Christian identity by establishing links with dioceses in other countries. The ones that we are most aware of are those with Sudan and Tanzania inherited respectively from the dioceses of Bradford and Wakefield. The purpose of these links goes beyond simple financial aid. The purpose of these links is to establish our common identity with Christians in Africa, Asia, America - in fact anywhere else in the world.

In that sense when Muslims asserts that their Islamic identity is more important than their British identity we can only agree with them. EE feel the same But the danger is that we stop there. The danger is that our British tribal identity is simply replaced by a Christian or Muslim tribal identity. However, our vocation is to go beyond that. Our vocation is to assert our common human identity. A common human identity from which no one is excluded. It is not Christians who are rescued from slavery to seeing: it is all people. When God created human being he did not create them British, European, or African. Adam and Eve had no nationality or religion.

When Paul wrote to the fractious, bickering church in Galatia he recognised this:

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free,
nor is there male and female,
for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Galatians 3:28

WE live in a fractious, bickering world. The gospel we have to proclaim to such a world is really very simple. In Christ there is neither male nor female, neither Briton no immigrant, neither Remainer no Leaver, neither religious or secular, neither Muslim or Christian, neither Jew nor Palestinian.

Perhaps in your family, perhaps in your circle of friends, the divisions are different. But the gospel message remains the same: in Christ we are one.

N Clews
17th April 2019