**15th September 2013**

**Exodus 12.1-14**

Sitting down and having a meal together as a family is something we try to do in our house every day. It’s a chance for us all to catch up with each other. When it’s my turn at the stove there is also the ritual of the children complaining about my cooking. We try and say prayers around the table and we share about our day. It doesn’t always happen –sometimes life is too manic and everything is rushed, or we have had a bad day and don’t feel like talking much. But the idea is there and that’s the aspiration. I guess it’s a ritual that draws us back to what is central to our lives. It is a focus for our identity as a family, yet it can also be problematic and at times a bit messy; but it is also a challenge to live up to the ideal of what having that family time is all about.

As we continue to look at the story of Moses the reading today is about the institution of the Passover meal. The Passover marks the escape from Egypt when the Hebrews were liberated from the oppression of a foreign power. When the Jewish community relives this meal it reminds itself of its identity and reminds itself of the challenge the Passover symbolises.

Briefly this morning I want to talk about how our traditions and rituals give us identity and a sense of belonging; whilst also being problematic and messy; These rituals challenge us to live out the message at the heart of them.

Jesus on the night he was betrayed shared in a Passover meal which he then reinterpreted as an act of remembrance of what his life and death was all about.

At Greenbelt once I heard a fascinating talk by a woman called Sarah Miles who was an atheist but who became a Christian by taking part in a communion. She lived in San Francisco in the States and she had heard about a different kind of church, called St Gregory’s that were doing some great community work. She went along to a service to observe what was different about this place. She immediately noticed that in the centre of the church was a big table and there were no barriers around the table, no rails or steps or pews. The big table had inscribed on it the text of the dismissive accusation Jesus’ religious adversaries threw in his face, "This schmuck (Its American!) Welcomes sinners and eats with them”.

The invitation came to come and gather around the table, the priest said "Jesus welcomes everyone to his Table, so we offer communion to everyone." She went forward and when she received the bread – she said she just believed – that Jesus was real and present.

Sarah Miles went on to found a Food Pantry. This is where the church collects spare food from supermarkets and restaurants and suppliers and gives it away free to anyone who wants it on Friday. She said that for her the Table is a sign of the kingdom. Jesus wasn’t choosy who he shared meals with. Communion was the sacrament of God’s grace and acceptance and love for everyone – just as the death and resurrection of Christ was for everyone. This open table was the sign of the kingdom.

Their baptismal font was outside the church to symbolise how people first were welcomed by Jesus and only later did they then work out what he was all about and so were willing to identify with him and his mission and go out in the world. For the people in that church, you didn’t have to be baptised first before you could have communion. Baptism wasn’t about joining the club but about signing up for Jesus’ movement, following in his way of radical acceptance, generosity, compassion and love. The Table captured the essence of Christianity. It was their focus, their identity. Their open central table was a sign of belonging.

Our rituals and habits do say something about us and identify us.

Children going back to school no doubt will be trying to sort out which groups they will fit into. Our wider culture is littered with the badges of identity we espouse, whether it's the sports team we support, the bands we listen to, the brands we buy or the clothes we wear. In almost every area of our lives we would be hard put to point to something we have bought or some pastime we enjoy that doesn't immediately identity us to someone else as 'one of us' or 'one of them'. The Christian subculture is no different. The building we go to, the hymnbook we use, our form of worship, even the translation of scripture from which we read, marks us out to one another.

None of this would matter if it wasn't for the difficulties human beings have in treating others fairly and decently, especially people whom we identify as 'not one of us', whether they are someone from the wrong gang or no gang in a British city, or someone from the wrong ethnic or religious grouping

*Today’s New Testament reading (Romans 13.8-14) shows us the way of squaring this particular circle: of how to belong, how to be part of an 'us' without creating a 'them'. 'Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.' You cannot love a person without it beginning to change you and to change how you see not only the person you love but the next person and the next person and the next person.*

As we seek to build our communities of faith, we need to ask God for the wisdom to see whom we are defining ourselves against, whom we definitely are not, so that we might learn to love and appreciate those whom we most fear.

But of course what unites us may exclude others. Our rituals and traditions may be problematic and messy. We know that the meal Jesus gave in remembrance of him has caused division within the church as different denominations have understood it in different ways.

I could take hours offering you various theories of the origin of the Passover meal and how our own communion grew out of this understanding. For example, some speculate that the origin is based on the habit of herdsmen who daubed their tents with the blood of the lamb when moving from winter to spring pasture as a way of superstitiously warding off misfortune – in other words it was a good luck charm;

others point up the ancient belief that blood contained the life of an animal or person It was thought that a universal law demanded a life for a life – so the blood was shed of a lamb to spare the lives of the Israelites. This led to much convoluted theology to understand the cross of Jesus and the spilling of Jesus’ blood as offering that sacrifice for our sins. That view resulted in some churches having altars and sacrifices being made at those altars where the bread and wine become quite literally the body and blood of Christ.

Danny Hecht, my Jewish consultant, said that the blood in the story in many ways symbolizes the need to show braveness in the face of hard times. By spilling the blood in broad daylight God reinforces his 'troops' to get brave before the battle commences.

The spirit is of being in it together, not just that we can all remember together. It erases differences between us in the face of upheavals as a self-preservation process. The word 'hang' and 'dependent' is the same word in Hebrew (Taluy). There is an old Jewish  joke about Passover which says that 'if we are not depending on one another we will be hanged one next to each other’.

As I said I could spend hours – weeks- examining the various theories and questions the institution of the Passover raises. Suffice to say it is problematic and messy. It leaves a lot of questions.

In the plagues story God was able to exempt the Israelites from plagues that affected Egyptians so why was it not possible for the final plague? There is a moral difficulty of believing in a God who apparently puts to death the innocent children of the whole people, when it is only its ruler who is in dispute with Israel.

Then you have these almost obsessive details about how to prepare the Passover. All this talk of blood and inner organs is a bit bizarre isn’t it? We are used to getting our meat nicely butchered and wrapped up in Clingfilm.

But that doesn’t stop you having family meals and re-enacting rituals. It is custom and it creates identity and aspiration.

Passover remembers the deliverance of the Jews. This deliverance was as much political as spiritual, in that it freed people from slavery. It was intended to bring benefits to all nations, including their oppressors, Egypt. If Israel is not a light to the nations in the manner in which it establishes and practices mercy and compassion among its citizens, the Egyptians will have paid a heavy price in vain; and the Old Testament, in its narratives of the wilderness wanderings is unsparing in its condemnation of the attitude of the very generation that was freed from slavery. The Passover meal would stand as a prophetic challenge to the people of God.

When we share communion our ritual challenges us. Donald Hilton tells a story in his book Table Talk from a century ago. One Sunday a farm labourer walked to the front of his parish church in order to kneel at the altar and receive Holy Communion. Others walked with him towards the rail that surrounded the altar table. As he approached and prepared to kneel he realised that the only place left at the rail would put him in close proximity to the squire who had moved forward at the same time. Instinctively the labourer paused ready to move back until the squire had knelt and completed his devotions. It was a natural reaction: the squire took precedence in every other day and in every other part of a labourer’s life. Had he passed him in the street he would have doffed his cap. Each knew his place. For the farm labourer to pause at the table and give reference to the squire was natural and instinctive.

But the squire, about to kneel, paused and beckoned the labourer forward. ‘Come’, he said, ‘we are all equal here.’

The story raises a number of questions says Donald Hilton, about the relationship between the labourer and the squire, not only on a Sunday at the communion table but also on a Monday to Saturday. How far did the Squire’s Sunday equality spread? Did it have echoes midweek? Did he pay his labourers a decent wage? Was the tied cottage a suitable home for a labourer’s family, and could he retain it on retirement? Was he provided with a pension when he could no longer work? What were the sick pay rates?

A Sunday gesture, however genuine, is no excuse for weekday neglect comments Hilton.

Our meal, which we do in remembrance of Jesus, is still a prophetic challenge to us. We don’t share out the communion bread to the richest in our community first and foremost. We don’t tell those who are disabled in any way to wait their turn. We don’t tell the poor they can have the crumbs because that’s what they deserve.

But while fairness and justice can be easily organised at our table we all know it is more difficult to organize in the world. The point is that the attitudes that normally surround the table of the Lord are a prophetic challenge to those contrary attitudes which control national and international politics and personal prejudices. As we find our identity through our rituals, hopefully they form our identity and attitude to the world around us.

May God bless us and challenge in all our customs and traditions.

**Theme introduction**

In this series, as you engage with the story of the Exodus, it would be good to remember that God is a God who rescues.

Leviticus 26:1−6,9−13 resonates with God’s goodness and power as he rescued his people from Egypt and yet, God’s words begin by reminding the people to obey God’s laws.

This reading can be split into two voices: ‘Voice 1’ speaks what God has

done; ‘Voice 2’ tells what the people must do or will experience. As an introduction, remind everyone of the background to the story. Leviticus 26:1−6, 9−13 can be downloaded from Web resources.

As you read Leviticus 26:1−6, 9−13, two people should walk slowly from the back of church to the front. One (a slave) should be bowed down with a heavy burden, even chains, across their shoulders. At the end of the reading, when they are at the front, the other one should say,

‘Give me your burden. Walk tall with your head held high.’

The ‘slave’ does what they are told. Follow this with a song of praise to God with everyone standing up straight.

**Prayer idea**

Ask each person in a small group to link their arms as though making a chain.

Ask everyone to think of one time when they felt trapped or in need of being rescued, either literally or metaphorically.

Pray,

thanking God that he is with us at all times and in all diffi culties, and is a God who rescues.

Then ask everyone to think of something that God may want them to do that is hard. Maybe they do not want to obey him.

Offer some examples. Ask for God to help you all to do what is right.

Then conclude by calling out: ‘Lord God, set us free so

that we can walk with our heads held high.’

At this point (and you will need to warn people not to hit anyone) everyone should fl ing their arms out wide and cry:

‘We will trust and obey the Lord God.’