

Reflective Worship – Sunday 7th April

Part 1

Since February – essentially through Lent and into Holy Week – in Reflective Worship we have been thinking about the story of the people of Israel in the Old Testament – from slavery in the Egypt to Moses leading the people out and through the wilderness wanderings to the promised land . We thought of the parallels between that story and the story of Jesus. How through his sacrificial death on the cross he has released us from sin and its consequences.

We started with the story of Joseph, reflecting on the way everyone in that story contributed to the Israelites ending up in Egypt and eventually in slavery. Jacob and his favouritism; Joseph and his inability to see the effect of his words and actions on others; his brothers and their jealousy and self interest. Mess upon mess.

We looked at Moses – the way he was adopted into the royal household; his fleeing and adoption into the household of Laban; the burning bush and the call from God and eventually the plagues culminating in the final plague – the killing of the first born. We thought about the Israelites leaving Egypt, pursued by the Egyptians. We remembered the Red Sea and left them on the brink of the promised land.

And in Holy Week we heard the stories of two people – Nathan – one of the Israelites who fled Egypt and Joanna – one of Jesus' wider band of disciples. We reflected on their experiences.

If you were here you may recall that Nathan talked about the history of God's covenant with Abraham and the nation. He reflected on the pain of the slavery in Egypt; God passing over the homes of the Israelites and then Moses leading the people out of Egypt. He spoke about the Red Sea and the death of the Egyptian soldiers; the commandments and the renewal of the covenant between God and the people; the instructions to remember the new freedom every year by the passover festival and finally the choice offered to all the people by Moses as they prepared to enter the promised land - , "This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live."

And maybe you can also remember something of Joanna's story. She was one of the women who had followed Jesus from Galilee. She said she had felt trapped in a world which thought that women had no value beyond producing children and she

longed for freedom – and Jesus offered her some hope. She went on to talk about that supper in an upper room where Jesus spoke of love and service. She told us about how as he celebrated the passover Jesus took bread and wine as a sign of his body and blood being offered for us all – a kind of self sacrifice – and he instructed his followers to do similar with bread and wine to remember him. She spoke about Jesus dying on the cross, and the temple curtain being torn in two to show there was a new way to know God. And she spoke of Jesus coming back to life and a new life being offered to all – a life of love and service in God’s new Kingdom.

But what do these two old and parallel stories have to do with us in 21st Century Britain. Is there a third strand to the story?

Part 2

So here is Malcolm’s story:

You OK? My name’s Malcolm. Just an ordinary sort of guy – principal interests footie, drink and family. But somehow my story became more than just that.

Never had much time for religion. Married in church of course. Had the kids done as babies, but that was about all. Not that I was a bad bloke. Paid my taxes (mostly), kind to old ladies and dogs, invited the parents to lunch on Christmas Day then watched the Queen on telly – well it’s the King now isn’t it?

Until one year I had a stupid row with Dad. Dunno now what happened, can’t even remember how it started, but it got pretty bad – very bad actually – words were said which never should’ve been said. I stormed off, slamming the door, saying I never wanted to see him again. And I meant it. Didn’t go near him for months. All the family, they tried to put it right, but I wasn’t having it. In my heart I knew I was wrong, but I couldn’t bring myself to go and say sorry and make it up. There was always an excuse to leave it til another day.

And then one day my brother turned up on the doorstep. Looked dreadful. “It’s Dad,” he said. “He had a heart attack this morning. He didn’t make it.”

My world fell apart. The guilt was indescribable. And there was nothing I could do about it now, and nothing anyone else could do either. I was trapped. Trapped in my guilt.

I felt terrible going to the funeral. All the time I was there I was thinking about the way I should have said sorry; I should have tried to make things better. But I was so proud and stubborn. And now – my pride and pig headedness had sort of imprisoned me.

And then the Minister who was taking the service started to read something – from the Bible I think. I caught some of the words.

See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them;

he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more

I couldn't understand all the words – but I caught hold of some of them. God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Crying and pain will be no more. Was that possible? Was it possible that the pain I was in could go away? That I could be free from this guilt? That there was a way out?

I left the chapel, still feeling rubbish; still feeling like things couldn't be any worse – but also wondering if there was any truth, any hope in what the minister had said.

I decided to have a chat to the minister. It was about a week later we met up. I talked about the mess I was in; the stubbornness, the pride and the guilt I now felt. I said about those words at the funeral and how I longed for some hope.

The minister just sat and told me some stories. One was about the Israelite people thousands of years ago; trapped as slaves in Egypt ; thinking there was no hope. And then God acted and brought them out of Egypt, led them through some really hard times in the desert and then showed them a new future – a new land where they could settle and make their home. God said all you have to do is choose to be my people; to live as I ask you too and it will be like starting out again – a new life in a new land!

The minister then told me a story about some of the people who followed Jesus a couple of thousand years ago. Thieves, women, outcasts – those who had little hope for the future because of what they had done or what society thought of them. The minister told me how Jesus cared for them and included them; how he showed them how to live the kinds of lives God wanted – lives of love and service – putting

others first rather than selfish lives; then talked about Jesus dying on the cross – like he offered up his own life for others – and how a few days later he was alive again. The story seemed too ridiculous to believe, but the minister carried on. These people – the thieves and outcasts and the women – all found new hope because they had seen Jesus alive again; they all put the past behind and looked to a new future; they all decided to be part of God’s new people and for them it was like starting life again. A new life and a new future. It wasn’t always easy for them – some even died because of their new faith – but they all knew Jesus was with them as they stepped forward.

The minister looked me in the eyes. It’s your choice. You can stay where you are – trapped in your guilt and past – or you can take a step into the future. Jesus offers you the same as he did those people; the same as God offered the Israelites. Choose life. Choose to live as he wants. Choose to put the past behind. And then those words you heard at the funeral will become real for you. It won’t always be easy, but you won’t ever be alone. God promises to be with you always.

So here I am. Malcolm. Just an ordinary sort of guy with an extraordinary story of how God has changed me and give me the chance to live a new life. Just like the Israelites thousands of years ago; just like those people who followed Jesus. He did it for me. And can do it for you. All you have to do is say yes.

That is Malcolm’s story. There are countless other stories like it but also different from it. Stories that echo the story of the Israelites in Egypt or the story of the followers of Jesus. I have a story; you have a story. We all have stories.

Let us now take a few moments in quiet to reflect on our own particular stories and to thank God for them.