

## Salvation from Egypt

Sermon 2 September 2011

Year A, Ordinary Time, Proper 18

Exodus 12:1-14, Psalm 149, Romans 13:8-14, Matthew 18:15-20

*Rev Dr Jos Strengholt*

### Introduction

Jesus said: 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.' What a great promise of our Lord Jesus Christ to us today.

In the book of Acts, in chapter, St Peter says of this same Jesus: 'There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men, by which we must be saved.'

Peter spoke these words in a very unfriendly environment – in front of the Jewish council that had just weeks before, rejected Jesus, and had him crucified.

May these words of Jesus and Peter be the motto of our church throughout the years. He is in our midst, with his saving power – even in an environment that is not friendly to our Lord Jesus Christ and his church.

Today we have heard from Exodus 12 how the people of God in their need, in a land of oppression, were saved by God. This is one of the most formative stories in the Jewish faith, and also for our own understanding of God and how he wants to save mankind.

### Salvation: Punishment for the enemies and from their gods

What did Israel need salvation from? First, clearly, from the Egyptians who oppressed them. Egypt abused the Israelites, it treated them as slaves, and it did not want to let them worship God in the desert.

So Israel was in need of salvation from a social and political environment that was not particularly friendly. And it needed the help from God against those people who wanted to make the true worship of God impossible.

But that was not all. Israel also had to be saved from the gods of Egypt. In Ex 12:12 we read that God was preparing to pass through the land to strike the oppressive Egyptians, and, He said, 'and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgements. I am the Lord.'

That the gods of Egypt are also mentioned is because those self-constructed ideas in the minds of the people had become real 'powers' in Egypt. State, society and religion were woven together

in a manner that was oppressive to anyone who did not wholeheartedly embrace all three – state, culture, and religion.

Here in Heliopolis, the Egyptians worshiped Ra above all, the sun god, and many other gods with him. The creation story in the Bible beautifully rejects these Egyptian gods. God spoke his word, and in a fraction of a moment the sun was created. Ra was nothing.

But on the other hand, Ra was powerful. These Egyptian gods served to justify the exploitation of the poor Israelites. Just as many people today use man-made religion for exploiting people.

One important aspect of the salvation of God, is that he comes to avenge – Those who oppress the people of God and their gods, they cannot stand.

This reminds us of a scene in the book of Revelation, where we see Christian martyrs in heaven, calling to God: "How long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who live on earth..."

The cry to God for justice against oppressive regimes and their gods is totally Biblical.

This week I was teaching in the Alexandria School of Theology, in King Marriott, close to Alexandria. One of the new first year students was a beautiful young woman. She walked with crutches, as she is slightly crippled. And she had burn wounds on her arm. And she was deaf in one ear.

The wounds in her heart were much worse. On the first of January she was in the church in Alexandria that was bombed. She was badly wounded, and worse, her mother was killed. And her sister. And her aunt.

The salvation of God is that he comes to comfort those who have been abused, and to punish those who do evil, and to make an end to all mental constructions, religions, states, philosophies that are bad for people.

But God had to also save the Israelites from the gods of Egypt in another sense.

Many Israelites had adopted the same gods – and the mind of their enemies. God does not allow his people to have the mind of the world. The Israelites were not better than the Egyptians. The book of Exodus is very explicit about this; it opens in chapter 2 with the story that shows some men from Israel who were fighting each other. It even shows how the great leader of Israel, Moses, was a murderer.

The people of God have to be saved from the mind of the world, even from the gods of the world that we so easily adopt in our heart.

As Christians we are also very able to create our gods in our own image. John Calvin, the great reformer, called humankind ‘a factory of idols’.

We are all very good at moulding God into any image that suits us. God as the one who gives me what I want. The God who saves me from all things I do not like.

I find it amazing how many Christians seem to have problems with combining the idea that God is in our midst through Jesus Christ, with having problems in our midst. As if the presence of God means that we get all that we like to have today.

Bad things still happen to the people of God. Yes, eventually we will be saved even from those bad things. One day, we will enjoy the glory of His Kingdom where tears and pain will be gone, and where love, peace and joy will fill the earth.

But today God's focus is on saving us from the false gods in the corners of our heart.

The God who deserves our whole heart and the obedience of our whole life is not extremely popular, even among Christians. The God who asks us to love our neighbours and to do good, even to those who do evil to us, is not number one for most people.

What God actually came to do, was to save Israel from its enemies without –the oppressive Egyptians– and from the enemies within –the gods they had adopted in their hearts, the lifestyle that comes with those gods.

Israel did not only have to leave the land of Egypt and go to another land, but they also needed a change of heart. Forgiveness and cleansing and change.

### **Salvation: Eat the Lamb, put its blood on the door**

All people, Egyptians, Israelites, we, are miserable offenders. But God liberally offered salvation to his people.

Israel was told precisely what to do in order to be saved from God's wrath. Every family had

to take a perfect sheep, and on this specific night, eat it in their homes. The blood of that lamb had to be smeared on the doorposts and the Israelites had to stay inside their homes.

An animal had to die in order to save the people – a real sacrifice. The concept of sacrifice for salvation was central.

Interesting to note is that in Israel, this feast had to be celebrated in the homes, and not only at the time of the exodus, but ever since then, in Judaism this has been the most important feast.

For your information – on the Island of Elephantine in Aswan there was a large Jewish colony around 500 BC. From the famous "Passover papyrus of Elephantine" of the 5th century BC we know, that the Jews in that city, far away from their own land, 2500 years ago, celebrated this feast of Passover as their major feast in Aswan.

Our Lord Jesus, on the night before he was delivered, celebrated exactly this feast with his disciples; he made clear that he was making himself the perfect sacrificial lamb for the world.

In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* we read this about this Passover feast that Jesus celebrated with his disciples:

By celebrating the Last Supper with his apostles in the course of the Passover meal, Jesus gave the Jewish Passover its definitive meaning.

Jesus' passing over to his Father by his death and resurrection, the new Passover, is anticipated in the supper and celebrated in the Eucharist, which fulfils the Jewish Passover and anticipates the final Passover of the church in the glory of the Kingdom.

Jesus gave his disciples bread and wine and said: Eat, this is my body, and drink, this is my blood.

He is the Lamb of God, and even today, in heaven, he is recognized as the Lamb who was sacrificially slain.

The sacrifice of the lambs in Israel looked forward to the great Lamb, Jesus Christ. Just as our holy communion today looks back toward that Lamb.

And by eating his body and drinking his blood, in faith, we participate in his eternal sacrifice, receiving full salvation.

### **Salvation: Matter of the whole community**

The decision to *not* be saved is totally personal. Every Jewish person could decide *not* to stay inside their homes; that disobedience of God would bring terror and death on them.

Salvation is also personal. It is available for each person. Even the Egyptians could be saved, if they would only stay inside the homes of the people of God. Remember that when Israel left Egypt, many Egyptians travelled with them to the Promised Land; they became part of the people of God.

Each person can experience the salvation and presence of God, by joining his people!

Salvation is personal, and has to do with my and your personal choice. But it is *not* individualistic. In Israel, it was a family affair. Father and mother would bring their children into the homes, brothers, sisters, aunts and uncles, and eat the lamb together. And pray to God together. And it also had to be remembered as a family feast throughout the generations.

That is why we as congregation also meet. To believe together, to eat together, to live together under the blessing of God. And this not only on Friday for an hour or so.

Our Lord Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He commands us to let go of the gods, the ideas, the mind, the lifestyle of the world we live in, and to live in accordance with the will of his Father.

And for those who desire to do so, he also forgives our lack of perfection. He forgives us when we allow hatred, anger, a lack of kindness, a lack of love to dictate our behaviour and our mind.

That is the salvation he offers. The promise that one day, he will make all things good; evil will be punished and goodness rewarded.

But also that he draws us out of a mindset and a lifestyle that is not wholesome.

And that he forgives us our sins and weaknesses.

This is not a promise for Israel only, or for very pious and religious people, but it is for all people. This is what we celebrate as a community – with Holy Communion as the heart of our celebration.

But it is, as I said, also personal. With our hearts, we must receive Him. St Augustine (354-430), a church father who lived in North Africa, said in one sermon:

Our foreheads are marked with the blood of Christ. And that sign, because it was a sign, was said to keep the destroyer away from the houses marked with the sign. The sign of Christ drives the destroyer away from us insofar as our heart receives the Savior.” from his *Tractate on the Gospel of John* 50.3:

### **Conclusion**

Like Israel in the past, at Holy Communion we reject the lifestyle of the Egyptians, and the gods of this world, to worship our Lord God alone.

You know what the Israelites did when Moses explained to them how God was going to save them? Exodus 12:27 says: ‘The people bowed down and worshipped...’

We also kneel worshipfully for the heavenly Father as revealed by Jesus Christ and proclaimed by his apostles.

We eat the Lamb for our salvation; we worship Him with all our heart.

And after the kneeling, we also stand ready with the belt fastened, staff in our hand, ready to go into the world. Looking forward to Gods eternal city, and on the way, trying to invite more people into the family of God, inside the house where we enjoy his salvation meal together.

**+ in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.**