

We're going to look at scripture together in a moment or two. You'll know that we're continuing our series looking at the life of Moses and the history of the Israelites, and then we're going to be using passages from Romans to reflect on those aspects of Moses' life and the Israelite history.

In our series looking at the life of Moses and the history of the Israelites we have reached some of the most significant events in the whole of the Old Testament. After God had brought 9 plagues on the Egyptians Pharaoh still refused to set the Israelites free. God, therefore, had to bring the most horrendous plague upon them, the death of first born male in every Egyptian family. Now the Israelites were to avoid this plague by marking their door posts with lamb's blood. The blood of an animal, the life blood, was considered to be immensely important in Jewish theology and Jewish thinking, and so as the blood was smeared upon the door posts it meant that when the Destroying Angel went through the land, he saw the blood on their door posts and he passed over the homes of the Israelites. And it is one of the lovely things that this word "Passover" literally describes what actually happened; what our understanding is of what happened on that occasion in the history of the Israelites when the Destroying Angel passed over the homes of the Israelites. This terrible event when the Lord struck down all the eldest sons in Egypt finally caused Pharaoh to relent. So in the middle of the night Pharaoh told Moses and the Israelites to get out of Egypt with all their livestock and belongings. The exodus journey itself was only about 32 miles, but it was really a symbolic journey out of slavery into freedom. Once the Israelites had left Pharaoh, realising he had lost his captive work force, changed his mind again and led his army out to recapture the Israelites. As the Egyptian army thundered towards them, the Israelites found they were trapped on the banks of the Red Sea; but, of course, this is when Moses famously raised his staff and parted the waters of the Red Sea so the Israelites could cross safely. The Egyptian Army started to follow them but of course then Moses pulled down his arm with the staff, and the waters flooded back and swept away the Egyptian Army, their chariots and their horses. So, in order to help us reflect on those events that we look at in the life of Moses and the life of the Israelite nation, we're going to read a passage from Paul's letter to the Romans, which should help us to see how these events apply to us. And the Reading in case you'd like to follow it with me is from Romans Chapter 6 verses 1 to 14, and in my Bible this passage is headed: "Dead to sin, alive in Christ"

[Reading Romans 6:1-14]

Praise God

So the Old Testament events that I described earlier, a few moments ago, are used several times in the New Testament, particularly by Paul, as a picture of our human spiritual situation. And it goes like this: the Israelites were physically enslaved and God, through Moses, led them to physical freedom. And Paul says that in the same way human beings are spiritually enslaved and God, through Jesus, offers to lead humanity into spiritual freedom. This is made clearest in the last verse of today's passage from Romans: "for Sin shall not be your master because you are not under Law but under Grace." So this passage can help us to rethink our beliefs about being followers of Christ because after all what we believe affects our behaviour: if we believe that we are new people and our Sin has been rendered powerless then we'll find it easier to resist temptation than if we believe that Sin still has power over us. If we know we have been changed,

we will want to live a change life. You see if we think of this journey from spiritual slavery into spiritual freedom then we can see Jesus Christ is like our pioneer: He is the one who was gone before us, he has already travelled to this new country which he calls the kingdom of God. And as we follow Christ he leads us through the experiences that he has already gone through.

Let's look at some of those experiences that this passage tells us about that Jesus has already gone through and now leads us through as well.

Firstly, he leads us through his death on the cross. In the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus knew he was about to suffer terrible pain culminating in his death on the cross, Jesus prayed: "Father if you're willing take this cup of suffering from me; yet not my will but yours be done." He says that in Luke 22:42. And those words remind us that Jesus chose to lay aside his own will, he didn't want to die, but he chose to lay aside his own will, his own desires, in order to fulfil his father's plans. And he calls us to do a similar thing. In Matthew 16:24 Jesus says, "whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." We are offered a new life in Christ, not just a revamped old life; but in order to experience that we need to go through a spiritual death. The death of her own desires, our own ego in the sense of laying down our ego and our desires for what we want for our lives, and instead being prepared to live according to God's plans for us, God's will for us. And if we're prepared to follow Jesus through that death of our desires and our ego, then we can experience that new life in Christ that he promises.

Secondly, Christ leads us through his resurrection. He was raised from death and he offers us the opportunity to be raised to life. Just as Christ was raised back to life we follow him by also rising to a new life. Paul tells us in verse 6 of our reading that our old self was crucified with Christ so that the body ruled by Sin might be done away with; that we should no longer be slaves to Sin. And this, of course, is for us the power and the symbolism of baptism. Just before we went into lockdown, about a month or so before hand, I had the joy of leading 7 people through baptism preparation classes; and it is my real hope that when we are finally able to join together in worship as a body of Christ, physically, that sometime in the next few months we will be able to see some of those 7 people choosing to go through the waters of baptism expressing the new life that they have already experienced in Christ. We don't believe that baptism achieves the spiritual reality for us but we believe if we come to baptism with faith it's a seal of the decision that we've already made to live for Christ, and the act of baptism, in a sense, seals that desire that we've already expressed and have found in reality as we have given our lives to Christ. So Paul tells us, as I said, that our old life was crucified with Christ so that the body ruled by Sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to Sin. Now, I don't believe that this means that as Christians we are now without sin, but I do think it means that the power of Sin to dominate and to rule us has been broken. The enemy's power to hold us in thrall, as it were, to Sin and our inability to resist it, that has been broken. However, we do still make mistakes and we can still become enmeshed in Sin if we are not watchful.

On Thursday this week, I had an afternoon of gardening. I wanted to put some seeds out for some bee friendly flowers in one part of our garden. So I had to take out all the weeds in this flower bed and I was trying to protect the plants that I wanted to keep, and so that I could then seed the other flowers that I wanted to see develop. But, this was made much more difficult by the fact that the flower bed in question has started to be overtaken by bindweed; those of you who are gardeners will hear that word "bindweed" with fear and trepidation - it's otherwise known as "Convolvulus". And one of my memories from my teenage years was being in a particular house where we had moved to a new church and my dad looked at the back garden and said: "I'm going

to need to spend some solid time in there because that garden has got a problem with convolvulus.” And I remembering him being out there for hours (I think I probably helped him at some points with trying to deal with that convolvulus in those gardens), so I'm now repeating that experienced myself in our garden. But this weed is so successful because it wraps itself around any other plants in the garden, and it will eventually strangle those other plants and kill everything else that is in the garden if it's allowed to take over. Now I was trying to save some of the other plants but to be honest some of them were just too delicate to cope with the process of removing the bindweed from them. Well, we're reminded of the spiritual equivalent of bindweed by the writer of the book of Hebrews, he said in Hebrews 12:1 (and remember he is saying this to Christians), “Let us throw off everything that hinders and the Sin that so easily entangles.” Just like the vigilance that gardeners need to show with bindweed, we need a spiritual vigilance with anything that will stop us growing closer to Christ. So, Christ leads us through his death on the cross, he leads us through his resurrection.

Thirdly, Christ leads us through death. Christ leads us through death. Jesus Christ died a physical death on the cross and therefore he is trodden the road that one day we will all travel. But because we have confidence and faith in who Jesus is, we have a new perspective on life in this world. Paul tells us later in Romans, he said these famous words: “That neither death nor life...” and goes on to all sorts of other things and then finishes with “...nor anything else in all creation...” Let me just say that again: “Neither death nor life...nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (in Romans chapter 8 verses 38 and 39.) One of the implications of this truth is that as Christians we do not need to fear death! This doesn't mean to say that we look forward to it (and the experience of dying itself before death, that can be really scary) but rather we know that beyond this earthly life we have a future that is in Christ. So Christ having gone through death leads us then to have a new perspective on death itself and what follows death.

Fourthly and finally, Christ leads us through his life in God, his life in God. There are whole chapters of John gospel which give us an insight into this intimacy of relationship between God the Father and Jesus as his son. Jesus talks about I and the Father are one, and he talks about the way that the relationship between them is a one of intimacy, and a one that sustains him, sustains Christ himself, particularly through these times of suffering when he is on the cross. And in those verses in John's Gospel Jesus also explains something of the connection in the relationship between God the Holy Spirit and himself and the Father. I recently heard the relationship between the members of the Trinity compared to the activity of an atom, which is, of course, the building block of all things. Now, those of you who remember your physics lessons from school may know that the atom has three constituent parts: the neutron, the proton and the electron. The neutron and proton they hold together, and they form the nucleus, whilst the electron rapidly spins around the nucleus. But we are told that it is the relationship between the three constituent parts that creates the energy. We understand God to be Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and like the atom it is the relationship between the three that creates the spiritual energy and flow, which we are invited to join in with. Father Richard Rohr, a Franciscan monk from the United States, describes the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in these terms; the Father: God for us; the Son: God alongside us; the Holy Spirit: God within us. That lovely picture of the Divine Trinity: God for us, God alongside us, God within us. Astoundingly, we are invited to join the flow of this divine Trinity at work in our world, but so often at work in hidden ways, so often at work in hidden ways. As we join this flow we discover the freedom to be ourselves in God, rather than to be enslaved to an identity imposed, or expected, by the earthly authorities and powers around us. We're invited

to discover the freedom to be ourselves in God.

Praise God! Let's pray together.

Lord God we thank you for your word to us this morning, that just as you did with the Israelites you call us out of slavery into freedom, to find our true selves and to be able to leave in the freedom and the joy of being our true selves. I pray Lord that during this time of continued lockdown that we may have opportunity to reflect on the freedom that you offer us to be our true selves. And I pray Lord God that we will take this opportunity, and we will meditate and focus and reflect upon who we are in you, and how we can fulfil more of your will for us, not only in the things we do but in the people we are and in the relationship that we develop with you but also with those around us in our work lives, in our local neighbourhood, in the relationships that we have day by day (particularly as we are able to pick those up in the weeks and months that lie ahead, hopefully). Lord we bring these prayers to you, and pray them in your name, amen.