

8 March 2015

What we celebrate at Easter is what we are reminded of in today's first reading; the God who sets us free from slavery. We are used to understanding slavery in terms of particular groups or races being denied freedom and fundamental human rights, groups of people detained and exploited for cheap labour. While we think that we live in modern enlightened times where slavery no longer exists, in fact the bible speaks about another form of slavery; it is the slavery of sin and all that keeps us apart from God's love and grace in daily life.

The chosen people of God knew the reality of slavery in Egypt. They were detained, they were exploited, they were denied hope and identity. God sets them free from this captivity with the reminder that they are to worship the living God and not create false gods of their own. As we know from the Old Testament, no sooner had the people been set free from Egypt, they began to create and worship idols and false gods. And guess what? They were then 'enslaved' once more. They were enslaved by their own foolishness. Human nature is so predictable. Rather than worship the living God who set them free from the slavery of Egypt, the chosen people worship a false god of idolatry who enslaves them once more.

The list of commandments that are given in Exodus are familiar to us. Yes they are a code of conduct but they are more than just 'traffic lights' for our lives. For those who live in the freedom of God, the commandments are our way of celebrating what it means when we are not 'enslaved'. When God loves us and frees us, we are guided by God's grace and therefore we do not kill, we do not steal, we do not bear false witness and we honour those around us. And so for the Christian, this is what we celebrate at Easter. The death and resurrection of Jesus sets us free from sin and slavery and enables us to live by his grace, light and truth. The commandments are not rules to make us miserable in life; they are principles that lead us to true freedom.

In today's Gospel, Jesus drives out the money-changers from the temple. By his death, Jesus will raise up the new sanctuary which is his body in the resurrection. The religious leaders of the time miss the point completely. They think he is going to destroy the sanctuary of the temple

that took forty-six years to build and reconstruct it in three days. Jesus is calling the people to faith and hope in his resurrection but the religious leaders are enslaved to a vision of protecting a building sacred as it was. They have very little sense of what Jesus means by raising up a new 'sanctuary' which is his body.

Of course it makes little sense. Paul reminds us in today's second reading that preaching a crucified Christ is folly and nonsense to the Jews who look for miracles and the Greeks who look for wisdom. To the pagans, it is utter madness. For Paul, Christ crucified on the cross is the power and wisdom of God. This is the God who forsakes his power and enters into the mystery of human suffering and death to transform us and set us free. Death is the ultimate form of 'slavery' that holds us captive. But Jesus has embraced death precisely to unlock for us the mystery and gift of eternal life. That wonderful image we have on Good Friday of blood and water coming from the side of the crucified Christ reminds us of the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist that sacramentally give us and the Church new and everlasting life. From the slavery of death comes freedom and the new life of grace.

As we continue our Lenten journey, let us be mindful of the journey of freedom and hope we are being called to; let us celebrate the God who calls us out of darkness and into his own wonderful light.