

# **A Sermon preached on the first Sunday after Easter 11<sup>th</sup> April 2010 by the Very Revd James Atwell, Dean of Winchester**

Exodus 12: 1 – 13

1 Peter 1: 3 – 12

The Reading from Exodus reminds us that the context of the first Easter was a Passover Celebration. The Paschal events of Christ's death and resurrection are rooted in the vibrant memorial-observation of the rescue of the Hebrews under Moses from slavery in Egypt. Jesus instructs his disciples to prepare the Passover, and already seems to have made arrangements: "Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, 'the Teacher asks, where is my guest room that I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready" (Mark 14: 13 – 15). Carrying the water was normally women's work. The Essene sect had male communities, and so the water would be carried by men. Had Jesus some Essene connections with whom he had made these arrangements? There is more behind the biblical text than we are always aware of!

Jerusalem at Passover time was seething with people. The City was so crammed with pilgrims that many had to camp outside the City walls. There were huge queues in the Temple as every family had its lamb ritually slaughtered. People made the journey from Judea and Galilee, but also from across the world – from Cyrene in North Africa and Babylon ('dwellers in Mesopotamia'). As people converged on Jerusalem it became a huge security challenge. Pilate migrated from his Mediterranean headquarters at Caesarea Maritime to be in Jerusalem and ready for any trouble.

The very nature of the Passover Celebration always looked forward as well as backwards. God had rescued his people of old. Was this the moment when he might do it again? Was this the Passover on which the Messiah might appear? Every Passover in that period was eaten with keen anticipation. The Exodus instructions fuelled that excitement: 'This is how you shall eat it; your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you should eat it hurriedly. It is the Passover of the Lord' (Exodus 12: 10).

It was a volatile time. A time that a renewed liberation was fervently hoped for and anticipated. Such anticipation often spilled over into violence: aided and abetted by the Sicarii, people like Barabbas, who were bent on causing fear and panic through terrorism. Random stabbings in the crowd were the equivalent of today's terrorist actions. The Sadducees, the ruling cast of priests at the Temple, were as committed to diffusing insurrection as were the Romans. They had huge investment in the status quo.

Jesus had already chosen his moment: or rather, identified God's moment. His challenge to Jerusalem is straightforward. He rides a donkey into Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday; by so doing, he enacts the prophecy of Zechariah: 'Your King is coming to you, humble and mounted on a donkey.' Jesus goes to the temple, makes a whip of cords and drives out the sacrificial animals, and overturns the money-changers tables: 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations, but you have made it a robbers' den' (Mark 11: 17).

Jesus deliberately harnessed the expectations of the Passover and sought to say to Jerusalem: 'Now is the moment of your visitation'. It was for coming as a King albeit 'humble and mounted on a donkey' that he was crucified on Good Friday as King of the Jews. At his hastily convened trial it was his challenge to the Temple that was held against him. The Romans and the Sadducees equally feared a disturbance.

All the hope of Passover is rewarded in a quite unexpected way. Without a doubt, people looked for a political Messiah. Even the disciples on the Emmaus Road expressed their dismay in this way: 'But we had hoped he was the one to set Israel free' (Luke 24: 21). What actually happened seems to have taken them all by surprise 'on the third day he rose again'. Nothing had prepared them for that. There is a puzzled question from Jesus' disciples in St John's Gospel: 'Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world? (John 15: 22).

The contemporary anticipation of political liberation turns out to have been a crude concept; something more subtle actually happens. The Kingdom dawns in a startling but subdued way, and not in a global catastrophe. 'On the third day he rose again'.

The question to address to the resurrection is not whether it happened, but what was its significance? That something strange, mysterious and unexpected happened is evident. The significance of the 'third day' is embedded in the New Testament. Good Friday was not the end of the story. That resurrection is involved is only validated by further witnesses, beyond the empty tomb, of the encounters with the risen Lord. Paul's received evidence in 1 Corinthians 15 presents us with circumstances that are remarkably well attested. The whole New Testament is stamped with the resonances of the resurrection; that alone accounts for the vivid record that has survived of the events of the final week of Jesus' earthly ministry.

Where faith engages is in the interpretation of the events. They might have been simply evidence of some innate immortality in, at least, good people, or perhaps an insight into another dimension of our material world or even a freak event without obvious parallel or particular significance.

Faith has received the resurrection event in context. It comes out of a Passover situation that keenly expected God to act, and which Jesus himself had deliberately annexed and adopted into his own destiny. The resurrection came as fulfilment to hope anticipated; it was like horse and carriage, bride and groom. It was received not as an isolated event, but in the context of the promises of God.

The question to address to the resurrection is not whether it happened but what was its significance? It has been received by the Christian Church as a true 'act of God' – not as a phrase on an insurance policy! That is, as a moment of divine self-revelation, of grace, of God unveiling himself. 'The veil of the Temple was rent in two'. It is in that understanding of the resurrection that we need the perspective of the faith community. We are part of the Church, the Body of Christ, who have received the significance of the resurrection in that light.

The resurrection of Christ did not simply address a moment of history, and bring that much sought-after freedom to a people under Roman occupation. Rather it brought into being an Easter people who are to carry, in Christ's resurrection, a universal sign of hope for all history. An explosive event of hope, the death and resurrection of Christ is a hope for our individual destiny and for the destiny of Creation. Like the mustard seed, it is a small signal of God's promise which will grow until it encompasses everything. 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ; by his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead' (1 Peter 1: 3).