

Lent I Evensong 2020

Since the earliest days of our Faith, there has been an identification of the theme of Exodus with that of Lent and Easter – the sense of journeying and liberation. Our Easter praise will resound with hymns that link two profound events – the freeing from slavery for the Children of Israel seen as a foreshadowing of the Paschal Mystery of the Lord's Resurrection, together with the consequences which flow from this. Here is the first verse of a hymn by the fifth century by St John Damascene making the link, and which we will sing at some point over the Easter season:

Come, ye faithful, raise the strain
of triumphant gladness!
God hath brought his Israel
into joy from sadness:
loosed from Pharaoh's bitter yoke
Jacob's sons and daughters,
led them with unmoistened foot
through the Red Sea waters.

'Tis the spring of souls today:
Christ hath burst his prison,
and from three days' sleep in death
as a sun hath risen;
all the winter of our sins,
long and dark, is flying
from his light, to whom we give
laud and praise undying.

Don't think me slightly prescient in quoting an Easter hymn on the first Sunday of Lent (and note that I didn't utter the 'A' word!), but it does give us an understanding of the way in which we are called to see the unfolding continuity of the revelation of faith within the Scriptures. This in turn leads us to consider our own response to the way in which Faith touches our lives.....or , perhaps more correctly, how fundamentally we allow faith to shape who we are.

The disciples, growing up as faithful Jews, found themselves draw to a new understanding of faith and of life and death revealed through the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ, the consequences of which reverberate down the centuries – that is why you and I are here tonight in an act of worship.

The first reading this evening starts with the Shema: **Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad** – Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.

Jesus would have recited these words every day of his life. Judaism doesn't purport to have a formal creed in the way we do, but in fact this passage acts as one. It simply states the divine unity – the monotheism at the heart of Judaism, which ultimately leads to Christianity and Islam's same monotheism. The words that follow (verses 5-9) form part of the

recitation of the Shema, and speak of the powerful sense in which the 'Oneness' of God should never be forgotten: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.*

Many orthodox Jewish men use phylacteries or tefillin – leather thongs and a small pouch which contains a parchment with the Shema and other verses of Scripture. The tefillin are bound around the arm with the pouch on the forehead during morning prayer.

Our second reading seems to bear no relationship to the Shema's proclaiming of God, but in fact is one of those moments when Jesus illustrates the profound nature of the consequences of following God. It is as much to do with living one's life together with the way we interact with others that speaks of our call to inform every aspect of our lives through an understanding of our participation in the Divine Life of God. We do this because we are called to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, souls, and might. Sometimes we might feel that this is a pretty difficult command, yet the way we live in faith is a practical example of the way we achieve this.

Lent is a good time to reflect on this pull of God's call within our lives and allow it to shape who we are. I sometimes think of Lent as an opportunity for personal liberation – a chance to rethink everyday life. Our interaction with the world, shaped by faith, can bring this same liberation which lies at the heart of following Jesus to all those we meet. We can offer the pathway towards casting off the distractions which life which so often burden people, and at the same time allow ourselves to be transformed.

Today marks a profound moment in the life of the parishes of Bolney and Cuckfield as we embark on the adventure of our united benefice. In doing so we are called to proclaiming that Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Now you and I know that the church works extremely slowly, so it has only taken about a thousand years for this joint approach to come about!

Flippancy aside, I **do** believe that the gifts of those who worship at both churches – members of the Body of Christ – have so much to offer their respective and joint communities, knowing that they are prayerfully and practically supported by each other in working together to reveal the One True God, who loved the world so much that he sent his only Son, so that whosoever believes in him may not perish, but have everlasting life.

This is our call and privilege.



The Shema Yisrael in Hebrew

Deuteronomy 6: 4-9, 16-end.

⁴ Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. ⁵ You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶ Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷ Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ⁸ Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹ and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

¹⁶ Do not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah. ¹⁷ You must diligently keep the commandments of the Lord your God, and his decrees, and his statutes that he has commanded you. ¹⁸ Do what is right and good in the sight of the Lord, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may go in and occupy the good land that the Lord swore to your ancestors to give you, ¹⁹ thrusting out all your enemies from before you, as the Lord has promised.

²⁰ When your children ask you in time to come, ‘What is the meaning of the decrees and the statutes and the ordinances that the Lord our God has commanded you?’ ²¹ then you shall say to your children, ‘We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. ²² The Lord displayed before our eyes great and awesome signs and wonders against Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his household. ²³ He brought us out from there in order to bring us in, to give us the land that he promised on oath to our ancestors.

²⁴ Then the Lord commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our lasting good, so as to keep us alive, as is now the case. ²⁵ If we diligently observe this entire commandment before the Lord our God, as he has commanded us, we will be in the right.'

Luke 15: 1-10

15 Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'

³ So he told them this parable: ⁴ 'Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? ⁵ When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." ⁷ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.

⁸ 'Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbours, saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost." ¹⁰ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.'