

LENT 2024

JOURNEY *to* FREEDOM



THE
DIOCESE
OF
BLACKBURN

THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND IN LANCASHIRE



PREFACE

Has a greater story ever been told? Exodus has all the ingredients. A flawed hero in Moses. An arch-baddie in Pharaoh. The appalling injustice of slavery. The vivid horrors of the plagues. The jeopardy of a last minute escape. The hyper-real psycho-drama of the wilderness. The promise of a glorious freedom. What more could you want? Well there's much more! As you read through this wonderful book, look out for the following.

The Story of God's Covenant

From start to finish, Exodus shows us God's faithfulness to His people. He is with them in slavery and raises up the leader whose unique mix of qualities and experience He will use to set them free. He sees off mighty Pharaoh and rescues His people in the Sea. He shows them through the Ten Commandments how to live and, when again and again they fail and fall into sin, He does not give up on them.

As you read, see yourself in those struggling Israelites. In the twenty first century, it can be hard for us to go on being faithful, faced with the mighty pharaohs of secularism, materialism and greed. We too can easily drift off into sin and mistrust, doubting the presence of God or His work in our lives. But our faithful God never lets us go. Lent is the time to repent and turn back to Him, to be faithful to the covenant God who is always faithful to us.

The Gospel Story Anticipated

He may not be named, but we can find Jesus on every page of the Book of Exodus. We can find Him in fire. As Moses hears God's voice in the burning bush, so we see anticipated the fire of the Holy Spirit, the gift of Jesus to His church, who equips and sends for the mission.

We can find Him in the lamb. The blood of a slain lamb smeared on the doorposts of the Israelites to free them from the angel of death points us to the blood of Jesus, the Lamb of God, whose death on the cross sets us free.

We can find Him in water and bread. The water of the Red Sea, through which the Israelites escape Pharaoh's army, points us to the water of baptism in which we are born anew. The manna in the wilderness points us to Jesus, the living bread, who feeds us in the Eucharist.

Above all we can find Him in the big-picture sweep of the narrative. Just as the Israelites are saved by God from slavery, so through the whole saving work of Jesus we are ransomed from our slavery to sin and death and set free for eternity. That's why Exodus is the Lent book par excellence. It points us to the whole saving work of Christ.

Has a greater story ever been told? Yes! The story of Jesus Himself. And as we tell the Exodus story, something more of the wonder of that Gospel story is revealed.

The Diocesan Lent Course

This book will take you through the story of Exodus bit by bit, helping you to understand it in detail. A great way of exploring in more depth some of the big themes of Exodus is through our Diocesan Lent Course. This course can be followed either in parish groups or individually. Go to the Diocesan Website (www.blackburn.anglican.org) and you will find five short videos that I have recorded in different parts of the City of Lancaster and a written resource.

The Rt Revd Philip North, Bishop of Blackburn



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Ash Wednesday

Read: Exodus 1:1-14

'Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph...

Exodus 1:8

Some years ago I helped lead a trek through the Sinai desert, following in the footsteps of Moses and sleeping under the stars. I have never been so freezing cold in all my life! Each morning as we huddled around the campfire, drinking strong tea and eating bread baked freshly under the embers of the fire, we read together from the book of Exodus and reflected on the perilous journey of the Israelites from slavery to freedom.

Often in human history the rise of a new ruler or tyrant has spelt danger for a minority group within a country. The dramatic change from privileged position to persecuted minority is a story that many communities have experienced over the years. Once invited as honoured guests of the Pharaoh, Jacob's descendants find themselves over time resented and feared (see vv9-10), becoming an easy scapegoat for the ills of society.

Joseph's family had been invited to Egypt after Joseph's meteoric rise from being a wrongly-convicted prisoner in an Egyptian jail to being prime minister of the whole land at a time of famine and national crisis. With the benefit of hindsight, one could ask whether the way Joseph exercised his authority on behalf of Pharaoh had sown the seeds of future discontent—while his family enjoyed protected status, the Egyptians were forced to become slaves in their own land in order to buy food, as we can read in Genesis 47.20-21.

As we begin the Book of Exodus we shall see how God hears the cries of His people as they suffer ill-treatment. We shall be reminded how much human suffering—and plagues in the natural world—come about because of human stubbornness and disregard for the Creator. And we shall see how—not for the first or last time in Scripture—God's amazing rescue plan begins with the birth of a vulnerable little baby...

Let us pray: *Lord, we pray for those parts of our world today where fear and mistrust lead to minorities being oppressed. Lord, help us to hear their cries for help, and give us hearts to speak out in Your name. Amen.*

The Venerable Mark Ireland, Archdeacon of Blackburn

Read: Exodus 1:15-22

'But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live.'

Exodus 1:17

Most of us find the suffering of children incredibly hard to accept, whether we see that close at home, or on our screens in countries far away. Here, as so often, it is those who are the very youngest who suffer the most from a harsh and brutal regime.

What a terrible task to be given to midwives, whose mission was to protect life at its most fragile and vulnerable. And yet from somewhere, these ordinary women find extraordinary courage to dare to do something different. How is that? It is because buried in this passage, there is a key phrase: *'The midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them...'* (v.17).

What does it mean to fear God? Throughout the Bible we are constantly and wonderfully reminded 'do not be afraid'. And yet here, it seems that fear is a positive factor. This kind of fear is about revering God above everything... it's having a greater loyalty, knowing that most important of all is putting God first... saying 'yes' to Him, which may mean saying 'no' to others.

The midwives were given a very clear command by a brutal dictator, and yet they had a greater loyalty. They recognised that whatever others wanted them to do, and however powerful those people might be, they were first of all going to serve their God no matter what. As they did so, their courage and integrity were rewarded.

This may seem a million miles away from your situation or mine. However, as we begin the season of Lent, it is worth considering, what it might mean to you to give your greatest loyalty to God. What would that mean for your ambition, your money, your time, and the choices you make in your life? Would saying 'yes' to God mean saying 'no' to someone or something else?

For us, living in the fear of the Lord may mean we make sacrifices and face tricky choices. For other Christians throughout the world, living in the fear of the Lord may involve the threat of persecution or death. Let's commit to pray for them.

Let us pray: *Lord God, show us what it means to be faithful to you in all we do and say. Help us to remember in prayer all those whose faith in you puts them in danger Amen.*

The Revd Helen Scamman, Start of Ministry Officer

Read: Exodus 2:1-10

‘When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river.’

Exodus 2:3

What does it mean to be brave or courageous?

It may be facing your fear and doing it anyway – but be assured, I will not be adopting a tarantula as a pet any time soon. It may be showing good leadership, particularly in the face of difficulty or challenge. Volodymyr Zelensky could not have predicted the way his presidency of Ukraine would unfold but he has never stepped back from the task of leading his people against the Russian aggression they face. We may also think that those who speak out for the poor and marginalised show bravery in their words and actions.

If we think of characters from the Bible who show bravery and courage, the mother of Moses and Pharaoh’s daughter might not be the top of our list. They only play a small part in Moses’ story but without their actions, the events that follow would not be possible. It was Pharaoh himself that decreed that all Hebrew boys be thrown into the Nile out of fear of an eventual uprising against him. At just three months old, Moses’ mother places him in a waterproofed basket in the reeds in the river. What a risk she takes not knowing what will happen. Even though his sister watches on, there is no guarantee that the child will be found and kept safe.

Then Pharaoh’s daughter comes to bathe and the basket and baby are found. His sister offers to find a nurse to care for the child and so Moses’ mother is given the opportunity to raise him after all. Bravery shown by a mother to save her child, courage shown by a daughter to defy her father’s decree and protect this innocent boy.

This Lent how might we show bravery and courage in living the lives God wants for us? We are given opportunities to be a voice for the voiceless, to help protect and care for God’s people and the world in which we live. We may not be called to lead a nation, but we are called to make a difference in the power of the Holy Spirit and following the example of Jesus.

The Revd Canon Fleur Green, Vicar of St John the Baptist, Broughton

Read: Exodus 2:11-24

'But Moses fled from Pharaoh. He settled in the land of Midian, and sat down by a well.'

Exodus 2:15

'...and sat down by a well'. Sitting by a well has positive echoes, indeed positive intentions, in both the Old and New Testament narratives. Jacob sat by a well when he went to the east to seek a wife (Genesis 29:2ff) He rolled away the stone that sealed the well and allowed Rachel's sheep to be watered--and so he met Rachel and--much later--married her. Jesus sat by Jacob's well and there met the Samaritan woman (John 4:7ff).

But here we have Moses, also in a strange land, and who also watered the sheep of a woman from another background and later married her. Moses fled from Pharaoh. We tend to forget that as a result of the events in yesterday's reading, Moses was a member of Pharaoh's court, brought up as an Egyptian in the innermost circle of the Egyptian rulers. We usually jump from the papyrus basket to the much older Moses, who came back from Midian complete with a wonder-working staff and an official spokesperson.

Today we look at how Moses started to mature. He saw and felt the mistreatment of the Hebrews, and rashly killed a precursor of those who later insisted on bricks without straw. Challenged, he fled to Midian, sat by a well, watered a flock, and accepted Zipporah, a Midian woman, as his wife, and had a child with her.

But note the repeated echoes of unexpected interaction with those who aren't your immediate kindred: Jacob travelled a long way to sit by a well and find a wife: Moses fled from both his birth-kin and his adopted family status: and Jesus not only talked with a Samaritan woman, but a highly disreputable one.

This reading as a whole challenges us: it is entirely outward looking. Where are our moments by a well? How do we travel--spiritually if not literally--out from our comfort zone in our church buildings to meet all those others who--like the Samaritan woman--need to meet Jesus? In verse 24 of our reading God heard *'their groaning'*. Do we?

■ **Let us pray:** *Lord, show us where to sit, who to welcome, and how to listen. Amen.*

Ian Wells, Lay-member of Holy Trinity, Tarleton

The First Sunday of Lent

Read: Exodus 3:1-12

‘He said further, ‘I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.’

Exodus 3:6

In the Exodus 3 narrative, the burning bush captivates me, particularly the moment when Moses hides his face from God—a poignant verse underscoring his feelings of inadequacy. Despite being chosen by God, Moses grapples with self-doubt and reluctance, a familiar human response to a divine calling. This underscores God’s unique ability to empower and reassure those He calls.

How many of you resonate with a sense of imposter syndrome? Have you ever questioned your purpose, asking, “Why am I here?” Personally, this sentiment has accompanied me throughout my career. For those familiar with me, avoiding the limelight has been a deliberate choice—I even kept my wedding intimate with only ten guests. The fear of embarrassment and not fitting in contributes to this pervasive feeling.

Yet, when faced with God, can we truly embarrass ourselves? The God who knows us completely, loving us unconditionally, nullifies our need for such concerns. Stepping outside our comfort zones becomes a necessary journey. Echoing Paul’s message to the Philippians (4:6), ‘Do not worry about anything,’ we’re encouraged to present our requests to God through prayer and petition, with thanksgiving. Verse 13 in Philippians 4 reinforces this idea: ‘I can do all this through him who gives me strength’ (NIV).

Much like Paul reassures the Philippians, God assures Moses in today’s reading that He will be with him, providing a confirming sign. This assurance underscores the divine presence’s paramount importance in fulfilling God’s purposes. For us, it signifies that God is with us in all our endeavours. As we approach Easter, let’s be brave and bold, secure in the knowledge that God accompanies us every step of the way.

Let us pray: *Lord, as Moses found courage in the burning bush despite his doubts, grant us the strength to overcome imposter syndrome and step boldly into the purpose You’ve called us to, assured of Your unwavering presence and guidance. Amen.*

Iain Parks, Diocesan Director of Education

Read: Exodus 3:13-22

*‘God said to Moses, ‘I am who I am.’ He said further,
‘Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I am has sent me to you.’’*

Exodus 3:14

In today’s bible reading God tells Moses His name, and in doing so, He’s beginning to tell us what He’s really like. God’s name is YHWH (some people say this name as ‘Jehovah’), but the English translation that we have in our bibles is perfect. God says His name is ‘I AM WHO I AM.’

This name shows us that God does not depend on anything else for His existence. He is all He needs. In this way He is nothing like us because we do need other things to exist. Without food we would cease to exist within a couple of months. Without water, it would take about a week. Without air it would take only a few minutes. And without parents to conceive us, we wouldn’t exist at all.

This is not the case for God. He does not need food or water or air or anything else to sustain Him. He does not need parents to conceive Him because He has always been there. Just like the fire in yesterday’s reading, that did not burn up the bush as fuel, God requires nothing to keep Him going.

Knowing all this helps us to understand Jesus better. Once, when He was asked by the Pharisees “Who do you think you are?” Jesus replied “I AM.” In saying that, Jesus was clearly announcing to the world that He is the eternal God who does not depend on anything else for His existence.

This is really important for our faith as Christians because, if He was only a man, His death on the cross would have only been enough to pay for one person’s sins. However, because He is God, His sacrifice was enough to be able to pay for all the sins of the world.

During this season of Lent, as we look towards Easter, we should keep these wonderfully true things in mind. When God sent His only Son into the world, He didn’t do it because He needs anything from us. He did it because He is the One we all need to pay for our sins.

Let us pray: *Heavenly Lord, thank you for sending your Son into the world, not because you needed anything from us, but because we needed Him. Amen.*

The Revd Paul Davies, Associate Vicar, St Andrew’s, Leyland

Read: Exodus 4:1-17

'... I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and will teach you what you shall do.'

Exodus 4:15

So often God calls us to something new, unexpected and scary when we least expect it. We can sometimes feel a bit like Moses, who has just remade a life for himself... a new identity in a new community. Moses feels safe in his new found life, and now God has revealed Himself to Moses and commanded him to march straight into Egypt, the den of the lion, in order to rescue God's people!

Moses is rightly scared; he feels inadequate and unprepared. This all seems too much, why does it have to be him? He tries every excuse to back out of God's call: he does not want it! But how does God respond? With goodness, assurance, and proof of His love and support for Moses.

God will provide for Moses. God will equip Moses with the skills to overcome the obstacles before him. When he feels that he is not strong enough to journey alone God will provide Moses' help in the form of Aaron.

Do we feel safe and secure in our faith and life? Do we feel like we have reached a plateau in our spiritual life, or do we feel unwilling to take that step into something new and intimidating in our faith that God might be calling us to?

This Lent God is calling you to grow in fantastic new ways that will help His people and allow you to achieve wonders that only God knows He has for you. Do not be afraid to listen to that voice of God calling you to grow in prayer, to step out and try new things for your church and your faith.

God will never leave you without help, or call you to something that will not draw you closer to His goodness. He will equip us, provide for us, and give us 'Aarons'.

Let us trust in the Lord and His purpose for us. Let us not be scared to take a step into things that are new, exciting, and even scary!

Let us pray: *Almighty God, give me the faith to trust in Your plan for me, the will to listen to Your voice, and the trust to know that You will always provide for me as I journey through Your plan for me. Amen.*

The Revd Matteo Zambon, Assistant Curate, Church of The Ascension, Torrisholme

Read: Exodus 4:18-31

*‘On the way, at a place where they spent the night,
the Lord met him and tried to kill him.’*

Exodus 4:24

Now, have I done everything?! This brief yet popular phrase aims to reassure us that we have done all that is required. However, even after this confirmation, we often still manage to miss something important. Perhaps you can relate to preparing for a holiday and prior to departure ensuring that the house is fully secure, only to realise halfway down the road that you have not locked the door! Although a small and rarely visible feature, a lock is very important and failing to operate it correctly can influence events significantly.

In today’s passage we read of Moses finally beginning his journey to Egypt as God had commanded him to do. Having done the courteous thing of seeking permission from his father-in-law, the family depart. However, in verse 24 we learn that the Lord planned to kill Moses. This is a surprising turn as with everything supposedly in order, this is the last thing we expected to happen. What we learn is that whilst Moses had been diligent in seeking permission and making other preparations, he overlooked a very important factor; the circumcision of his son. The circumcision was crucial for honouring the covenant with God and by failing to do so in the past, Moses had now provoked the wrath of the Lord. In the moment, Zipporah removed the foreskin and thus secured the relationship between the Lord and Moses. Crucially, this small act corrected something that Moses had overlooked and enabled the journey to continue as planned meaning Moses could fulfil the Lord’s command.

How often do we pay attention to the small details which affect our relationship with God and others? Whether this be a promise we have failed to keep or a small debt we have yet to repay, they all impact our relationships and deserve our attention. As we journey through this season of preparation, take time to consider all those things you ought to have done, the small things which are easily forgotten and give attention to faithful prayer. Perhaps then you can say with a little more confidence: now, have I done everything?!

Sam Walmsley, Ordinand

Read: Exodus 5:1-9

‘Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, ‘Let my people go, so that they may celebrate a festival to me in the wilderness.’

Exodus 5:1

The point of Exodus chapters 5 and 6 is to reveal God’s name to Moses and to Israel, to God’s own people. To be God’s people they must first know who He is. The same stands true for us, as God’s people today. In Exodus 5:1-9 we see things go from bad to worse for our brothers and sisters. I’m sure we’ve all had the thought ‘things can’t get any worse’ only to see them do just that. That’s why it’s crucial we know who the Lord is both in our good and bad times, in our mountain top and valley/desert places. He is, always has been and always will be our refuge and shelter from the storms of life.

Chapter 5 opens with Moses and Aaron saying to Pharaoh, *‘This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘Let my people go’* (v1). In the verse following today’s reading, 5:10, the slave drivers and the overseers tell the people *‘This is what Pharaoh says...’*. So God’s word and rule is up against Pharaoh’s word and rule. God commands Israel to rest in Him more (hence the three day break to worship Him). Pharaoh commands Israel to work more. This conflict is not so much Egypt vs Israel but Pharaoh vs The Lord with Israel stuck in the middle.

We should not miss the point for us. We were created to be God-pleasers not people-pleasers. Ultimately we need to explore, honestly, who we are trying to please through our work. Whose approval are we seeking to gain or whose disapproval are we seeking to avoid? Is it our employers, our partners, our friends, our parents, our congregations, our colleagues, our own, or is it God’s approval we seek? Take some time to sit prayerfully with these questions.

Whose approval am I trying to gain? Whose disapproval makes me feel crushed? These will both be clear pointers to who you truly worship. Then be prepared to shift your focus back to our beautiful creator God by prioritising time with Him in prayer and study.

Take heart brothers and sisters, as we journey through Lent, because getting our eyes back on God and His approval is a real game changer.

Let us pray: *Ever loving, ever living God give us ears to hear You and a heart to please You this Advent. In Jesus’ precious name we pray, Amen*

**The Revd Michelle Delves, Associate Mission Priest,
Holy Trinity & St Bartholomew’s, Colne**

Read: Exodus 5:10-23

*‘Then Moses turned again to the Lord and said,
‘O Lord, why have you mistreated this people? Why did you ever send me?’*

Exodus 5:22

The demand for God’s justice has seemed to make everything worse. This has been true throughout the ages. God’s reaction to injustice, through His people, has often been such a stark contrast to the rulers of the world that it causes them to become angry. Whether Moses, standing before Pharaoh, Esther before the throne of the king of Persia, Oscar Romero calling out the dictators of San Salvador, or Martin Luther King Jr, declaring his dream. When God’s people call out injustice in their society, it can scare those who profit from injustice so much that they do everything in their power to quiet God’s people.

In response to the call for justice Pharaoh has decided to increase the oppression of God’s people. On top of all of their other back-breaking labour, they must now find their own straw without slowing down their work. This task is meant to be impossible. It is meant to cause misery for God’s people so that they will be put off listening to Moses and Aaron and, initially, it seems to work. The Israelite supervisors are angry at Moses for rousing Pharaoh’s anger. Even Moses seems to be giving up hope on God’s plan as he says *‘O my Lord, why have you mistreated this people? Why did you ever send me?’* (v.22).

How often do we give up on justice when things get hard? When we think of Exodus, we often think of the liberation and we forget about the apparent hopelessness at the beginning. Yet just as many of us today struggle and become discouraged as we try to push for a more just society; so too did Moses struggle and become discouraged. If you are in a situation in your life in which you feel that you are suffering whilst trying to do the right thing, remember that God’s people suffered too when Moses proclaimed God’s demands to Pharaoh, as have many other Christians throughout the centuries. Remember that God is at work in the darkest of places, and you are not alone.

**The Revd Jordan Bentliff, Church Planting Curate,
St George’s & All Saints’, Chorley**

Read: Exodus 6:1-9

*'I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgement.
I will take you as my people, and I will be your God.'*

Exodus 6:6b-7a

I suspect we have all got to the point with someone of getting to the end of our tether – getting to that point where there is nothing further to be done but to act to make something right.

As we continue our journey through the book of Exodus, we see in today's passage a glimpse of the Lord getting to that point. The Israelites are held in slavery, being forced to perform increasingly impossible workloads. And here the Lord responds by giving reassurance to Moses that the people of Israel will indeed be freed from their bondage – they will be freed through the Lord's own outstretched arm and with His mighty acts of judgement in such a way that Pharaoh will drive them out of the land of Egypt.

In our Christian context as we journey through Lent, of course, this can be seen as a metaphor for the slavery that you and I need to be set free from. It is a slavery not to making bricks in the oppressive heat of Egypt, but a much more profound one – the slavery to sin. Time and again, we fall into the trap of disobedience to God's will, whether by what we have done or what we have failed to do, and as such we fall short of God's glory, and find ourselves caught up in sin.

But our Lenten journey gives us hope, for we have the promise of freedom. Jesus himself offers us the answer to our slavery to sin. And that answer is through looking to Him and His overcoming of the power of sin and death on the wood of the cross. And the way in which we do that is through repentance; through confession of our sins, and through our acceptance of the reconciliation that Jesus offers to us. This reconciliation comes through love – the love of a God who offers His own Son on the cross, so that we can be truly freed from our bondage to sin, and live the life of freedom He wills for us as the chosen people of God.

The Revd Canon David Arnold, Vicar of the United Benefice of Accrington

The Second Sunday of Lent

Read: Exodus 6:10-27

‘Go and tell Pharaoh king of Egypt to let the Israelites go out of his land.’

Exodus 6:11

The taskmasters set over the enslaved people of Israel were probably the Egyptian officials in charge of building operations who, in their turn, dealt with them by using the people’s more promising leaders as foremen. These foremen petitioned Pharaoh for a more righteous consideration of their situation. In response, Pharaoh told them that it is the request of Moses and Aaron that has resulted in a deterioration of their working conditions. For the first time, Moses has experienced the wrath of his own people, something that would become commonplace for him in effecting their deliverance. He finds himself inextricably trapped between the divine command and the anger of the people. He pleads with the Lord for help; and again he is assured that the power of the God of Israel will triumph over Pharaoh. He and Aaron are instructed to go to Pharaoh on behalf of the people.

In this passage, we are then given the genealogies of Moses and Aaron. Although Moses and his brother are of the Levitical line, Reuben and Simeon are mentioned first because they are Levi’s older brothers. According to this enumeration, Moses is a fourth generation descendent of Jacob. The list does not claim to mention all the generations of Jacob, and the term ‘son’ is referred to quite loosely to refer to anyone in direct line, whether son, grandson or great-grandson. The type of marriage as the one between Amran and his aunt would be forbidden by later legislation. The progeny of Moses go unmentioned; whereas Eleazar and Korah, the descendants of Aaron, are noted; the former for his priestly role and the latter for his connection with temple ritual.

The Lord covenants to establish the children of Israel, just as He established their forefathers. He tells them, through Moses, that He will remove their burdens, rescue them, redeem them, and restore their heritage. Moses is gradually revealed as the forerunner of Christ, a type of Messiah and Deliverer. He will deliver the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, free them from the yoke of Pharaoh and lead them into the Promised Land.

The Revd Canon Stephen Jones, Vicar of Christchurch, Carnforth

Read: Exodus 6:28-7:13

'Moses and Aaron did so; they did just as the Lord commanded them'

Exodus 7:6

The film *Ground Hog Day* sees the main character live the date February 2nd over and over again. You might be getting that déjà vu feeling here. As when faced with Israel (4:1) now anticipating Pharaoh, Moses raises the same objections. *'I won't be listened to', 'I'm no good at speaking'* (6:30). As our reading ends, once again rods turn into snakes (4:4, 7:8). Is God's story caught on repeat?

Despite what it might feel like, the Lord is moving His messenger forward. He meets Moses' hesitations with a reminder of His control over his speech (7:1). He reminds him of His sovereignty over Pharaoh's heart. Pharaoh's rejection does not catch God by surprise. It is in His plan. Those reassurances cause a significant leap forward. Moses and Aaron obey (7:6). For all the doubts and excuses, the new pattern is to do what the Lord says (7:9).

As the brothers step out, the Lord does not let them down. Faced with Pharaoh wanting to discredit them (7:9), it is clear whom the Lord is with. Despite the mysterious ability of the magicians, there is no doubt who the winner is (7:12).

We can take encouragement and challenge. The Lord is working obedience in His people. He is shaping in each a desire and decision to do what He says. The fact that Moses took a long time to get there is not an excuse to drag our heels. But it is a reminder that it is better to get there in the end than not at all (see Matthew 21:28-32).

The reassurance of God's presence and evidence that His ways are good and purposes unstoppable give us encouragement to throw our lot in with Moses and Aaron. Might there be an area of obedience in your life which you are hanging back from, making excuses over, or struggling with? Seek the Lord's help to make today the first day in God's new direction, one where we do *'just as the Lord commanded.'*

Let us pray: *Heavenly Father, give me Your strength and help today that I might live just as You have commanded. Amen.*

The Revd Paul Bye, Vicar of St Paul's, Ansdell and Fairhaven

Read: Exodus 7:14-25

'Thus says the Lord, 'By this you shall know that I am the Lord.' See, with the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water that is in the Nile, and it shall be turned to blood.'

Exodus 7:17

The other week, I was swimming when the lifeguard reached behind him and lifted down the pool strainer. He repeatedly used it to fish out something and then discard it from the pool. I don't know what he removed (and I don't want to) but nothing has made me want to get out of the water more than that!

In our reading today we have something worse. The River Nile is turned to blood and you couldn't just sieve a bit of it out, it was everywhere. In fact, blood was throughout the whole land of Egypt. The fish couldn't get out of the Nile and they died. The Egyptians worshipped the Nile for the life and vitality it brought, but in one move God turns it into a source of death.

All this came about as judgement from God. Just as the Egyptians had thrown the Hebrew baby boys into the Nile (Exodus 1), so in retribution, the Nile becomes a source of death for the Egyptians. Pharaoh wouldn't acknowledge God, nor let His people go (7:14) and so the plagues force him to have to do business with the real God. Whenever we see judgement in the Bible, we also see salvation. It is as Pharaoh and his gods are judged that the Israelites are saved and brought to live with the LORD.

Easter is a wonderful celebration of salvation through judgment. On the cross Jesus faced the just retribution that we deserve for how we have treated God and how we have treated people made in His image. He was judged so that we might be saved. It is as His blood was poured out, that eternal life spreads to all who trust in Him. The old hymn puts it like this:

*There is a fountain filled with blood,
Drawn from Immanuel's veins;
And sinners, plunged beneath that flood,
Lose all their guilty stains.*

Today what gods will we go to for rescue? We can go to the Nile, a picture of wealth and prosperity, or to Pharaoh a picture of power and status. Or we can go to Jesus crucified in weakness to rescue those who humbly admit they need to be washed clean.

The Revd Dan Freeman, Vicar of St James', Chorley

Read: Exodus 8:1-15

'So that you may know that there is no one like the Lord our God.'

Exodus 8:10

God wants king Pharaoh and the people of Egypt to know that there is no other god like the God of Israel. This God is on the side of the poor, the oppressed and the exploited. This God offers opportunity to the rich and the perpetrator to turn from sin to repentance and live a just life.

The plague of frogs is an intentional initiative to use Pharaoh's stubborn and hardened heart as a means for God to reveal His power to the nations. God was far above the Egyptian magicians who had no comprehension of who God was and the power of God. This plague is more than a miraculous sign. It highlights the way God encounters the evil of that time. The king and the rich people were unjust and oppressive to the poor.

The plague of frogs reminds me of my childhood in our village house during monsoon season, when frogs of different sizes were seen everywhere. But people living on upper levels or in two or three-story high buildings did not face such invasion of frogs. It seems this plague was more to affect the rich as the poor of Egypt, who lived in small mud-brick houses of one or two bedrooms with a palm-trunk roof, would have been used to such infestation. Infestation of frogs in the homes of the rich living in upper stories, surrounded by landscaped gardens and enclosed by a high wall was to become quite frightening to them. This plague was a message to the rich, to the powerful, and to unjust people that the God of Israel is a God who delivers the poor, the oppressed and the marginalised.

In Jesus, we see the incarnate God, unique and unlike any other gods, dying on the cross to deliver the world from the death of sin.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book 'Letters and Papers from Prison,' is apt when he says, 'I should like to speak of God not only on the borders of life but at its centre, not in weakness but in strength, not, therefore, in man's suffering and death but in his life and prosperity...God is the beyond in the midst of life.'

Let us pray: *Jesus, there is none like You.*

You are Lord our God, full of grace and mercy. Amen.

The Revd Dr Sarah Siddique Gill,

Vicar of United Benefice of St Stephen's with St. James', Blackburn

Read: Exodus 8:16-32

‘But on that day I will set apart the land of Goshen, where my people live, so that no swarms of flies shall be there, that you may know that I the Lord am in this land.’

Exodus 8:22

He’s not sure what God’s got up His sleeve next, nor how Pharaoh is going to respond, but in these verses we have reached a new point of no return. The magicians are out of the game, they can’t match the gnats or the flies—they are in awe, and they let Pharaoh know—not to mention the anti-plague force-field around Goshen. And as Moses is setting off, having made a much better bargain with Pharaoh, he must be smiling to himself, wondering how long it will be this time before Pharaoh snaps again, and back-tracks.

But hang on—did he hear that correctly? Did Pharaoh just ask Moses to pray for him? As my little grandson found himself saying, starting to master the F1 model racing track we had just set up, with the little car he was controlling edging into the lead, “You’ve got this Finn!” So I can hear Moses, mature in his leadership, recognising there is only going to be one outcome in this show of strength, and begin to realise the pressure is not on him, “We’ve got this...”

Moses cared, Moses prayed, Moses watched and listened, Moses learned to trust. Maybe reluctantly, maybe resignedly, and maybe with humour, he became comfortable with God, even in, or perhaps because of, rocky on-going circumstances.

Jesus calls us into the adventure of following, not passively, but being agents of change—personally, locally, nationally, globally.

The secret of being effective? God gave Micah a good summary—act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.

This is what we’ve been given, such grace, let’s respond with joy, “we got this!”

Let us pray: *Heavenly Father, I embrace your call upon my life.*

You got this, I am open to receive see and travel. Amen.

**The Revd Stefan Dnistrianskyj, Vicar of St James the Great,
Wrightington with Heskin**

Read: Exodus 9:1-12

*‘Thus says the Lord, the God of the Hebrews:
Let my people go, so that they may worship me.’*

Exodus 9:1

Not again! I confess that this is my automatic reaction to many situations from damaged vegetables in my shopping delivery order to the ping of my phone when I’m trying to concentrate on something. Perhaps you had the same thought when reading today’s passage. Not again! Not another day reading about the plagues! How many days will this go on? But, through each plague, God reveals more about Himself. The first few plagues demonstrated that God could do miraculous things just as the Egyptian magicians could, but when this fifth plague struck the livestock of the Egyptians whilst leaving those of the Israelites untouched, God displayed His total control over creation. In stating the time for this plague and then making it happen He also demonstrates His control of time. Without warning, this plague was followed by the plague of boils, illustrating God’s power over evil, striking down the magicians, leaving them unable to stand, and, despite the power they had demonstrated earlier, showing them as unable to overcome this plague.

Through these two plagues, God again demonstrated His power over false gods of the Egyptians (animals and health), whilst protecting those who followed Him. The magicians struck down by boils may not have known who God was, but Moses told Pharaoh that God was ‘the LORD, the God of the Hebrews’ (v.1) both almighty and personal. Though the Israelites were Pharaoh’s slaves, they belonged to God who desired their freedom. ‘Not again’ God must have thought when, despite having seen and heard who God was, Pharaoh still refused to let God’s people go; but God still gave him more chances. ‘Not again’ God must think when I forget that He has the power to work miracles. ‘Not again’ God must think when I live without recognising that He is the creator and ruler of the universe, and that time is in His hands. ‘Not again’ God must think when my heart is captured by things that start to squeeze God out of my life, and I live as if He is not the LORD and as if I don’t belong to Him. However, Lent is a time of penitence, an opportunity for us to re-evaluate ourselves and our relationship with Him, knowing He is patient and that, when we call out to Him and repent, He will set us free to worship Him.

Let us pray: *Father God. Help me to remember who you are, Almighty God, LORD, Creator of the universe and Lord of time. Help me to let You rule over my life and not allow false gods to squeeze You out and take Your place. Amen.*

Stephanie Rankin, Stewardship Resourcing Officer

Read: Exodus 9:13-35

“... Thus says the Lord, the God of the Hebrews: Let my people go, so that they may worship me.”

Exodus 9:13

Life is affected by the choices we make. Generally, at least two options or ways are available for almost every matter. We choose one way and ignore the other and vice versa. And when it comes to our spiritual lives, we also have two options. Accept and obey God's word, or reject and defy. These two options affect our life now and for eternity.

In today's reading we see God's word (v.13) and His warning (v.18) is served to Pharaoh (v.13). Now Pharaoh is to choose either to obey or to defy. Obedience will lead him to life and defiance to death. The mystery is that the way of life begins with death. Pharaoh is proud and stubborn. He needs to kill his pride to begin to walk on the way to life. Otherwise, God tears down the proud (Proverbs 15:25). He is the righteous judge, and His judgement is upon Pharaoh and His nation (vv.13-35).

God is also gracious and merciful (v.19a), and He does not want anyone to perish, but all to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9). God gives Pharaoh the way to life and amidst this plague Pharaoh confesses his sin and admits that the Lord is right (v.27). But his repentance is false as he does not let go of his pride or the people of God. He ignores God's word and His warning again. He chooses the way to destruction and death. Though, some of his officials choose to obey God's word and saved (v.20).

God is gracious and merciful even today. He gives us the way to life in His Son, Jesus Christ, who said *'I am the way'* (John 14:6). He died for our sins to give us new life. And those who choose 'the way' through repentance find that there is no condemnation (judgement) for them (Romans 8:1). Today, let us listen to God's voice and do not harden our hearts (Hebrews 3:15); Examine ourselves and see what is holding us back to confess our sins before God with honesty.

May the Lord help us through His Holy Spirit to choose 'the way' of repentance and obedience, and to worship Him (v.13) who gives life in Jesus now and for eternity.

Lubna Din, Lay-member of St Luke's, Brierfield & St Cuthbert's, Burnley

The Third Sunday of Lent

Read: Exodus 10:1-20

‘Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Go to Pharaoh; for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his officials, in order that I may show these signs of mine among them [...] so that you may know that I am the Lord.’

Exodus 10:1-2

‘How many times do I have to tell you?’ – this familiar cry from a parent or teacher reflects something of the frustration that God must have been feeling as He sends another plague on Egypt. Pharaoh’s ongoing refusal to accept God’s mandate from Moses to ‘let my people go’ (5:1, 8:20, 9:1 etc) is ultimately one of those standoff moments in life; potentially placing everyone on edge!

The plague before us today is no ordinary plague – it’s a plague with a purpose. Verses 1 and 2 make clear that the eighth plague is primarily about teaching future generations about the sovereignty of God. Engaging with the younger generations and helping them to come to an understanding, an experience, and a response to God as sovereign Lord, is a significant responsibility for the people of God today as much as it was for Moses and Aaron. But what do we teach them? What is the application from these plagues? I think it has something to do with submission and the acknowledgement of God’s sovereignty in our own lives. Are we prepared to humble ourselves before God, to acknowledge that He is Lord, to embrace Christ as King over every aspect of our lives?

Preaching just two months before his untimely death, Martin Luther King spoke about how he would like to be remembered, and in doing so, he zeroed in on that ultimate question: ‘If Christ is King, what does that mean? If Christ is ruler over our lives, then my Nobel Peace Prize is less important than my trying to feed the hungry. If Christ is King, then my invitations to the White House are less important than that I visited those in prison. If Christ is Lord, then my being TIME magazine’s “Man of the Year” is less important than that I tried to love extravagantly, dangerously, with all my being.’

Recognising the sovereignty of God in our everyday lives and living under that sovereignty, appears to be something that God is trying to teach Moses, Pharaoh, and ultimately each one of us. We all have a tendency to want to be in control, but plague eight reminds us that when the east wind blows, whenever and wherever it pleases, our worldly securities can very quickly be taken away and it is at that moment our faith is laid bare.

The Very Revd Peter Howell-Jones, Dean of Blackburn

Read: Exodus 10:21-29

‘Then Pharaoh summoned Moses, and said, ‘Go, worship the Lord. Only your flocks and your herds shall remain behind. Even your children may go with you.’

Exodus 10:24

Darkness was the ninth plague. I imagine the Egyptians had had enough. Surely they must have marvelled at how the darkness affected them, yet when they looked to the Hebrew camp the light still shone upon them. I wonder what was going through the Pharaoh’s mind. It clearly must have been getting to him, as here, within this story, we see Pharaoh make an offer to Moses ‘Go, worship the Lord. Even your women and children may go with you; only leave your flocks and herds behind.’ (10:24). It appears on face value to be a good offer... all the people get to go, including the women and children. A compromise, yes, but surely a good one? The Hebrews can worship God as a whole community. Freedom from their slavery. Sounds good to me.

For Moses, however, compromise was not an option. This was a man who knew his calling. He knew the will of God for his life and his people’s life. This was the easy way out. He refuses. He will not compromise what is most important to him even though this seems to make his position worse. Now I am not suggesting that compromise isn’t important in life. I haven’t managed to stay married for the past 20 years without it! But how often do we compromise on the really important things in life because it is the easier option, because it gives us mostly what we want or keeps others happy. Moses was stubborn for the things of God. As was our Lord Jesus, who stubbornly sets His face to Jerusalem, and ultimately the cross, even when He is rejected for it (see Luke 9:51-54). Both stubborn to fulfil their calling and uncompromising. As we reflect this Lenten-time, our reflections no doubt will turn to our calling and what is most important to us. We may reflect on what we have achieved and where we are up to. Let us be mindful of these examples to be stubborn and uncompromising for the things of God. Asking the questions, where have we allowed compromise? Where might we have taken the easy way out? The light shone on the Hebrews, despite the darkness. Let us pray that God’s light will shine on us, showing us His favour and guiding our way so that we too may uncompromisingly follow where He calls.

Let us pray: *Lord Jesus, as I make my way on this journey to Easter, help me to fix my eyes on You. May I know something of the uncompromising passion that drove You to the cross, that I too may fulfil my calling to know and love You more. Amen.*

**Laura Watson, Director of Spirituality,
Hutton C.E. Grammar School & Sixth Form**

Read: Exodus 11

‘The Lord said to Moses, ‘Pharaoh will not listen to you, in order that my wonders may be multiplied in the land of Egypt.’

Exodus 11:9

Dunkirk, May 1940. The incredible rescue of over 300,000 surrounded soldiers from France during World War Two, by an unlikely fleet of small boats which has been described as ‘the Miracle of Dunkirk’. I only learnt recently that the King had called for a ‘National Day of Prayer’, and on the day of national prayer, the evacuation began! Those who had taken part in the National Day of Prayer must have been thanking God for His wonderful response, and I’d imagine that even some who did not usually pray or trust God must have been prompted to think that perhaps Someone was listening!

In the early chapters of Exodus it seems that Pharaoh agreeing to let God’s people leave Egypt is an impossibility. However, in our passage today God tells Moses that ‘I will bring one more plague upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt; afterwards he will let you go from here’ (v.1), and not only that, God tells Moses that the Egyptians will be giving the Israelites their gold and silver on the way out! This seems impossible. But I wonder if you noticed the repetition of ‘will’ in our passage, as unlikely as it seem, this ‘will’ all happen, and (forgive the spoiler!) it does happen, just as God said!

When we were working through Exodus in our Church Bible study, the question kept coming up: ‘but why did it take so long?’ God could have ‘clicked His fingers’ straight away and His people would be free from slavery, but, verse 9 of our reading highlights something of why God chose the route that He did to free His people: ‘The Lord said to Moses, ‘Pharaoh will not listen to you, in order that my wonders may be multiplied in the land of Egypt.’ The fact that Pharaoh was asked repeatedly to let God’s people go, and that he responded with such a firm ‘no’, meant that when the Israelites were finally allowed to leave Egypt there was no doubt that ‘only God can do that!’ It was clear that it was a miracle, and even those who didn’t follow God would see His ‘wonders... multiplied’ in Egypt.

As we take the opportunity that Lent provides to examine our lives and consciences we will all find things which aren’t good and ways in which we give in to temptation again and again. In human terms the rescue from slavery to freedom is impossible, but as we prepare ourselves to celebrate Jesus’ wondrous and miraculous victory over sin and death to save us, we are left thinking ‘only God can do that!’ Thank God that He did.

Natalie Print, Lay-member of St George’s, Chorley

Read: Exodus 12:1-28

'The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.'

Exodus 12:13

Are you good at following instructions? Even if you aren't, if it was a matter of life and death I'm sure your attention to details is all of a sudden meticulous!

This is the spot that it might appear that the Israelite's found themselves in. If they didn't follow the instructions God had given Moses then their first born sons would die, along with the first born sons of the Egyptians. The fact of the matter was that by following God's instructions they were marking themselves out as His chosen people – as people who follow the Lord God.

In many ways there is something for us to take from this. We can read the Bible and hear our church leaders preach and feel like there are a lot of rules to follow! Is it a case that if we follow those rules correctly we will dodge hell and get to spend eternity in Heaven? Not exactly!

Instead, we find that the narrative of the Bible is one of God's love for us, redemption and freedom. As a result, when we encounter and know God's love, understand and are living in the freedom and redemption Jesus bought for us by dying and rising again, we are increasingly drawn towards living lives that reflect love, forgiveness and freedom as a response to God. Put another way, our lives mark us out as followers of Jesus!

The question I pose us today is, how do our lives, our encounters with others, point them to the person of Jesus without us having to say a word?

The Israelites in this passage are told to put blood around their doorframe so as to mark them out as God's people. John 13:35 suggests that for us, how we love is how others will know we are Jesus' people. Are you living so as to point to Jesus?

Let us pray: *Lord Jesus, as Your Father asked the Israelites to mark themselves out as His people, help us this Lent to be people whose lives reflect Your love, forgiveness and freedom, so as to reveal who You are to those we meet. Amen.*

Ben Green, Diocesan Youth Adviser

Read: Exodus 12:29-42

'Then he summoned Moses and Aaron in the night and said. 'Rise up, go away from my people. Both you and the Israelites! Go, worship the Lord, as you said.'

Exodus 12:31

During the night disaster had come for the Egyptian people and their livestock. We are told 'there was a loud cry in Egypt for there was not a single house without someone dead' (v.30). It is hard to imagine that degree of distress or how Pharaoh must have felt, after disregarding the warnings he had been given. The vehemence of his response is shown by the summons in the night; they are to leave and to leave now.

For the Israelites this night is one of drama; their sudden expulsion has not granted them the chance to prepare, although guided by Moses they had brought together items of silver and gold and prepared the basic sustenance of unleavened bread. In their haste they wrapped this and the kneading-bowls in their cloaks. This is their moment of liberation, but it cannot have been easy to walk away from their homes towards an uncertain future in the desert. Yet they did so, 'all the companies of the Lord went out from the land of Egypt' (v.41b). The mass of men, women, and children, of flocks and herds moving as swiftly as they could through the night shows tremendous trust, in the Lord and in His servants, Moses and Aaron. At the end we see how fundamental this deliverance has been and how it will be remembered through the years to come, 'that same night is a vigil to be kept for the Lord by all the Israelites throughout the generations' (v.42b).

In this act of deliverance God shows His care for the oppressed and the faithfulness of His response to those who call out to Him. For us today it can often be in our most difficult times that we feel closest to Him. If we trust with all our heart and soul in the Lord, He will answer our cry, whatever it takes to do so, as He did the cry of His people so long ago.

Let us pray: *Lord, we give thanks that You hold out Your hand of love and care to all who trust in You. May You guide us as we each walk our journey in faith, day by day. Amen.*

**Dr Shelia Fisher, Licensed Lay Minister/Anna Chaplain,
St Wilfrid's Parish Church, Standish**

Read: Exodus 12:43-13:10*'No leaven shall be seen among you'***Exodus 13:7**

I remember as a boy in the choir learning the Easter Anthems during Lent, so we were ready to sing this canticle on Easter Day:

'Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us therefore let us keep the feast;

Not with the old leaven of malice and wickedness

but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth'

In our passage today, we hear of two festivals given to the Israelite people. The Feast of Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread, and in today's verses the manner in which they are to be kept is emphasised. The people are reminded that in keeping these festivals they are to look back at what God has done for them, but also look forward to all that He is going to do. The leaven understood to represent human sin, and so the people are urged to have a good clear out... to ensure there is no leaven "in their territory" (13:7). This is in order that they are better prepared to look back on what the Lord has done for them, to repent of their failings, and also to move forward with renewed commitment, with the Law of God close to their hand and their minds, and His teaching on their lips.

As Christians Lent is such a time for us, which is why there is a focus on penitence, and why many Christians will make use of the Ministry of Reconciliation (confession and absolution) during this season. It is so that we might look back at all the Lord has done for us, repent of our failings, and approach Holy Week and Easter with renewed resolve, confident that through Christ and His Cross we are forgiven and free.

When I have travelled to Jerusalem, I have often witnessed Orthodox Jews preparing to pray on the flight. They carefully strap phylacteries onto their foreheads and arms with portions of the Torah inside the little boxes as a reminder to keep the Law. It is an ancient custom which many religious Jews have continued to this day.

This sign on a Jew's hand or forehead is to remind them that they belong to Yahweh. It is to remind them of their redemption and of who is their God. In a similar way many Christians use the sign of the Cross. It reminds us that through the Cross we are saved and made free.

'We adore you O Christ, and we bless you,

because by your holy Cross you have redeemed the world'

**The Revd Damian Porter, Vicar of The Parish of the Ascension,
Torrisholme & Westgate**

Read: Exodus 13:11-16*‘Every firstborn male among your children you shall redeem.’***Exodus 13:13**

“Cake or death?” That’s a pretty easy question. Anyone could answer that. “Cake or death?” “Eh, cake please.” “Very well! Give him cake! Now you! Cake or death?” “Uh, death, please. No, cake! Cake! Cake, sorry. Sorry...” “You said death first, uh-uh, death first!” “Well, I meant cake!” “Oh, all right. You’re lucky I’m Church of England!” So went Eddie Izzard’s famous ‘Cake or Death’ sketch in his 1998 tour, *Dress to Kill*. In context, the sketch pokes fun at extremist religion and playfully imagines the form that violent fundamentalism might take should it capture the Church of England, centred as the latter is (Izzard opines) on tea with the vicar, village fetes, and limp handshakes.

‘Cake or death?’ is a pretty easy question to answer. And so, in Exodus 13:11-16, is the question, ‘Redeem or death?’ While in the case of a firstling donkey, if it were weak or malformed one might opt for ‘or death,’ since the redemption price was a sheep (v.13), there was no ‘or death’ option for firstborn children: they must be redeemed – and the redemption price (set in Numbers 18) was five shekels. Redemption of the firstborn harkens back to the Passover narrative (ch. 12), when in a mighty act of judgment-and-salvation, the Lord took to himself the firstborn of every family in the land of Egypt. Every firstborn faced the sentence of death, but the firstborn Hebrew children were redeemed by the blood of the Passover lamb. In perpetuity the Lord establishes, in today’s passage, the firstborn in every future Israelite generation (and their livestock) similarly belong to Him – as a sign of his ownership and rule of all His people.

Five shekels seems cheap to redeem a human life – it’s between £60 and £80-worth of silver in today’s market. But reading this text as Christian interpreters, we know that that price was not the real redemption (how could it be? – Hebrews 10:4), but a prophetic token in earnest of the true redemption-price to come later in Israel’s history: the blood of God’s own firstborn Son.

As we read this passage in Lent, let us look forward to celebrating the solemn feast of our redemption from sin and death, being humbled by the inordinate costliness of our ransom that God in Christ was pleased to pay; being stirred to remember not only in thought (‘an emblem on your forehead’ 13:16) but also in deed (‘a sign on your hand’ 13:16) that we are not our own, we were purchased at a price (1 Corinthians 6:19-20); and being challenged to proclaim boldly in our evangelism (with all gentleness and respect) that the choice before all people is ‘Christ or death.’ And once the Lenten fast is over, offer cake as well!

The Revd Dr Tom Woolford, Vicar of All Saints, New Longton

The Fourth Sunday of Lent

Read: Exodus 13:17-22

'The Lord went in front of them'

Exodus 13:21

I love maps. I can spend hours pouring over them. I love the details; I love to imagine being there, taking in the surroundings. The people of God didn't have a map for their exodus wanderings. At times they must have wished they had. They had something better, they had God Himself as their personal SatNav. I can't imagine what it must have felt like for the people of Israel as they journeyed through the wilderness to the Promised Land. They were obviously tired, at times frustrated by lack of progress, and so the promise made by God to go before them by means of a pillar of cloud and of fire must have been a source of encouragement.

The comparison of the exodus journey and our own life pilgrimage is an obvious one to make and it shows two things:

First, it showed God's gentle leading. He knew their weaknesses, and, not wanting His people to be discouraged, God guides them on a route that avoids confrontation with the fierce warring peoples that were the Philistines. They head south-east towards the Red Sea rather than taking a more direct and perilous route. God too guides us on journeys that can seem circuitous, but are intended for our own protection, and He does so with gentleness.

Second, it showed God's continual presence. The Israelites were protected by His presence, sheltering them and coming between them and their enemies. It's a tremendous source of blessing and comfort to know that God is with us. As the Psalmist says, *'Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me'* (Psalm 23:4). We have no cloud today, but God graciously leads us by His Holy Spirit. He goes ahead of us and so we have no need to fear.

*'Lord, I would clasp thy hand in mine
Nor ever murmur nor repine;
Content whatever lot I see
Since 'tis my God that leadeth me.*

*He leadeth me! He leadeth me!
By his own hand he leadeth me;
His faithful follower I would be,
For by his hand he leadeth me.'*

'He Leadeth Me' by J. H. Gilmore

The Revd David Craven, Priest-in-Charge, St George the Martyr, Preston

Read: Exodus 14:1-20

'The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.'

Exodus 14:14

Big things have happened (as we have read) and big things are about to happen (v.21f – more of that tomorrow!), but here the Israelites are in between past and future, trapped between the pursuing Egyptian army and an impassable Red Sea. Life often leads us through 'in between times', where we too encounter situations which seem insurmountable.

In today's passage we witness a pivotal time in the Israelites' journey—an 'in between time.' We see the people afraid, with an overwhelming sense of hopelessness, and questioning God's plan (vv.10-12). God's response to them is also a message for us: *'The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still'* (v.14). God was about to demonstrate His power in an extraordinary way, and all the Israelites had to do was trust and witness His deliverance.

Daunting challenges are real for us today too—financial struggles, health crises, broken relationships. Questioning, fears and feelings of hopelessness are no less real for us than for the Israelites. We are called to be still—not in idleness but in active surrender to His will. We know God will do 'big things'; our role is to trust Him, to be still in our hearts, and to surrender our anxieties, fears, and uncertainties to the One who has the past and the future in His hands.

'In between times' teach us important lessons about faith and trust in God. So the question for today, in the midst of life's challenges, in the 'in between times' is: 'Am I willing to be still and trust that God is fighting for me? Can I surrender my fears and uncertainties to the Lord, confident that He is working all things together for my good? Am I able to find strength and assurance in the knowledge that God's plan is perfect, even when I can't see the way forward?'

Let us pray: *Lord, in our 'in between times,' where challenges seem insurmountable, grant us the strength to be still, trust Your plan, and surrender our fears, confident that You're working for our good. Amen.*

Peter Williams, Assistant Warden of Lay Ministry

Read: Exodus 14:19-31

‘Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided.’

Exodus 14:21

Can God keep His promises? It’s a question we may be asking in these ‘in between times’. It may be personal: a bad habit or besetting sin that we just can’t shake. It may be general, as we wonder if there will ever be peace on earth as it is in heaven.

The Israelites doubted, as they stood on the shore of the Red Sea. But God showed that He is the One who created the universe; He has the power to keep His promises. The Bible echoes the Bible. Exodus 14 rings with echoes of Genesis 1. It begins in verses 19 and 20, as God separates the light from the darkness. Then, in verses 21 and 22, God separates water from water and sea from dry land. The crossing of the Red Sea begins at evening and ends in the morning, as do the days of Genesis 1 (whether literal or metaphorical!).

God has the power to rescue His people from slavery, darkness and death, because He is the one who freely made light and life out of darkness and chaos, right back in the beginning.

This linking of the power of God to create and the power of God to rescue His people continues to echo through the rest of the Bible and to us today:

- Jesus walking on Lake Galilee echoes the Spirit of God moving on the waters, and echoes I AM rescuing His people through water.
- *‘For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness’, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.’* (2 Corinthians 4:6)
- *‘He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.’* (Colossians 1:13-14)

The God who made the universe and whose Son Jesus Christ died and rose again is more powerful than my sin. He is more powerful than the men of war. We can trust Him to keep His promises.

Let us pray: *Almighty God, Creator and Redeemer, help us to trust You when we feel powerless. Bring us and this world out of slavery to darkness and death, into Your kingdom of light and life, through Your Son Jesus Christ. Amen.*

The Revd Matt Hornby, Vicar of Coppull and Coppull St John

Read: Exodus 15:1-21

'I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously.'

Exodus 15:1

During Advent 2022, I hosted a group of Muslim ladies on a visit to our church, they were fascinated by the idea of Christians gathering to sing. It seemed strange to them, and yet in today's reading we see the women of Israel launch a new choir and dance group (15:20), to lead the people of God in worship.

The wonderful promises and great acts of God magnified, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus have inspired countless songs, poems, and hymns for thousands of years. So why do Christians sing?

John Piper answers: 'Christian's sing, because the realities of the Christian faith are so glorious—so great, so beautiful, so valuable—they will never be adequately experienced or expressed by written or spoken language alone. They must be sung.'

In our reading today, Moses and the Israelites gather to sing (15:1-2) after God has saved them from the Egyptians and brought them through the Red Sea. A few months before they were groaning in distress, now they are dancing with joy. The Israelites sing:

1. A joyful song declaring the mighty deeds of God who leads His people through the waters into new life, free from injustice and hopelessness (15:5-10).
2. An awe-inspired song full of reverence for a holy and perfect God (15:11-12).
3. A heartfelt song to a God who loves His people and is always faithful (15:13).
4. A salvation song worshipping God who is a warrior (15:4); who defeats His enemies, who redeems and restores, inspires and guides; and sets His people free (15:14-18).

When God saves us He renews our hearts; He puts words in our mouths and dancing in our feet. We are more than cold intellectual machines, we have feelings. God made us to be affectionate, and singing helps us express the depth of our emotion. So *'Sing to the Lord because he has triumphed gloriously'* (15:21).

Why not reflect on your faith journey so far? Listen and sing along with a worship song that inspires and reminds you of your place in God's salvation story. Give thanks for how the Lord Jesus has demonstrated His saving power in your life.

The Revd Alex Oehring, Rector for St. Bartholomew and Holy Trinity, Colne

Read: Exodus 15:22-27

*'He cried out to the Lord; and the Lord showed him a piece of wood;
he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet.'*

Exodus 15:25

The sun was shining brightly and I was feeling optimistic as my husband Ben and I headed out on a five mile, two-and-a-half hour walk above Lake Grasmere almost a year ago today. At around the three hour mark we belatedly realised we were further up the valley than we should be, and our water bottles were now empty. My optimism was wearing a little thin as my rising thirst had me considering the peat-infused stream water and I can certainly begin to sympathise with what the Israelites might have been feeling in today's passage – especially towards the leader of the trek (Ben was in charge of navigation).

The Israelites have been on a rollercoaster of spiritual highs and spiritual lows. They have been saved from Pharaoh's pursuing army, have walked through the Red Sea, and have responded in praise only to then walk through the desert for three days finding no water. Can you blame them for giving some less than constructive feedback to their leader? (I certainly did!) But notice how God answers — He responds with compassion having put a rescue plan in place (the wood) well before the Israelites knew they needed saving.

Whenever I read passages like this, I find myself wondering whether the Israelites would have complained quite so bitterly knowing that God would save them, or did they need to understand their desperate need for His provision first? At Easter we celebrate God's compassionate response to us through His taking the bitterness of sin and death through a piece of wood (the cross) and making it sweet through the resurrection of Christ. It's so easy to skip to the good bit, but I wonder if, like the Israelites in today's passage, I need to understand my own thirst and need before I can fully appreciate God's provision.

Let us pray: *Lord, as we walk towards Easter, help us to understand our great need and thirst for You. Thank you that You showed Your compassion through Jesus and a piece of wood. Help us to respond to You in worship and obedience. Amen.*

[Five hours after setting off, Ben and I made it safely down from the fells to fresh water. He still maintains that the walking book was wrong – not his navigation!]

Sarah Marston, Making Disciples Coordinator

Read: Exodus 16:1-20

[The Lord said:] ‘I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.’

Exodus 16:12

Anyone who has led a large group of people through unfamiliar territory, has surely heard complaints, often over trivial matters to the point of regretting taking the group there in the first place. The complaining is loud and clear in this Exodus passage. Moses, Aaron, and God get an earful. As readers, it is tempting to treat the complaining as whiners, condemning the Israelites as faithless. No one likes listening to complaints. People in power often choose to ignore, dismiss or punish the person complaining, instead of hearing in complaints a call to act. However, we must acknowledge that a complaint does not always contain the best solution. In their complaining, the Israelites declare it would have been better to have died in Egypt than be facing hunger in the wilderness. In their complaint, Egypt sounds like the good life as they remember how they *‘sat by the fleshpots and ate [their] fill of bread’* (v.3). In their real fear for the future, the Israelites look back to Egypt as the way of life that sustained them instead of looking at God. They prove that they are short-sighted and easily forget that the Lord their liberator and provider is always with them. Therefore, Moses instructs Aaron to tell them: *‘Draw near to the LORD, for he has heard your complaining’* (v.9), because at its core, complaint is a turning to God – not away – trusting that God does not ignore, dismiss or punish those who call out in fear, anger, suffering or need. Regardless of their faithlessness and grumbling, the Lord provided bread for their sustenance.

We all like to grumble especially when things are not going our way, when we are in the desert, and this verse give us the reassurance that the wilderness is not a God-forsaken place. Therefore, when we experience wilderness in our lives, Jesus assures us that we should not worry about *“What shall we eat?”* or *“What shall we drink?”* (Matt. 6:31-33). At all times we must remain focused on our relationship with God and trust God’s providence in every situation we find ourselves. The Apostle Paul also encourages us, in Philippians 4:6-7, not to be anxious about anything but to pray to God. God knows our needs and He will provide.

So, instead of grumbling why not pray like Jesus for God’s will to be done in your life at His own appointed time. The Lord who provided your bread yesterday is the same today and tomorrow. Therefore, do not let your wilderness experience blur your spiritual sight and faith. Be strong and turn to the Lord in this Lent season, with hope and assurance that the Lord is with you in your wilderness and will continue to provide your daily bread and all that you need to succeed to the glory of His Holy Name.

The Revd Jean Kouacou, Assistant Curate, St Paul’s Adlington

Read: Exodus 16:21-36

*'For six days you shall gather it; but on the seventh day,
which is a sabbath, there will be none.'*

Exodus 16:26

We have spent many years enjoying camping holidays and I have always loved the sense of living an uncomplicated life in our tent, of paring down our way of living. It focuses our minds on the necessities, instead of the non-essential. One necessity being food; in a tent with limited storage and refrigeration, meals are simpler, shopping only for that day's worth of food.

In the wilderness, the people of Israel, are doing the same, but without a visit to the supermarket! God has been providing them with water and food, the necessities for physical life. They are delivered their daily bread through the generous provision of manna from heaven – just enough for that day, no more no less. It is an exercise in daily trust in God.

But in today's scripture, there is a shift from water and food to rest. God has been providing food daily, but on the sixth day of the week, provides twice the amount, enough supply of manna that will stay fresh so that on the seventh day, they can rest. This echoes the creation story of God resting on the seventh day after creating the heavens and the earth. The people of Israel are to rest from work and toil and instead focus on God and learn to live and witness to others His holy rest. Their trust and faith are being tested; can they do this? Will they be tempted to focus on their own needs rather than focusing on God?

This is perhaps a lesson for us too, that by focusing on our needs for today, this present moment, rather than on our needs for tomorrow, next week, next year...we instead become more aware of God's provision, for all that He has given and continues to give us; His generosity to meet our physical and spiritual needs each day, through both our daily bread and rest.

How are you going to rest on your Sabbath? What needs to be gathered up or planned ahead to ensure that you can focus on today's needs only and set aside proper time for rest?

Let us pray: *Lord, help to prepare our hearts and lives to enable us to trust and rest in You.
Amen.*

**The Revd Karen Herschell, Vicar of the United Benefice of Balderstone,
Mellor and Sablesbury**

The Fifth Sunday of Lent

Read: Exodus 17:1-7

‘I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.’

Exodus 17:6

Our immediate response to this passage might be ‘will they never learn?’ But before we judge the Israelites too harshly, we need to remember that they were not only journeying through the desert, but they were also on a transforming life journey too. They had been used to living in cruel slavery and now they were free. It was hard to get their heads round it—no more chains and subjugation and now they had to trust in God.

It would take time to unlearn the past and live in the present. When they had no water, their immediate thought was to turn to the man who led them out of slavery—Moses. There seems little thought of God leading them out of slavery, and therefore God providing, even though they had experienced it. Moses had his work cut out for him in leading the Israelites!

This is where we read of God’s compassion—Moses cried out to Him in desperation, and He answered. He didn’t condemn the grumbling people; He brought a solution. He didn’t immediately deal with the obvious—their seeming lack of trust in Him—He dealt with their immediate need. Does this say something to us? Do we sometimes judge people in hardship for their words and their attitudes instead of demonstrating God’s compassion and provision for those who are crying out to Him right now?

God used Moses to show clearly that where He leads, He does provide. And sometimes this provision comes in unexpected ways. We could assume that God would provide ‘Manna’ food from the earth, and water raining from heaven. But no, He provided manna from heaven and water from a rock—His answer to our needs is not always in a way we would imagine.

During this time of Lent, many people give something up, create a sense of want. However, for some, Lent is a continuation of the reality they live in of want and need. You may be prompted by God to be the unexpected answer to need around you, and I pray those in need will know God’s compassion and provision as they trust in Him.

Ruth Haldane, Warden of Lay Ministry

Read: Exodus 17:8-16

‘Moses’ hands grew weary; so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side.’

Exodus 17:12

Do you ever secretly wish that some of what God said was not in the Bible? Sayings like, ‘The Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation’? It doesn’t immediately sit comfortably with ‘I am gentle and lowly of heart.’ What are we to make of this? First, here we find an uncomfortable but important truth: **God has enemies**. Ever since He said, in the Garden of Eden, ‘I will put enmity between you . . .’, there have been individuals and nations who have hated God. As God is bringing His people from slavery in Egypt to freedom in The Promised Land, there are those who long to stop Him and His work. As Jesus journeyed from the cradle to the cross, enemies tried to destroy Him. As God brings us today from this life to eternal glory, there are people who hate the name of Jesus and would rather His name, than Amalek’s, would be ‘blotted out’.

Therefore, we ourselves who belong to Christ are in a **spiritual battle**. There is the battle within—think of the grumbling in yesterday’s passage—and the battle without. The New Testament is clear that our battle is ‘not against flesh and blood’ (Ephesians 6:12) but against spiritual powers and spiritual realities; therefore our weapons are not the sword of Joshua but the armour of God. Nevertheless, the battle is no less real. Have you grasped that reality?

How comforting, then, to know that **the battle belongs to the Lord**. That phrase is from elsewhere, but the thought is equally here: it is The Lord who will have war with Amalek from generation to generation. Ever since he said, ‘I will put enmity . . .’, God has been personally committed to this warfare, and to winning it. As the book of Revelation taught us last Advent, in the End the Lamb wins. Yes, we are in a spiritual battle, but in Christ the outcome is assured.

Finally, that little detail that I have always found so touching, of Aaron and Hur holding up Moses’ arms as he grew tired. Moses is the mighty intercessor. Moses is the one holding the staff of God—so symbolic and important in Exodus. What do Aaron and Hur contribute? They hold up his hands. That’s all. It’s a lovely reminder that **God uses people** in His purposes. God used the mighty apostle Paul. But He also used the 80 or so ordinary people, named in Paul’s various letters. As one who is in Christ you are in a battle—but it belongs to the Lord, and He will win, and He can use you.

The Revd Philip Venables, Vicar of St John’s Whittle-le-Woods & Clayton Brook Community Church.

Read: Exodus 18:1-12

'Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods.'

Exodus 18:11

Before the days of pausing live TV and catch-up, advert breaks sometimes came as a welcome pause in action to put the kettle on and use the bathroom. After seventeen chapters of dramatic action, chapter 18 gives us a breather before we reach the heights of what follows. But this is no irrelevant commercial. Instead, it forms a vital bridge between the two halves of Exodus: past rescue by the Lord (today) and present relationship with the Lord (tomorrow).

Moses' father-in-law journeys to the mountain of God with Moses' wife and sons (perhaps Zipporah went home for safety during the plagues or went to visit dad after the Red Sea – we don't know). Jethro has already heard about what God had done, but Moses testifies at length to the Lord's goodness towards His people in the plagues, Passover, Red Sea, desert provision, and deliverance.

This retelling of the Lord's rescue has a dramatic effect on Jethro. He is moved to praise and worship. The priest of Midian, no less, declares the Lord is the greatest god. He brings sacrifices and eats a fellowship meal with the elders of Israel in God's presence! All this happens because of his relation to Moses (just count how many times father-in-law appears).

So here in an obscure chapter of Exodus, Jethro foreshadows our inclusion in God's salvation plan. Jesus is our Passover lamb sacrificed on the cross. He has passed through the waters of death and risen again. Relating to Jesus by faith, we rejoice and partake in the rescue He has accomplished for us through His passion. Today, dwell on and praise the Lord for all the good He has done for us, His people in Christ.

One final thought, tomorrow we'll read that Jethro returns home. What impact will his new faith in the Lord have on his life and work? We're not told. But we can consider our own response. This Lenten season, how will the Lord's goodness to me continue to transform my daily living? What other priorities ("gods") do I need to set aside to worship Him alone?

Let us pray: *Father God, I praise you for all that You have done to include me in Your people and plan. Help me to dwell on Your goodness that I would worship You in how I live today and always. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

The Revd Jonny Lee, Vicar of All Hallows, Bispham

Read: Exodus 18:13-27

'You should also look for able men among all the people, men who fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain; set such men over them as officers over thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens.'

Exodus 18:21

The end of Exodus 18 finds us between two pivotal moments of the Israelites' story. Situated in the wilderness after their deliverance from Egypt but prior to the unpacking of the covenant at Mount Sinai, the Israelites are starting to wonder what's next. It's here, in the wilderness, where we meet Jethro, father-in-law to Moses, who was keen to reunite his daughter and grandsons with Moses and hear of God's victory himself.

Aren't we glad that our God is always intentional in His 'in-between's. We see as Jethro begins to observe the work of Moses and life on camp, he takes the opportunity to impart wisdom, a little lesson in leadership. Jethro recognises that Moses, in taking the role of judge was neglecting what God had placed on him, to lead the Israelites. He saw that the whole camp looked to Moses, that he had no team. Jethro approached this:

'Seek out capable, Godly men, those who aren't here to make a name for themselves, trustworthy men and appoint them to serve the people. They can bring the big issues to you and deal with the small things themselves. That will lighten your load.' (Paraphrased).

Moses did as Jethro instructed, he appointed officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens and the scripture records *'all these people will go home satisfied.'* (18:23, NIV).

Regardless of whether you are active in leadership or not, are you seeking Godly men and women to join you on your journey of faith? Are you finding people who bear the fruit of the spirit (Galatians 5:22-23)? Are you surrounded by those who encourage you, build you up, who aren't afraid to challenge you?

It's funny, it's almost as if Jethro's leadership advice to Moses was a sign of what they should look for in a saviour, and aren't we privileged to know the leadership ministry of Jesus today.

Let us pray: *Heavenly Father, we seek wisdom like Jethro, leadership like Moses and a love for people like your Son, Jesus. Let us, in this season of lent, recognise where we have influence, and grow in knowledge, endeavouring each day to become more Christlike. In your Mighty Name, Amen.*

Tabitha Halliwell, Youth Provision Development Officer

Read: Exodus 19:1-15

'The whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation'

Exodus 19:5b-6a

The account of Moses preparing to meet with God and receive the Ten Commandments is full of awe. A covenant was about to be made which would mark God's people out as holy and special; because of their reverence for the one God, the keeping of a Sabbath day, and their respect for one another.

After all his doubts when he stood before Pharaoh in the land of Egypt, Moses was set apart as the man who would lead God's people to the Promised Land. God's people were about to begin a journey into the wilderness, with little water or food. Yet in this holy moment, God's presence binds fast to them, so that they do not walk alone.

The people had to prepare themselves—so that body, mind and soul were completely ready to meet with the God who had rescued them from slavery. They were asked to respect where God's glory would be made known, and not to touch Mount Sinai. I wonder which places you have been filled with awe at the glorious sight of what God has created?

Consider the times when humanity has failed to heed this instruction not to touch what is holy within God's creation. The times when greed has led us to damage and desecrate the fragile beauty of the gift God asked us to care for.

Pray for the people who are walking through wildernesses of drought, fire, or flood because of climate change brought about by human overuse of this gift. In this season of repentance, consider how your own lifestyle habits might change to live out such awe and respect for God's presence within creation.

Moses said to the people *'Prepare for the third day'* (v.15). As we prepare to celebrate Christ's resurrection on the third day—we tell the story of God's new creation and covenant that bring healing and forgiveness of our sins. Yet Mary could not touch the Risen Christ – a sign of the awe and reverence we are called to have for all that reveals God's glory in the gift of life in creation.

Let us pray: *Lord, as we see Your awesome glory, teach us new reverence for Your gift of life in creation, made present in Christ our redeemer. Amen.*

The Revd Carol Backhouse, Vicar of Christ Church Lancaster

Read: Exodus 19:16-25

‘Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God.’

Exodus 19:17

The people of Israel had been miraculously delivered from slavery in Egypt by the hand of the Lord. The Lord had provided them with bread and water in the desert, despite their complaining, and had protected them from attack. In all of this deliverance, provision, and protection however, it appears that Israel had yet to properly meet her God... until now.

Now that they have camped at Mount Sinai, Moses brings the people out of their camp to the foot of the mountain where God would reveal Himself. They had consecrated themselves, knowing that this God, their deliverer and provider, was holy. What they experienced surely was beyond any preparation, expectation, or comprehension. In this encounter there is smoke and fire and trembling and a trumpet blast of increasing volume as the Lord God draws near. The holiness of Israel’s God is clear in the repeated warnings about coming too close. This God is an awesome God.

How do we respond when we read this passage? Do we read this as a strange encounter from long ago that doesn’t have much relevance to our worship today? Do we read it with a degree of discomfort, wondering why God is portrayed as so frightening? Do we dismiss it as ‘old covenant’ practice that no longer applies to us? The author of Hebrews helps us by comparing this meeting with God on Mount Sinai to the encounter that believers have with God because of the work of Christ (Hebrews 12:18-29). As those who participate in the new covenant because of Jesus, we do not come to a mountain surrounded by darkness, gloom, and tempest, full of terror that results in running away from the voice of God. No, we come to another mountain – Mount Zion – which is marked by joy and the assembly of God’s people. We come to Jesus as the mediator of a new covenant.

This doesn’t mean we can come as we please: the author of Hebrews affirms that we offer God our worship in reverence and awe because He is a consuming fire. But because of the work of Jesus, we can come boldly to the throne of grace with confidence, not shaking with terror but gripped by awe and wonder at the grace and love given to us in Christ. This encounter with our Living God is a vital part of our journey to freedom, and it is not a one-off encounter but one we repeatedly return to as we worship with our sisters and brothers in our journey together as the people of God.

Amy White, Lay Training Officer

Read: Exodus 20:1-17

*'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt,
out of the house of slavery.'*

Exodus 20:2

As we journey through the season of Lent, we are reminded of God's incredible self-revelation to the Israelites in Exodus 20. In verse 2, God declares, *'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.'* These words are not just a simple introduction or a statement of authority; they are a powerful proclamation of God's identity and relationship with His people.

In this declaration, God reveals Himself as the Eternal Sovereign who rules all creation. He is the Lord, the one in control and has the power to bring about deliverance and freedom. Not only is He the ruler of all, but He is also the Creator who brought everything into existence. He is the source of life and sustains us each day.

God makes Himself known as the Redeemer—the one who rescued the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. This act of redemption was not just a historical event but a foreshadowing of the ultimate act of redemption through Jesus Christ. Just as God delivered His people from physical bondage, He offers us deliverance from the bondage of sin and death.

During this Lenten season, as we reflect on God's self-revelation, we are reminded of the incredible love and grace He has shown us. He is our Eternal Sovereign, Creator, and Redeemer. As His children, we are called to respond to this revelation with gratitude, obedience, and trust.

In the face of temptations and struggles, remember who our God is. He is the one who delivered us from the land of slavery, from the chains of sin and death. This truth may always remind us to turn away from the things that entangle us and seek a closer relationship with Him.

Let us make some time to meditate on God's powerful self-declaration and respond to His self-revelation by surrendering ourselves to Him and offering our lives to be a living testament to the transformation and freedom found only in Him as we draw closer to the LORD our God, our Eternal Sovereign, Creator, and Redeemer.

Cornelius Asghar, Ordinand

PALM SUNDAY 24TH MARCH

Holy Week

Read: Exodus 20:18-21

'The people stood at a distance while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.'

Exodus 20:21

In the 1990s, a friend of mine was promoted rapidly to become the finance director of a small company. His boss called him in one day and told him in no uncertain terms it was time for him to get a new car. At the time Paul was driving a Mini Metro. He had no interest in flashy cars and wanted to ensure he could give a good proportion of his income away. 'But it doesn't look right', his boss replied. 'You can't make an entrance in a Mini Metro – it simply doesn't give our clients confidence.' The upshot of the conversation was that Paul was given a BMW, paid for by the company! How we go about 'making an entrance' signals power, status, character, intent.

As we've journeyed through the wilderness with the book of Exodus, there's no mistaking the entrance of God at Mount Sinai. Fire, thunder, earthquake, thick darkness. Everything that signals: Keep your distance. The people and priests had to consecrate themselves for two days in preparation for the coming of God (19:10, 22). This was signalling: these commandments are important. As Moses explained: *"for God has come only to test you and put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin"* (v.20).

This is very different to the entrance of Jesus on Palm Sunday which we remember today: *"Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt"* (John 12:15). He was signalling a different approach, which is beautifully picked up in the book of Hebrews (12:22): *'But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly.'* It is no longer: 'Keep your distance, but everyone's welcome.'

The new covenant which Jesus sealed in His blood on the cross, confers on us a new status as sons and daughters of the gentle king, welcome in His presence, with all His angels. But this is not to deny the spiritual reality of Mount Sinai. The 16th century mystic, St John of the Cross, wrote powerfully of the 'dark night of the soul.' By which he meant God's gentle invitation to deepen our spiritual lives, detaching us from the vibrant senses of our ego, to deepen our encounter with God by His gentle intimate presence in the 'glowing darkness.' On this Palm Sunday, as we welcome the coming King who leads us to the cross, may we know both His call to radical welcome and radical consecration.

The Rt Revd Jill Duff, Bishop of Lancaster

Read: Matthew 2:13-15

‘Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, ‘Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.’

Matthew 2:13

Today we are given a gospel reading alongside Exodus. Jesus’ life was unpredictable from the start. The circumstances around His early childhood were unsafe and now as we head towards Good Friday, the threat and the suffering intensify. But why are we looking back to the Christmas story in Holy Week? Because you cannot ask why Jesus died on the cross without considering why God came into the world. God saw the suffering of the people and interfered.

Joseph was asked to take Mary and baby Jesus and leave for a foreign land in order to protect the child, because He would have a special task to liberate God’s children. The life of Moses, whose story we have been following through Lent, has many parallels. His mother had to hide him as a baby, and he was destined to lead God’s people into freedom. Both Jesus and Moses became aliens in a foreign land. As an immigrant myself, I know that this has a lasting impact on someone’s identity and perspective, even if they later return.

God protected both Jesus and Moses for a special role in the future, but in that moment of escape and becoming a refugee I imagine it might have felt like a failure. When I consider the trials and failures of my life, I am relieved that the God of mercy enfolds even those experiences into my story. They are part of what makes me who I am and do not need to be excluded. In fact, God has walked through them with me and offers healing.

The running away, hidden periods of preparation, rejection, and restoration are all part of our story. And having gone through it all as a human being, Christ is there with us. We do not need to fear, for we are placing our feet into His footsteps.

If your story is to take the shape of Jesus’ story, like Moses’, where have you seen God’s hand guiding you when it all seemed to go wrong? Where are you called to relieve the suffering of God’s children?

Let us pray: *God of mercy, You bury our past in the heart of Christ and of our future You will take care. Amen. (Prayer by Brother Roger of Taizé).*

The Revd Anna Walker, Director of Whalley Abbey

Read: Matthew 4:1-11

*'Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness
to be tempted by the devil.'*

Matthew 4:1

'It's not about you.' That well aimed challenge was voiced at least once daily in my theological college. I questioned it at my ordination. In a packed cathedral the bishop pressed his hands on my head. 'Crikey' I thought. 'This moment really is about me.' I quickly realised it was actually about the Holy Spirit. That same Spirit who led Jesus into the wilderness.

Moses led Israel into the wilderness but they failed to see God's invitation into a deeper relationship. They complained, doubted and sinned. Jesus' relationship with God was affirmed at His baptism. But instead of the doors of ministry bursting open, the Spirit led Him into the wilderness. God uses the wilderness as His crucible for spiritual growth. In this unique environment Jesus' calling is tested. Unlike the old Israel, Jesus, the new Israel, deepens His trust in God's love.

In prayer, now, in Holy Week, we have that opportunity for an encounter; a relationship. Time with God that we needed. If we're honest, we spend a great deal of time being absent from God. Too busy to hear the knocking on the door. Or perhaps tempted. The wilderness is fertile ground for temptation. Those monastic eccentrics, the Desert Mothers and Fathers, were highly aware of the power of temptation. The greatest of them, Anthony of Egypt, said 'Nobody who has not been tempted will be able to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, for take away temptations and nobody is being saved.' Powerful stuff.

Have courage. In the wilderness Jesus saw that what Satan offered was a false reality.

By saying 'no' to false reality, Jesus says YES to being among us and with us, with YOU. Through encountering the wilderness Jesus is revealed: He is fearless, continually saying no to corruption and lies. He gives voice to the voiceless; He will heal, He will bring in the Kingdom.

See how inspiring this wilderness can be!

What are the illusions about myself that need clearing away? How can the Spirit help me discover true self-awareness? This is the time and place to embrace our living relationship with God made possible for us by the Spirit who will lead us to where Jesus stands. We only have to say 'yes.'

The Revd Christopher Wood, Vicar of Waddington and West Bradford

Read: Matthew 5:1-11

‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.’

Matthew 5:3

Are you a natural rule follower? I know I am. I like to have clear instructions so that I know what I should or shouldn't do. Last week, we read in Exodus 20 how Moses went up a mountain and God instructed him in the 'Ten Commandments'; ten rules for God's people to live well with each other and to live as the holy people of God.

In today's reading, approximately 1,500 years later, we see Jesus similarly going up a mountain and He proceeds to teach on what Christian living looks like. But interestingly, Jesus doesn't produce a list of 'do' and 'don't' rules, rather He inspires us with the qualities of character that ought to be exhibited by his followers; those to whom He says the Kingdom of Heaven belongs.

The challenge with simply having rules is that it puts the responsibility and potential glory onto our shoulders and we can easily slip into equating how 'holy' we are with how many rules we are able to keep in comparison to others and begin to judge others as a result. Jesus does away with that wrong attitude. Rather, the list of qualities of character includes that we are to be 'poor in spirit'. This doesn't mean that we are to be weak or crushed with despair. On the contrary, it means that it is those who recognise their helplessness before God who are blessed and to whom the Kingdom of Heaven belongs.

And so as we approach the cross this weekend, the beatitudes encourage us to reflect on our posture towards it. Will we do so with any sense of pride or guilt around whether we feel we have 'followed the rules'? Or will we do so on our knees, acutely aware of our need for God's help, forgiveness and love? Jesus' teaching in this passage is clear that it is those who do the latter that are blessed.

Carolyn Barton, Director of Vision Delivery & Deputy Diocesan Secretary

Read: Matthew 26:17-30

'the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the Passover meal.'

Matthew 26:19

New and improved. We often see this description in advertisements in shops trying to sell their latest products. I've found it quite annoying ever since my dad pointed out to me during one trip to the supermarket that something can't be both new AND improved. If it's new then there hasn't been one before; if it's improved then in a real sense it isn't new, it's just an old one made better. New and improved... I don't think so!

However, as in so many other ways Jesus blows the usual rules out of the water. Jesus' passover meal with his disciples is both much improved and radically new. How so? Jesus and His disciples, in what we now call the Last Supper, are meeting for what?.. for a Passover meal. We know all about this meal. Moses was told: *'take some of the blood [of the lamb] and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. They shall eat the lamb that same night'* (Exodus 12:7-8). This is how God's people are to remember their great salvation for centuries to come, with a meal. Much like we gather round meals at key moments like birthdays, anniversaries, and Christmas to look back and to remember, so with the Passover. Salvation from slavery remembered, marked, celebrated. Each ingredient in the meal has its own symbolism; each ingredient reminds them of one part of that story.

Jesus and His followers are being obedient Jews and keeping the Passover requirements in Exodus 12.... but with a difference. In this meal, a Passover with no mention of the lamb (more tomorrow!) bread and wine come to represent, to be, Jesus Himself. The meal, a Passover meal for sure, is improved by the actions, words, and presence of Jesus. This isn't just a Passover meal, it is truly something radically new. A meal which no longer merely reminds, but now actually connects to the sacrifice, feeds those who receive it both physically and spiritually, and transforms those who digest it into something, someone, new. Passover, yes. Something more, most definitely. New and improved... I think for once this may be right.

Let us pray: *Lord Jesus, thank You for giving us in the Eucharist a new and improved Passover that we might eat Your body and drink Your blood, and so be strengthened for our own journey to freedom. Amen.*

The Revd Michael Print, Vicar of St George's & All Saints', Chorley

Read: Matthew 26:45-55

‘Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?’

Matthew 26:53-54

I recently visited Lichfield Cathedral. If you have been you will have walked past the white marble statue called ‘Sleeping Children’ (1817AD) which shows two sisters asleep on a bed in each other’s arms. As one reads the plaque above the statue one is gripped by the tragedy of their deaths and the tranquil beauty of the piece. Noticing my interest, a cathedral volunteer suggested I felt one of the feet to discover that the artist Sir Francis Chantrey had left a piece of the marble uncarved, apparently because he believed that only God was able to create perfection.

On this Good Friday we pause to reflect on the imperfections of our world. The garden of Gethsemane in Mathew 26 was the setting for the failing of the disciples to pray; the betrayal of a friend; the breakdown of trust and the onslaught of violence. How have we let down Jesus recently? How may we have been as guilty of desertion from Jesus as those in the garden that night?

On this Good Friday we pause and remember from Exodus 12 the threads of sacrifice that weave their ways through God’s salvation story. We remember the Israelites walking through their flocks to select the perfect animal that would be an acceptable sacrifice to pay for the sins of the people. We remember the cost of perfection and the priority to give to God the very best. What does ‘giving God our best’ look like for us? Is that something we need to think through on this day?

Only God is able to create perfection. Only He was able to step in and provide the perfect, sinless, spotless, sacrifice. The cross became the final altar on earth to be stained with the blood of the lamb—Jesus Christ, the only one who could take away the sins of the world (John 1:29). On this day let us choose to put our faith in Christ alone. Let us give Him our thanks and praise for the cost He paid; the sacrifice He made and the life of perfection He led for us. Let us pray:

Lord, we come to You seeking forgiveness for the times we have let You down.

Lord, we come to You seeking Your mercy for the imperfections of this fallen world.

Lord, we come to You in thanksgiving for the sacrifice You paid for us.

By Your Spirit Lord reveal to us how we can live generously, love sacrificially, and share You boldly this Easter time. Amen.

The Revd Jenny Brown, Associate Vicar of St Anne’s Shevington

Read: Matthew 27:57-66

‘Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.’

Matthew 27:61

So how was your day? This is a common question at the end of a day in homes amongst families and others we love. Sometimes there’s some significant things to say, other days, not a lot. I’ve often thought that if every day in our lives was a spectacular experience, we couldn’t cope with it this side of Heaven. Some people need to live in the highs and lows a little more than others, but the reality is some days are just ordinary. There is nothing wrong with that – it’s called life, I guess.

Holy Saturday isn’t ordinary in that sense but is the closest we get in the liturgical year to such a day. We neither have the emotion of the grief of the crucifixion, nor the exhilaration that flows from the reality of the empty tomb. Yes, hell is being harrowed and Jesus is God’s agent in that. But for the Church Holy Saturday is the day when not much happens liturgically.

In fact, that’s not a terrible thing. The spiritual life is not separate from everyday living. Sometimes we have the highs of knowing God’s presence with us, others we may experience something that feels like the absence of God.

Today we pause as the Israelites pause on the banks of the Red Sea. The world waits for the saving knowledge of life in all its fullness. Today, we have buried the dead, we wait for the next things. This is in the knowledge that God will save but we rightly feel raw from the grief and brutality of crucifixion and not yet ready for the dawning realisation of the reality of Easter joy. Both those events represent the awful (deliberate spelling!) majesty of God, and in between we have the reality of waiting for what is to come.

For Christians, the temptation is to leap ahead because we know how the story ends. Yet, I believe our lives are enriched by the preparedness to wait, knowing that sometimes there is nothing we can do in each situation but to wait upon God’s saving help.

Let us pray: *Dear God, I’m reminded this Holy Saturday that You are no stranger to death, darkness, or doubt. Help me to remember as I wade within my own discomforts and fears today, that You are still alive, even when I can’t see You. You know waiting is hard. And yet You allow it, for Your glory to be revealed in Your perfect timing. I rest in you, Lord, as I wait on what only You can do. Amen.*

The Venerable David Picken, Archdeacon of Lancaster

31ST MARCH

Easter Sunday

Read: Matthew 28:1-10

'He has been raised from the dead...'

Matthew 28:7

Easter Day has dawned. And today we know for sure that all God's promises have been richly fulfilled.

The finest chefs, magicians and entertainers use the same trick. They save the best until last. The show may be amazing, but wait until the end when you see the showstopper. Then you'll really be blown away but their skill.

That is what God does today. He saves the best until last. But on an infinitely greater scale and to an eternal effect.

When the people of Israel passed through the waters of the Red Sea, their salvation was astonishing. By God's mighty hand, the sea was held back as they passed through, but then returned to discomfort and destroy Pharaoh's army. Through water, the people of Israel passed from slavery in Egypt to the freedom and safety of the promised land. But God was saving the best until last. Although those events were stunning and miraculous, they were merely a sign, an anticipation, of a far greater gift still to come.

Today, Easter Day, that promised gift has come. Jesus has passed through the waters of death as He went to the cross. Jesus has seen off Pharaoh's army as He defeated sin. And now He has conquered once and for all. Through His rising from the dead, those who once were slaves to sin can delight in the eternal freedom of the children of God.

On Easter Eve and Easter morning, many churches will be using water as reminder of the freedom we find in Jesus's dying and rising. In the waters of the font, we die with Christ in order to rise with Him to the new life of eternity. Our sin is drowned out by the power of the cross and we are set free.

That freedom is there for you to delight in. So this Easter Day, with the whole church shout out those words from the promises of Baptism, 'I turn to Christ!' Give your life afresh to the one who has laid down his life for you.

For Christ is Risen! We have passed through water from slavery to freedom. And what awaits us now is the perfect joy of eternity.

The Rt Revd Philip North, Bishop of Blackburn



WHAT'S NEXT?

We really hope you've enjoyed walking through Lent with this booklet. If you're wondering how you can continue with this pattern of daily reading there are many resources available. For ease of access, most are now available either online or as apps. Here's a few suggestions:

Daily Prayer

churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/join-us-service-daily-prayer

Daily Prayer is available free as an app or on the Church of England Website and gives complete services for Morning, Evening and Night Prayer in both contemporary (Common Worship) and traditional (Book of Common Prayer) forms.

BIOY

bibleinoneyear.org

With BIOY each day you receive a Psalm or Proverbs reading, a New Testament and an Old Testament reading. It also provides daily audio and written commentary to walk you through each day's reading, to provide fresh understanding of the texts.

How to read the bible

blackburn.anglican.org/bible-study

In addition to these resources there will be regular Quiet Days and Retreats offered by Whalley Abbey:
whalleyabbey.org

Bible Podlets

bducation.org.uk/podcasts/bible-podlets

Bible Podlets is a Bible study and discussion podcast for primary aged children to do with adults. Each episode has fun games/activities, an engaging Bible reading in the form of a news story, and discussion, with places to pause and talk together about the topic. You can download discussion notes from the resources area of the site.

If you prefer a hard copy resource, Christian bookshops carry a large range of Bible reading material, from daily reading notes to study books on particular themes or books of the Bible.

Lent Bible Study Course by the Bishop of Blackburn

Designed to be used by a small group of people or individually, this five week video based bible study course will help you to explore the themes in the Book of Exodus in a fresh way. Download the app.







*All texts in this booklet are taken from the
New Revised Standard Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated*

Designed by Morse-Brown Design

We'd love your feedback on this resource!

