

Daily Devotions
from the United Reformed Church

Stories from Exodus



part 2
The Plagues of Egypt

Saturday 8th August to Saturday 22nd August 2020

[Introduction](#)

After a sojourn away from the stories in Exodus we now return to where we left off before having a stroll through Jonah and the Basis of Union. We return to Egypt, Pharaoh's hardness of heart and the plagues - when these studies were planned no one had heard of Covid-19; it's odd to reflect on ancient stories of plagues as we live through a contemporary one.

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Saturday 8th August The Plague of Blood

The Rev'd Fiona Thomas is the outgoing Secretary for Education and Learning for the United Reformed Church, and a member at Christ Church in Bellingham.

Exodus 7

Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Pharaoh's heart is hardened; he refuses to let the people go. Go to Pharaoh in the morning, as he is going out to the water; stand by at the river bank to meet him, and take in your hand the staff that was turned into a snake. Say to him, "The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you to say, 'Let my people go, so that they may

kneading troughs. Kept only for that purpose it was where the dough was pummelled into submission before baking in a hot oven or over a hot fire. Keeping 600,000 people (plus women and children and livestock) fed on the march would have been a challenge for anyone and it's no wonder that there were often complaints and shortages as the wandering years unfolded in the wilderness. As I write this we are still wandering in our own wilderness not quite knowing where we are heading except that there is a promised land of a new normality out there somewhere. One thing is for sure, we all need bread for survival and the bread of life to feed us.

Some of us have made incalculable sacrifices and all of us have had to learn to adapt and think in new ways and to make do. By the time this is read no doubt we will have retrieved some golden moments and celebrated them but we will also be grieving the losses of people and the loss of the old ways. As we travel where we are led may the leaven of love help us rise to the occasion what ever may befall .

Prayer

Take my gifts and let me love you,
God who first of all loved me,
gave me light and food and shelter,
gave me life and set me free.
Now because your love has touched me,
I have love to give away,
now the bread of love is rising,
loaves of love to multiply!

Shirley Erena Murray 1931-2020

Egypt; it was not leavened, because they were driven out of Egypt and could not wait, nor had they prepared any provisions for themselves.

The time that the Israelites had lived in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years. At the end of four hundred and thirty years, on that very day, all the companies of the Lord went out from the land of Egypt. That was for the Lord a night of vigil, to bring them out of the land of Egypt. That same night is a vigil to be kept for the Lord by all the Israelites throughout their generations.

Reflection

One of the interesting things to emerge from our time indoors earlier this year was a renewed interest in baking bread at home. Some people have been doing it for ages, others had dropped the habit out of busyness or simply the availability of good bread on the High Street and others had never even thought about it as a possibility. But suddenly by the middle of April people were creating and nurturing 'sourdough starters' up and down the British Isles and publishing recipes for every variation of bread product you could imagine using these feisty little bowls of bubbling life. It even led to a shortage of flour for some time. For those unfamiliar with the process a 'starter' is a mixture of flour and water which catches naturally occurring yeast from the air and starts to ferment. This fermentation is what makes bread rise and the starters can be kept and fed for years, with care, and each one can give rise to a new generation of bread. It was a process that Jesus was very familiar with judging by the number of times he uses bread and uses yeast as an illustration of his teaching.

This rising and fermenting takes time and patience neither of which the people leaving Egypt had on that fateful Passover night. The bread had been prepared for the next days but there was no time to let the yeast work and so it was unleavened. As they travelled they baked what we would now call flatbread. The utmost importance of this food is demonstrated by the list of things that were carried away including

worship me in the wilderness.' But until now you have not listened. 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. The fish in the river shall die, the river itself shall stink, and the Egyptians shall be unable to drink water from the Nile.'" The Lord said to Moses, 'Say to Aaron, "Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt—over its rivers, its canals, and its ponds, and all its pools of water—so that they may become blood; and there shall be blood throughout the whole land of Egypt, even in vessels of wood and in vessels of stone.'"'

Moses and Aaron did just as the Lord commanded. In the sight of Pharaoh and of his officials he lifted up the staff and struck the water in the river, and all the water in the river was turned into blood, and the fish in the river died. The river stank so that the Egyptians could not drink its water, and there was blood throughout the whole land of Egypt. But the magicians of Egypt did the same by their secret arts; so Pharaoh's heart remained hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the Lord had said. Pharaoh turned and went into his house, and he did not take even this to heart. And all the Egyptians had to dig along the Nile for water to drink, for they could not drink the water of the river. Seven days passed after the Lord had struck the Nile.

Reflection

Perhaps the most convincing reason why Moses would find Pharaoh at the river in the morning is that the story requires it. The first challenge to Pharaoh's authority must take place at the Nile, the origin of Egypt. The annual four-month inundation left behind rich silt, while rapids to the south, the delta to the North, and desert either side of the river defended the nation from attack. Vast irrigation systems harnessed the water when the river receded, providing all year round agriculture, with excess produce traded with other lands by boat. The organisation required to control the waters created a stratified society which valued order and stability, whose foundation was slavery: the hardly visible

army of foreign workers without whom it would be difficult to keep the system running.

The Egyptian word for “blood” and “red” were the same, and red was the colour of Apep, the serpent of chaos and synonym for evil. When the highly learned priests, not served well by the translation “magicians”, performed rituals of execration they destroyed red pots or figurines as proxies for Egypt’s enemies. Now in an ironic reversal they experienced this destruction for themselves. All they could do in response was conjure more bloody water, bringing further misery to the people and helping Moses’ mission. The Nile, source of fertility and life becomes the bringer of death, and the people have to dig into the sands to find clean water.

This is still reality for millions of people. The World Health Organisation reported in 2017 that although 71% of the global population (5.3 billion people) used a safely managed drinking-water service, at least 2 billion people were using a contaminated drinking water source able to transmit diseases such as diarrhoea, cholera, dysentery, typhoid, and polio.

Prayer

Gracious God, thank you for the technical wisdom and commitment to the common good which has brought clean water to more people than ever. Where decisions must be made about allocating resources may leaders be guided to channel these to the people who have least. Give us determination to build communities on fairness, questioning the ways that we have always done things, and bringing our practices into your sunlight. Amen

whole world. Pharaoh recognizes this and asks for a blessing from the departing Moses.

At Easter, we see God’s own firstborn slaughtered. As a sacrifice. God saving the world – by bearing the cost.

Prayer

I pray fervently for the coming of your Kingdom, O God - this world as you intended, full of Life and laughter and future! I forget, though, that its coming is Bad News for those who will not welcome it because they refuse to let go of their advantage. Help me to find no glee in their downfall but mourn them as lost, beloved children of God, as you do. May we all find our salvation in the New World of your Kingdom. Amen.

[Saturday 22nd August From Ramases to Succoth](#)

The Rev’d Carole Elphick, retired minister, worshipping at Muswell Hill URC

Exodus 12: 33 - 42

The Egyptians urged the people to hasten their departure from the land, for they said, ‘We shall all be dead.’ So the people took their dough before it was leavened, with their kneading-bowls wrapped up in their cloaks on their shoulders. The Israelites had done as Moses told them; they had asked the Egyptians for jewellery of silver and gold, and for clothing, 36 and the Lord had given the people favour in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have what they asked. And so they plundered the Egyptians.

The Israelites journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides children. A mixed crowd also went up with them, and livestock in great numbers, both flocks and herds. They baked unleavened cakes of the dough that they had brought out of

Israelites! Go, worship the Lord, as you said. Take your flocks and your herds, as you said, and be gone. And bring a blessing on me too!

Reflection

Have you noticed how prominent the theme of children under threat of death is in the Exodus story? Firstly, Pharaoh's attempt to control the Hebrew slave population by killing male children. Then Moses, adrift on the Nile and rescued by Pharaoh's daughter. And now the slaughter of Egypt's firstborn by God, which triggers Israel's final liberation from slavery.

And have you noticed how crucial perspective is to how we read this story? It's Passover if you're a Jew, but holocaust if you're Egyptian. Salvation or genocide – and both at the hand of God!

We can't escape the really uncomfortable questions this raises about God and salvation – especially because of our direct line from Passover to the Cross via the Last Supper.

It's important to note that we're in the thick of the "God vs Pharaoh" battle for the future of the world. Just as Pharaoh's armies would slaughter the firstborn of their enemies to deny them any future, God's final act will complete the destruction of the slave-Empire and result in liberation – salvation.

But there's the problem: God may be saving the slaves and crushing the Empire in order ultimately to benefit the whole creation, but is playing by Pharaoh's rules! The slaves cannot be saved without the death of the (innocent) Egyptian children!

There is a mystery to salvation. For whatever reason, God saves only by entering into the mess and destructiveness of our world and defeating the forces ranged against God's intentions for life and flourishing. Israel is saved at the expense of the Egyptians - explicitly to be a blessing to the

Sunday 9th August Psalm 9

The Rev'd Andrew Royal Minister: Maidstone & Staplehurst URC's

Come sing to God
with all your heart;
give thanks to God Most High,
who makes the ruthless
fall from power
and rescues those who cry.

For, Holy One, you take our part;
your ways are always just.
You stop the tyrants in their tracks
and turn their names to dust.

You are a shelter for the poor,
a stronghold in distress.
You care for all who trust in You
and all who are oppressed.

The violent move
in vicious stealth
to dig their victims' grave.
Come, snare them in the nets
they cast.
Come, Mighty God, and save!

Rise up, O God; our blood cries out,
bring justice! Raise your hand!
Then we will tell how you have saved
Your praise will fill the land.

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Reflection

Captain Tom Moore has been quoted on his 100th birthday: 'Together we will beat this enemy'. This man who inspired the world walking 100 laps around his garden has raised 30+ million pounds for NHS charities. Where we shall be in our fight against the 'enemy' Covid-19 on 9th August, I have no idea. Will church buildings be open? What will be the impact of on-line worship? How many will have recovered? How many families will have lost lives to the enemy? The impact that the enemy will have on the recovery, restoration of communities, businesses and churches is still unknown.

Psalm 9, according to commentators, may have been written at a time

when Israel had just been delivered from powerful enemies, such as the Egyptians, the Philistines, the Assyrians or the Babylonians. The super-powers have released Israel, justice has been done and love has eventually prevailed.

Robert Alter in his translation of the Hebrew says of verse 17: 'The Lord is known for the justice (...) he did'. (It sounds a bit like Yoda speaking in a Star Wars film). The translation assumes an (...) ellipsis in the Hebrew. The literal sense of the four Hebrew words in sequence here is : 'The Lord is known Justice(...) He Did'. Now I have been using three dots in the writing of emails for years (some have questioned my Suffolk English). I never knew it was 'a thing' until I heard it discussed in an interview in lockdown. Don't rush from ellipses!

Justice and love go together. They lead us to praise God. In times of despair we are even more ready to turn to prayer backed up by practical care and support: 'For the needy shall not always be forgotten, and the hope of the poor shall not perish forever' (verse 18). Today the needy will bear the biggest losses at the end of this.

Words of Assurance

from Captain Tom's No 1 hit song with Michael Ball and the Care Choir

When you walk through a storm
Hold your head up high
And don't be afraid of the dark
At the end of a storm
There's a golden sky
And the sweet silver song of a lark
Walk on through the wind
Walk on through the rain
Though your dreams be tossed and blown
Walk on, walk on
With hope in your heart
And you'll never walk alone

quick decisions about whether they wanted to go or stay. It was literally a matter of life or death. Remembering such dates is special because of their uniqueness and importance, whether good or otherwise. Festivals are celebrated in religion to remind their followers that something special happened. The institution of the Passover was, and still is, very important to the Jews as it reminded them of a special night in their history. It was the starting point of their exodus from slavery in Egypt and a milestone in their learning journey of their knowledge of God. The Passover meal was to eaten by people ready to make a journey. It was the start of an adventure of faith. The Israelites, now ready to leave Egypt, like present-day believers in Jesus, are a pilgrim people with a destination. We are part of that free, but holy, nation a people set apart for God.

Prayer

Blessed are You, Our God, Sovereign of the universe. In Your love, our God, you have given us feasts of gladness, and seasons of joy. At this Festival of Pesach, season of our freedom, a sacred occasion, we remember the Exodus from Egypt and we celebrate all you have done for us in Jesus.

(Adapted from the Jewish Passover Kiddush.)

[Friday 21st August The Death of the First Born](#)

Lawrence Moore, Mission & Discipleship consultant, Worsley Road URC

Exodus 12: 29-32

At midnight the Lord struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the prisoner who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of the livestock. Pharaoh arose in the night, he and all his officials and all the Egyptians; and there was a loud cry in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead. Then he summoned Moses and Aaron in the night, and said, 'Rise up, go away from my people, both you and the

Then Moses called all the elders of Israel and said to them, 'Go, select lambs for your families, and slaughter the passover lamb. Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and touch the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood in the basin. None of you shall go outside the door of your house until morning. For the Lord will pass through to strike down the Egyptians; when he sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the Lord will pass over that door and will not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to strike you down. You shall observe this rite as a perpetual ordinance for you and your children. When you come to the land that the Lord will give you, as he has promised, you shall keep this observance. And when your children ask you, "What do you mean by this observance?" you shall say, "It is the passover sacrifice to the Lord, for he passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt, when he struck down the Egyptians but spared our houses.'" And the people bowed down and worshipped.

The Israelites went and did just as the Lord had commanded Moses and Aaron.

Reflection

There have already been 9 plagues on the land of Egypt, but Pharaoh's heart is hard, and he will not let the Israelites go. Moses, however, has told the Pharaoh that another plague is coming.

God had heard their cries for help and remembered the promise to the Israelites. God was a covenant-keeping God. They were to kill a lamb and smear the blood on the doorpost. The blood on the door post was evidence that the people in that household had been obedient to God's instruction and because of their faith in acting on God's instructions, they were going to be saved. It was a late-night meal, eaten in their travelling clothes. They were to eat it hurriedly and leave.

As I write this, we have just celebrated VE Day, marking the end of the 2nd World War in Europe. Many remembered evacuation with very

You'll never walk alone.

Oscar Hammerstein II / Richard Rodgers

You'll Never Walk Alone lyrics © Concord Music Publishing LLC

Monday 10th August The Plague of Frogs

Dr Sam Richards, serving as Head of Children's and Youth Work, member of mayBe community, Oxford.

Exodus 8: 1 – 15

Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Go to Pharaoh and say to him, "Thus says the Lord: Let my people go, so that they may worship me. If you refuse to let them go, I will plague your whole country with frogs. The river shall swarm with frogs; they shall come up into your palace, into your bedchamber and your bed, and into the houses of your officials and of your people, and into your ovens and your kneading bowls. The frogs shall come up on you and on your people and on all your officials.'" And the Lord said to Moses, 'Say to Aaron, "Stretch out your hand with your staff over the rivers, the canals, and the pools, and make frogs come up on the land of Egypt.'" So Aaron stretched out his hand over the waters of Egypt; and the frogs came up and covered the land of Egypt. But the magicians did the same by their secret arts, and brought frogs up on the land of Egypt.

Then Pharaoh called Moses and Aaron, and said, 'Pray to the Lord to take away the frogs from me and my people, and I will let the people go to sacrifice to the Lord.' Moses said to Pharaoh, 'Kindly tell me when I am to pray for you and for your officials and for your people, that the frogs may be removed from you and your houses and be left only in the Nile.' And he said, 'Tomorrow.' Moses said, 'As you say! So that you may know that there is no one like the Lord our God, the frogs shall leave you and your houses and your officials and your people; they shall be left only in the Nile.' Then Moses and Aaron went out from Pharaoh; and Moses cried out to the Lord concerning the frogs that he had brought upon

Pharaoh. And the Lord did as Moses requested: the frogs died in the houses, the courtyards, and the fields. And they gathered them together in heaps, and the land stank. But when Pharaoh saw that there was a respite, he hardened his heart, and would not listen to them, just as the Lord had said.

Reflection

I LOVE frogs. I find their shape, colours, movement, sound and feel beautiful. I have had pet frogs (and kept live insects to feed them), and still have an amazing collection of frog sculptures. I have been enraptured by a host of tiny frogs singing their mating song in Monet's garden one May and croaked to sleep by large Dutch dike-dwelling frogs whilst camping one April. It takes, as they say, all sorts. The scene in ET when all the dissection frogs are released in the science class is for me a glimpse of Exodus freedom.

Here millions of frogs emerge from the blood-polluted waterways and pools dug by thirsty Egyptians in their search for clean water. They get everywhere – in people's beds, in cooking pots, on people's skin. A by-product of environmental damage is often the displacement and distorted balance of species directly affected, which impacts us as co-inhabitants of the delicate balance that sustains life. The subsequent destruction of the frogs, unsurprisingly, impacts down the food chain, and there follows infestations of gnats and flies. Removing one symptom does not address the underlying problems.

This is part of the story of God's actions to change the hearts and minds of the holders of political power to overthrow the very economic structure that gives them power and wealth: slavery. The surprising tactic, unique to this plague, is to invite Pharaoh to choose when God should intervene via the timing of Moses' prayers. An all-powerful God waits to be invited to act so that we might know something of the One who acts. This is the relational heart of salvation.

without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. They shall take some of the blood 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; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the Lord. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgements: I am the Lord. 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.

This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread; on the first day you shall remove leaven from your houses, for whoever eats leavened bread from the first day until the seventh day shall be cut off from Israel. On the first day you shall hold a solemn assembly, and on the seventh day a solemn assembly; no work shall be done on those days; only what everyone must eat, that alone may be prepared by you. You shall observe the festival of unleavened bread, for on this very day I brought your companies out of the land of Egypt: you shall observe this day throughout your generations as a perpetual ordinance. In the first month, from the evening of the fourteenth day until the evening of the twenty-first day, you shall eat unleavened bread. For seven days no leaven shall be found in your houses; for whoever eats what is leavened shall be cut off from the congregation of Israel, whether an alien or a native of the land. You shall eat nothing leavened; in all your settlements you shall eat unleavened bread.

ourselves believing that Western culture is the pinnacle of human civilisation. We often stand in judgement over the actions other societies, ancient or modern, while betraying our own claims to egalitarianism and equality. Maybe we are exporting a degree of our own imperialism onto God.

I cannot find an easy way to justify the last plague to befall Egypt. Maybe all we can do is recognise that God, who came to earth in the human form of Jesus Christ, is also alien to us: "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." (Is 55.9)

Prayer

Creator God, we struggle and wrestle with the realisation that you are alien to us.

And yet, you fight on behalf of the alien and foreigner among us and stand against those who oppose the Kingdom of God.

Help us to understand your ways.

Give us peace to live with the knowledge

That you are also beyond our understanding. Amen.

[Thursday 20th August](#) [Passover](#)

The Rev'd Sue Henderson, retired URC minister, member of Bradford on Avon United Church.

Exodus 12

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbour in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it. Your lamb shall be

Moses prays, God responds, Pharaoh and Egypt enjoy immediate relief - but nothing else changes. We are left with the stench of rotting frog carcasses to remind us that the underlying injustices remain.

Prayer

God of Moses,
move us to see beyond symptoms to structural problems,
give us awareness of who really pays for our lifestyles,
help us make the changes we can.

Give us courage to speak truth to power,
and whole-heartedly pray to see all people set free
and in loving relationship with you
Amen.

[Tuesday 11th August](#) [The Plague of Gnats](#)

Pat Stannard is an Elder at Muswell Hill URC

Exodus 8 16 - 19

Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Say to Aaron, "Stretch out your staff and strike the dust of the earth, so that it may become gnats throughout the whole land of Egypt.'" And they did so; Aaron stretched out his hand with his staff and struck the dust of the earth, and gnats came on humans and animals alike; all the dust of the earth turned into gnats throughout the whole land of Egypt. The magicians tried to produce gnats by their secret arts, but they could not. There were gnats on both humans and animals. And the magicians said to Pharaoh, 'This is the finger of God!' But Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, just as the Lord had said.

Reflection

Anyone who has lived or holidayed in the West and Highlands of Scotland will understand the misery of the Egyptian people as the plague of gnats

descended. One word says it all: MIDGES.

These blood-sucking cousins of gnats have ruined endless peaceful summer evenings in the garden, on picnics, camping, fishing or walking. They never arrive singly, but in battalions. No amount of flailing arms and slaps will keep them all from their banquet on exposed areas of flesh. Away from the territories inhabited by the insects, we have metaphorical gnats and midges of our own. They are the worries and fears that get into our heads and multiply, swarming day and night until they bring us low, though too often reluctant to share our state of mind or seek help. This is especially true at the time of writing (April) during the Covid-19 lockdown. Many are enduring “mind midges”. Dread of disease, loneliness, separation from those we love, burning anger when we feel others are behaving irresponsibly, bereavement without the release of full funerals - all play their part in causing us mental distress. Even the strongest have bad days.

Some peace of mind in any troubles of life can come from quiet prayer and reflection; not shouty demands of God, for that just drowns out “the still small voice” which restored Elijah (1 Kings: 19). Driven close to madness and desiring death, he travelled on to Mount Horeb and there he found God with him - not in turbulent storm, earthquake or fire, but in the “gentle whisper” (NIV).

When we are in mental distress, let us admit the comfort offered by God in quiet prayer. And we should also seek counsel from people we trust. Working together, they can help us to cope.

PRAYER

Loving God, please grant us peace of mind and calm our troubled hearts; Imbue us with the courage to give voice to what is distressing us; Walk beside us on the path to recovery. We know that even when we neglect your assistance, you are with us always. Help us, Lord. Amen

be a loud cry throughout the whole land of Egypt, such as has never been nor will ever be again. But not a dog shall growl at any of the Israelites— not at people, not at animals—so that you may know that the Lord makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel. Then all these officials of yours shall come down to me, and bow low to me, saying, “Leave us, you and all the people who follow you.” After that I will leave.’ And in hot anger he left Pharaoh.

The Lord said to Moses, ‘Pharaoh will not listen to you, in order that my wonders may be multiplied in the land of Egypt.’ Moses and Aaron performed all these wonders before Pharaoh; but the Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he did not let the people of Israel go out of his land.

Reflection

... And we find ourselves at the climax of the series of plagues to befall Egypt. This ominous account, which seems to completely invert the massacre of the innocents in Luke’s Gospel, is indeed hot to handle for many a theologian. Its content is enough to disturb anyone. How do we respond?

We could take shelter behind the narrative device that the text may be stylised rather than literal. (Did it really happen?) Or we could argue that the impending deaths of the first-born is the final act against the tyranny of Pharaoh. (Could Pharaoh's refusal to release the Hebrews force God’s hand?) But both responses still leave us with the haunting conclusion that God, who is “slow to anger ... and abounding in love” (Ps 103.8), is capable of such a terrible act.

This account can leave us feeling that we may not recognise God. This shows a characteristic of God that is hard to get our heads around. The Creator of the Universe, who was willing to let his own Son die for our sins, is beyond our comprehension. God is, indeed, alien to us.

Maybe we also need to consider our own cultural position. We often find

Prayer

You, O God, are Light,
And in you there is no darkness at all.
We are at home in darkness.
We expect it,
Are resigned to it,
Unsurprised when it eclipses light.
We befriend it, even as we fear it.

Yet there is nowhere your love will not go to be with us and save us.
Teach us to discover you in our darkness.
Show us how to live as Children of Light,
Because that is who you have made us to be. Thank you! Amen.

Wednesday 19th August Pharaoh Warned Again

The Rev'd Daniel Harris, Minister with the North Manchester Mission Partnership

Exodus 11

The Lord said to Moses, 'I will bring one more plague upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt; afterwards he will let you go from here; indeed, when he lets you go, he will drive you away. Tell the people that every man is to ask his neighbour and every woman is to ask her neighbour for objects of silver and gold.' The Lord gave the people favour in the sight of the Egyptians. Moreover, Moses himself was a man of great importance in the land of Egypt, in the sight of Pharaoh's officials, and in the sight of the people.

Moses said, 'Thus says the Lord: About midnight I will go out through Egypt. Every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the firstborn of the female slave who is behind the handmill, and all the firstborn of the livestock. Then there will

Wednesday 12th August The Plague of Flies

The Rev'd ELizabeth Gray-King, Education & Learning Programme Officer, member St Columba's Oxford

Exodus 8: 20 - 32

Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Rise early in the morning and present yourself before Pharaoh, as he goes out to the water, and say to him, "Thus says the Lord: Let my people go, so that they may worship me. For if you will not let my people go, I will send swarms of flies on you, your officials, and your people, and into your houses; and the houses of the Egyptians shall be filled with swarms of flies; so also the land where they live. 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. Thus I will make a distinction between my people and your people. This sign shall appear tomorrow.'" The Lord did so, and great swarms of flies came into the house of Pharaoh and into his officials' houses; in all of Egypt the land was ruined because of the flies.

Then Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron, and said, 'Go, sacrifice to your God within the land.' But Moses said, 'It would not be right to do so; for the sacrifices that we offer to the Lord our God are offensive to the Egyptians. If we offer in the sight of the Egyptians sacrifices that are offensive to them, will they not stone us? We must go a three days' journey into the wilderness and sacrifice to the Lord our God as he commands us.' So Pharaoh said, 'I will let you go to sacrifice to the Lord your God in the wilderness, provided you do not go very far away. Pray for me.' Then Moses said, 'As soon as I leave you, I will pray to the Lord that the swarms of flies may depart tomorrow from Pharaoh, from his officials, and from his people; only do not let Pharaoh again deal falsely by not letting the people go to sacrifice to the Lord.'

So Moses went out from Pharaoh and prayed to the Lord. And the Lord did as Moses asked: he removed the swarms of flies from Pharaoh, from his officials, and from his people; not one remained. 32 But Pharaoh

hardened his heart this time also, and would not let the people go.

Reflection

“Let my people go!” rings in our minds as we hear the baritone of Paul Robeson sign out these words in a hymn from enslaved African Americans. Embedded in this Exodus story, the phrase resonates with the tirade for justice where justice has been denied. It has rung out for centuries, moving hearts and changing minds.

I’m sad to find the words again where first written, amidst a series of threats and misuse of creation for Moses to dent Pharaoh’s control. I’m sadder still that God is depicted as divine being misusing what had been made in love as a fly-filled weapon, damaging the crops of people God must also love. We are asked to believe that God changed God’s mind because Moses pleaded. In this story, Moses is the righteous one, God is the tyrant, and Pharaoh is merely another greedy human.

These epic tales have us severely testing our own notions of who God is. We pick and choose from these tales to talk about the human heroes. We’ve happily made musicals and movies about the bits we like. We use some of the words to give Biblical force to the cry for justice. Yet I see again and again that we don’t deal with the very confusing narrative of just who God is. I believe strongly that we humans make God who we want God to be. For the small Israel, fighting to have some control over itself, it looks like the preferred God would favour only this nation and to be as tyrannical as needed as long as tyranny was for their enemies.

This is not the God we see in Jesus. Jesus would have sung those same words, yet for the Triune God’s reasons. Justice is consequence of love, not the result of threat.

Prayer

Eternal God, whoever you are, fill us with Love so we can stop making

never see your face again.’

Reflection

Read the description of the three days of darkness and try and imagine how terrifying it would be to experience. CS Lewis captured something of that terror in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, where the ship sails into a cloud of utter darkness in which people’s worst nightmares become real.

The plagues are a story of struggle between two worlds: the brutal, anti-God slave-empire of Pharaoh and the world that God intended at creation (what Jesus calls the Kingdom of God). The darkness is a reversal of creation: light is God’s first creative act that rolls back the primordial chaos. The writer wants us to know that Pharaoh’s slave Empire is the great disruptor of creation. It is a world that can deliver only misery, despair and death. If Pharaoh is not willing to dismantle it voluntarily, it needs to die - it cannot be reformed or repaired.

We must not flinch from the picture of God in this story. As with the stories of the Flood and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, God is presented as responding to challenges to divine sovereignty with “shock and awe” (remember Desert Storm?), which may be impressive and irresistible, but are brutal and bloodthirsty. And partisan!

But the story isn’t finished. In Jesus, God enters into our darkness as companion and liberator of all humanity. As Jesus hangs on Empire’s cross, darkness falls again for three hours. We humans have chosen to be godforsaken rather than receive the gift of the Kingdom. And Jesus cries out in bewildered terror, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” We discover on Easter Sunday that God has not abandoned Jesus, but is “in Christ, reconciling the world to himself”. Jesus’ resurrection is nothing less than the death of Empire and the birth of the New Creation!

Prayer

Dear Lord and Father of mankind,
forgive our foolish ways!
Reclothe us in our rightful mind;
in purer lives thy service find,
in deeper reverence, praise.

Rejoice & Sing 492 J. G. WHITTIER (1807-92)

Forgive us Lord for laughing at others predicaments. Reclothe us in our right minds. Give us wisdom to depend on you, to hear your voice in the events unfolding around us For you alone are worthy of our worship and enable us to dwell in safety. Amen

Tuesday 18th August The Plague of Darkness

Lawrence Moore, Mission & Discipleship consultant, Worsley Road URC

Exodus 10: 21 - 29

Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Stretch out your hand towards heaven so that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, a darkness that can be felt.' So Moses stretched out his hand towards heaven, and there was dense darkness in all the land of Egypt for three days. People could not see one another, and for three days they could not move from where they were; but all the Israelites had light where they lived. 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.' But Moses said, 'You must also let us have sacrifices and burnt-offerings to sacrifice to the Lord our God. Our livestock also must go with us; not a hoof shall be left behind, for we must choose some of them for the worship of the Lord our God, and we will not know what to use to worship the Lord until we arrive there.' But the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he was unwilling to let them go. Then Pharaoh said to him, 'Get away from me! Take care that you do not see my face again, for on the day you see my face you shall die.' Moses said, 'Just as you say! I will

you up. Fill us with Spirit, so that we can know you a little. Give us courage to let you be who you are, though you remain such a mystery to us. Let us forgive ourselves for our need to re-create you, With your forgiving power, may we engage in justice as you see fit, whether we like it or not. Amen

Thursday 13th August The Plague of Pestilence

Kirsty-Ann Mabbott, Church Related Community Worker, St Columba's & Ansty Road URC's Coventry

Exodus 9: 1-7

Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Go to Pharaoh, and say to him, "Thus says the Lord, the God of the Hebrews: Let my people go, so that they may worship me. For if you refuse to let them go and still hold them, the hand of the Lord will strike with a deadly pestilence your livestock in the field: the horses, the donkeys, the camels, the herds, and the flocks. But the Lord will make a distinction between the livestock of Israel and the livestock of Egypt, so that nothing shall die of all that belongs to the Israelites.'" The Lord set a time, saying, 'Tomorrow the Lord will do this thing in the land.' And on the next day the Lord did so; all the livestock of the Egyptians died, but of the livestock of the Israelites not one died. Pharaoh inquired and found that not one of the livestock of the Israelites was dead. But the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he would not let the people go.

Reflection

Exodus is a dangerous book, it was deemed so dangerous by landowners during slavery in America and the West Indies that the whole of the arc of the Israelites journey out of slavery from Egypt was removed from the Slave Bible, along with 90% of the Old Testament and 50% of the New Testament. It is dangerous because it gives hope to people and shows how God is a God of liberation and preferential treatment of the oppressed.

This passage finds us at the half-way point in the plague story. God clearly has a preferential option for the Israelites as the marginalised, oppressed and enslaved people, but what of the regular Egyptian citizens who aren't in much better of a position? When I look at society today, I see that we have a social class of people who have been let down by a society that has seen them as not worth the effort, and this has left them under-educated, under-informed and ill-equipped to verbalise the injustices against them and has easily swayed them by a media that that is owned by people who know how to manipulate the truth.

I wonder then how the regular Egyptians felt when they had now endured five plagues that are destroying their livelihood. I doubt they would have blamed Pharaoh, at least not publicly, but they would have levelled the blame at the Israelites, the people who are already seen as a problem. So, we see the poor help marginalise the already oppressed. Sound familiar? Can we learn from this? Can we change how we use media to set one class of people against a migrant population, or are we going to continue hardening our hearts like Pharaoh pretending that it isn't our problem?

Prayer

Liberating God help us not only to acknowledge the injustice in the world, but to be bold enough to do everything we can to remove it. Enable us to see and hear clearly so we do not swallow lies that prop up the unjust systems in our world. Amen

Friday 14th August [The Plague of Boils](#)

The Rev'd Martin Knight is minister of St Paul's URC, South Croydon and South Croydon United Church (Methodist/URC)

Exodus 9: 8 - 12

Then the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, 'Take handfuls of soot from the kiln, and let Moses throw it in the air in the sight of Pharaoh. It shall

would not let the Israelites go.

Reflection

This story brings to mind an African farmer I saw on television earlier this year. He was surrounded by a cloud of locusts: he was frantically beating the air with a cloth, desperately trying to protect his crops. His actions seemed a futile act of resistance but faced with the onslaught of millions of locusts he was unwilling to give in.

Pharaoh is facing the cumulative effects of the plagues but remains unwilling to give in. The crops already damaged by hail are being ravaged by locusts which will strip vegetation bare. The crops will disappear and food shortages may result if reserves become depleted - this latest plague is a challenge to the pride of a nation used being economically self sufficient in food and able to control its neighbours through exports (a bit like the OPEC countries control of oil).

Faced with wave after wave of disaster, surely Pharaoh's resistance will be weakened and he would accede to the demands of the Hebrew leader? His spiritual authority is also being challenged and he remains unwilling to surrender fully in the face of this latest attack.

'Natural' disasters raise difficult questions - why is this happening? What is God saying? How can I stop this happening? What can I learn from this? Pharaoh is probably the most stubborn character in the Old Testament in his refusal to really acknowledge the supremacy of the God of the Hebrews.

Hearing this story each year at Passover the Jews would be reminded of God's sovereignty over the the natural world and all nations - they would be reminded of the folly and pride of Pharaoh and be encouraged not to repeat it but learn from it.

I wonder what God is saying to us today?

They shall fill your houses, and the houses of all your officials and of all the Egyptians—something that neither your parents nor your grandparents have seen, from the day they came on earth to this day.” Then he turned and went out from Pharaoh.

Pharaoh’s officials said to him, ‘How long shall this fellow be a snare to us? Let the people go, so that they may worship the Lord their God; do you not yet understand that Egypt is ruined?’ So Moses and Aaron were brought back to Pharaoh, and he said to them, ‘Go, worship the Lord your God! But which ones are to go?’ Moses said, ‘We will go with our young and our old; we will go with our sons and daughters and with our flocks and herds, because we have the Lord’s festival to celebrate.’ He said to them, ‘The Lord indeed will be with you, if ever I let your little ones go with you! Plainly you have some evil purpose in mind. No, never! Your men may go and worship the Lord, for that is what you are asking.’ And they were driven out from Pharaoh’s presence.

Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Stretch out your hand over the land of Egypt, so that the locusts may come upon it and eat every plant in the land, all that the hail has left.’ So Moses stretched out his staff over the land of Egypt, and the Lord brought an east wind upon the land all that day and all that night; when morning came, the east wind had brought the locusts. The locusts came upon all the land of Egypt and settled on the whole country of Egypt, such a dense swarm of locusts as had never been before, nor ever shall be again. They covered the surface of the whole land, so that the land was black; and they ate all the plants in the land and all the fruit of the trees that the hail had left; nothing green was left, no tree, no plant in the field, in all the land of Egypt. Pharaoh hurriedly summoned Moses and Aaron and said, ‘I have sinned against the Lord your God, and against you. Do forgive my sin just this once, and pray to the Lord your God that at the least he remove this deadly thing from me.’ So he went out from Pharaoh and prayed to the Lord. The Lord changed the wind into a very strong west wind, which lifted the locusts and drove them into the Red Sea; not a single locust was left in all the country of Egypt. But the Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he

become fine dust all over the land of Egypt, and shall cause festering boils on humans and animals throughout the whole land of Egypt.’ So they took soot from the kiln, and stood before Pharaoh, and Moses threw it in the air, and it caused festering boils on humans and animals. The magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils, for the boils afflicted the magicians as well as all the Egyptians. But the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he would not listen to them, just as the Lord had spoken to Moses.

Reflection

‘The Lord’ really is relentless!

We are now at plague number six of ten. As if bloody water, frogs, lice, flies (or wild animals depending on source), and pestilence would not be enough for you or I to ‘let God’s people go’!

At the end of the passage, we discover why these afflictions were not enough and why Pharaoh was so cold - because the Lord had hardened his heart’.

I kind of feel sorry for ‘The Lord’ throughout the telling of the story of Moses. To my mind, God gets written in as the ultimate baddie; even beyond Pharaoh. Pharaoh had no control over his reactions, it would seem, with God hardening his heart in the face of such calamity.

How can we know how Pharaoh would have reacted without the Lord’s interference?

We have to ask ourselves, why is the story told in this way?

Might it be to show us that God can be relentless for us?

God is persistent through Moses' words, through every increasing calamity and even through the hardness of Pharaoh’s heart. God just

won't let it go.

God seems like an angry dog with a bone, for the freedom, justice and release of the Israelite slaves. Without getting involved with the question of whether this is an historical event or an accurate retelling, or even if God was written-in by the history-teller doing things we find deplorable today, might we be being guided to learn that God is for us?

If we are brought low, on the edge of society or destroyed by it, in pain, crying for justice and hope – God is for us and will go above and beyond for us!

I pray you will hear this truth today, in all that you face.

Beware, however, if you are in the way of God's justice and love.

'The Lord' really is relentless!

Prayer

Loving God, may the truth of your persistence and devotion speak to us from years past. May it give us hope and peace. May it agitate us away from inequality and towards integrity. May we know deep in our hearts that you are for us and for our freedom. Amen

[Saturday 15th August The Plague of Hail](#)

The Rev'd Dr Susan Durber is Minister of Taunton United Reformed Church

Exodus 9: 13 - 35

Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Rise up early in the morning and present yourself before Pharaoh, and say to him, "Thus says the Lord, the God of the Hebrews: Let my people go, so that they may worship me. For this

tested again and again as was the faith of the Early Church which evangelised the world in a prophetic way. Such love for others would surely matter little if we are just atoms to be discarded at death and the faith that we currently share makes sense of a situation in which Jesus suffers with us.

Prayer:

Living God, we come in faith to worship you, yet we come conscious that our faith is so very weak, sinking without trace when trouble and danger threaten. Forgive us, and speak again of your loving purpose and sovereign power. Teach us that even in times of turmoil you are there, nothing finally able to overcome your will; that we can confidently put our trust in you, now and always. Amen

[Monday 17th August The Plague of Locusts](#)

The Rev'd Viv Henderson is Minister of Minehead URC & a mental health chaplain with Elysium Healthcare in Wellington

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, and that you may tell your children and grandchildren how I have made fools of the Egyptians and what signs I have done among them—so that you may know that I am the Lord.'

So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh, and said to him, 'Thus says the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, "How long will you refuse to humble yourself before me? Let my people go, so that they may worship me. For if you refuse to let my people go, tomorrow I will bring locusts into your country. They shall cover the surface of the land, so that no one will be able to see the land. They shall devour the last remnant left you after the hail, and they shall devour every tree of yours that grows in the field.

You call the wicket to account;
you champion the victim's cause;
you silence mortal taunts and threats;
Lord, heaven's eternal throne is yours.

Martin Leckebujsh © Kevin Mayhew Ltd 2006

You can hear v 4 sung here

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qovbmq51yvo>

Reflection

For aeons now humans have asked the same ultimate question "Why does God allow suffering?" Covid-19 has proved itself to be a disease of nightmares; indiscriminate and evading thus far the efforts of brilliant medical and scientific minds in their search for a vaccine or treatment. The first thirteen verses of Psalm 10 pose the same questions that tantalise us today. We ponder the plight of doctors and nurses in their relentless care of needy patients, the inability to visit loved ones in hospital or care homes, the loss of jobs and financial insecurity, and increased domestic abuse and crime. This is precisely why Richard Dawkins holds, "We are all atheists about most of the gods that societies have ever believed in. Some of us just go one god further."

As a Christian I believe that Jesus Christ's crucifixion and resurrection are historical facts. Death is not the end because Jesus rose from the dead. Consequently, God will be utterly fair and those people who have had the wrong end of injustice in this life will be ultimately compensated. Atheism has no such hope and its ideology flies against the basic human notion of justice. The Early Church was no stranger to pandemics, ultimately managing to weather the pandemic of Justinian 1st. (527-565 CE). In the Old Testament the nation of Israel recorded their years of desperation in the beauty, prayers and hymns of the Psalms, an example of which is this Psalm - (vv 10.14-18)

Our belief in resurrection and afterlife and the strength of our faith are

time I will send all my plagues upon you yourself, and upon your officials, and upon your people, so that you may know that there is no one like me in all the earth. For by now I could have stretched out my hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, and you would have been cut off from the earth. But this is why I have let you live: to show you my power, and to make my name resound through all the earth. You are still exalting yourself against my people, and will not let them go. Tomorrow at this time I will cause the heaviest hail to fall that has ever fallen in Egypt from the day it was founded until now. Send, therefore, and have your livestock and everything that you have in the open field brought to a secure place; every human or animal that is in the open field and is not brought under shelter will die when the hail comes down upon them." Those officials of Pharaoh who feared the word of the Lord hurried their slaves and livestock off to a secure place. Those who did not regard the word of the Lord left their slaves and livestock in the open field.

The Lord said to Moses, 'Stretch out your hand towards heaven so that hail may fall on the whole land of Egypt, on humans and animals and all the plants of the field in the land of Egypt.' Then Moses stretched out his staff towards heaven, and the Lord sent thunder and hail, and fire came down on the earth. And the Lord rained hail on the land of Egypt; there was hail with fire flashing continually in the midst of it, such heavy hail as had never fallen in all the land of Egypt since it became a nation. The hail struck down everything that was in the open field throughout all the land of Egypt, both human and animal; the hail also struck down all the plants of the field, and shattered every tree in the field. Only in the land of Goshen, where the Israelites were, there was no hail.

Then Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron, and said to them, 'This time I have sinned; the Lord is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong. Pray to the Lord! Enough of God's thunder and hail! I will let you go; you need stay no longer.' Moses said to him, 'As soon as I have gone out of the city, I will stretch out my hands to the Lord; the thunder will cease, and there will be no more hail, so that you may know that the earth is the Lord's. But as for you and your officials, I know that you do

not yet fear the Lord God.’ (Now the flax and the barley were ruined, for the barley was in the ear and the flax was in bud. But the wheat and the spelt were not ruined, for they are late in coming up.) So Moses left Pharaoh, went out of the city, and stretched out his hands to the Lord; then the thunder and the hail ceased, and the rain no longer poured down on the earth. But when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had ceased, he sinned once more and hardened his heart, he and his officials. So the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he would not let the Israelites go, just as the Lord had spoken through Moses.

Reflection

There is a traditional invitation to prayer, said often by Orthodox Christians, that goes thus; ‘For favourable weather, an abundance of the fruits of the earth and for temperate seasons, let us pray to the Lord.’

Many of us pray, or are asked to pray, for good weather. Even those who might think ourselves too sophisticated to pray like this often catch ourselves doing it, or being asked to do it, and sometimes by those for whom the weather really matters.

It would be lovely if the sun shone for that day at the seaside or that afternoon set aside for gardening. It would be wonderful if the weather could be favourable for the wedding, garden party or graveside burial service. But sometimes what the weather is like is a matter of life and death, for whole communities. And in times when the earth’s weather seems to be changing, and when even the temperate UK is beset by storms, prayers for good weather become more serious and compelling. Before the forces of storm and drought, of flood or forest fire, we find our powerlessness, our defencelessness and vulnerability, even our dependence. To be battered by hail or wind, to have crops fail or houses flood, to find your skin burned and in danger, or the cliffs crumbling beneath your feet is to know that you are in need.

To learn to pray this, very traditional, prayer well is to recognise that

what the weather does is something vital to our lives, to the lives of all with whom we share the earth, our common home. To pray it well is to pray for the good of all, and not just for ourselves. Prayed in common with all the people of God, it is not a selfish prayer for ‘a lovely day’, but a prayer for the thriving of all creation. It’s a prayer worth practising.

Prayer:

O God, we pray, in all places,
for weather that sustains life,
that provides for a fruitful harvest
and creates a gentle world.
Let sun shine, rain fall,
ice form and wind blow,
as the earth needs
and your people pray, Amen.

[Sunday 16th August Psalm 10](#)

The Rev’d Ian Gow, Minister, Eltham URC

When trouble looms
on every side,
when conflict dominates the day,
when life presents no easy path,
Lord, why do you seem far away?

The greed which never has enough,
the boasts of haughty insolence,
the words that threaten,
lie or curse,
Lord keep us from such arrogance.

From every plan
which harms the poor,
from schemes to victimise
the weak,
from those who snare the innocent,
Lord, your defence,
your help we seek.

Some think that you
are blind to sin;
some live as though
you were not there;
some treat your justice
with contempt;
Lord, surely you both see and care!