

# **St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore**

**Rev. Catherine Buchan**

## **ADVENT 2**

**6<sup>th</sup> Dec 2015**

Exodus 40:16-21, 34-38

Luke 22:14-20

During this Advent we are looking at the pattern of God's dealing with people, a pattern which is repeated several times in the Bible, each time with the reach of God's presence among people growing wider and wider. The Christmas story fits into this pattern as well, but we will get to that later in the month, and then we will see if having looked at the previous examples of God at work shows us anything new about Jesus coming into the world.

The pattern which we find repeated over and over is God intending to live among his people, being unable to because of their rebellion and returning in grace to do so at last. Each time that we meet it, the pattern is written larger, in ever-widening circles. It began with one couple and their rebellion, and God's return in grace was to a family, Abraham's family, which grew and grew and grew. It grew to the extent of Jacob having twelve sons (and one daughter), and all seemed set for things to continue as before.

But the pattern plunges into chaos when Joseph is taken to Egypt, sold by his brothers as a slave, which is hardly an action in line with God's goodness and his presence. The first rebellious chink appears. That action does save the family from famine, as it turns out, but it has the result of enslaving the whole family for generations, generations in which they grew and grew and became more like a people than a family. In Scottish terms we might now call them a clan. It may be because of their enslavement, because the Egyptians looked on them as lesser people, that their clan identity remained and they were not gradually absorbed into Egyptian life through intermarriage. But slavery is never really a blessing, and God remembers his covenant with Abraham, which was forged at the conclusion of the first appearance of his pattern of dealing with us. He remembers that covenant, he builds onwards from where he left off. He condemns the enslaving Egyptians and rescues his people through the amazing events of the Passover and through the leadership of Moses. He then gives the clan the law, to be the way of life for this rescued people.

One of the astonishing things about the story of the Exodus is that though he has given them directions – the law, encapsulated in the ten commandments - God also accompanies his people on their journey, and gives them instructions for the making of the Tabernacle, or "tent of meeting", where he will be seen to be present in their midst, where he will meet, more particularly, with Moses himself. It is a part of the pattern that God has always intended to be with his people, not remote from them.

While Moses is up the Mountain getting the directions for making this tent of meeting, the people rebel against God – again. They create the infamous golden calf. They pretend that this inanimate, tangible object is the god which brought them out of Egypt.

This is outright rebellion, this is turning their faces away from God, deliberately doing what they knew that they should not do. God is all set to destroy them, but, in a second astonishing part of the story, he yields to Moses' prayer to spare them, to forgive them and consents to go on with his people in their midst, despite their idolatry and rebellion. This morning we read the end of the story contained in the book of Exodus, and it concludes with a moment of pure grace as the Tabernacle is completed and the glory of Israel's God comes to fill it and to remain with them as they journey on to the promised land. For now, the people of Israel forgiven and redeemed are, as it were, the new humanity on their way to take possession of the new Eden.

The pattern has been completed once again. God has come to be with his people, leading them out of slavery. They have rebelled, but God has returned in grace to be with them.

Today we will be celebrating communion. As we gather around the Lord's table we remember that this meal, this tangible way of remembering Christ was inaugurated at a Passover celebration. It was inaugurated at a meal which was devised to help the people of Israel remember the cycle of grace which began with God looking on their enslavement in Egypt and coming to lead them out and journey with them into the promised land. The food eaten at that meal would include roast lamb, which was what was eaten the night that God came to devastate the Egyptians and fill them with awe and fear. The wine that was drunk would remind them of the lamb's blood painted on the lintels of the houses where the Israelites lived.

And Jesus told his friends that the Passover was to be fulfilled in the Kingdom of God. He linked that Kingdom which he had been proclaiming and enacting with the formative act of grace known as the Passover. He then changed the symbolism. We celebrate with bread, not lamb because Jesus, although he was the lamb of God, named as such by John the Baptist, was doing a new thing. It was rooted in the old, it was a continuation of the pattern, but it was new, a development. He called the cup the new covenant, the new agreement, which was represented by the wine but sealed by his blood.

All Jews knew that the Passover and the exodus were when God was living with his people, journeying with them, forgiving them and caring for them. Jesus was saying that this was still to be the pattern, but in a new way, a bigger way.

There are many names for the sacrament which we will participate in today. Some churches call it the sacrifice of the Mass, since in the breaking of the bread and the pouring of the wine it re-enacts the breaking of Jesus' body and the shedding of his blood. Some call it the Eucharist, the joyful gift. It certainly should be with joy that we come to the table, joy because God has made it possible, because in Jesus he has come in grace to be with us despite our rebellion. Some churches call it the breaking of the bread, for obvious reasons, and others the Lord's Supper. But while we might make use of many of these titles (not the Mass!) we usually call it the celebration of Holy Communion.

We meet around the table and when we do so we know that God is among us, that Jesus is among us and that it is the same thing. Communion is God and his people coming into union. We can do that only through the death and resurrection of Jesus, God's Son. We take the elements of this sacrament, and a sacrament is an outward

and visible sign of what is real and true in the hidden realm of God's Spirit. We take the bread and the wine and we do it because as it becomes a part of our bodies, so we know that we are united with God, that he is with us and we are with him. These are not just words. We are united with God through Christ, and God has allowed himself to be bound to us. It is a glorious truth.

After a lot of work, after chapters and chapters of the book of Exodus giving first precise directions then precise information about how these instructions were carried out the tabernacle was complete and all the furnishings were placed just as God had directed within it. These were furnishings which were all designed to remind people of the wonder that God should journey with them. And then, suddenly the glory of God filled the tabernacle and people saw it. It filled the tent and no one, not even Moses could enter it at first. God allowed people to see his presence with them in visible form, as cloud and as fire.

Later, once Moses was able to go into the tent to meet with God, the people also saw it in the face of Moses when he came out after spending time in God's presence. I hope it can also be seen in your faces when you have been spending time in God's presence. When you come out of church, for instance. I once heard a fellow-minister, who was obviously having a hard time, talking about "and all the people leave the church with long faces and full of complaints." Dreadful. At the time I contrasted his words with words which I used to hear fairly often from our late elder, Wendy Smith – remember Wendy? She used to come up to me and say "Ooh, Catherine, the Spirit is a-movin'!" I hope that when you have met with God your response is more in line with Wendy's – even if you wouldn't use her turn of phrase – than with the congregation of the poor minister. I hope that when we have met together around Christ's table then the glory of God might also be seen in the faces and lives of those who live in union with God, in communion with God. Amen.

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