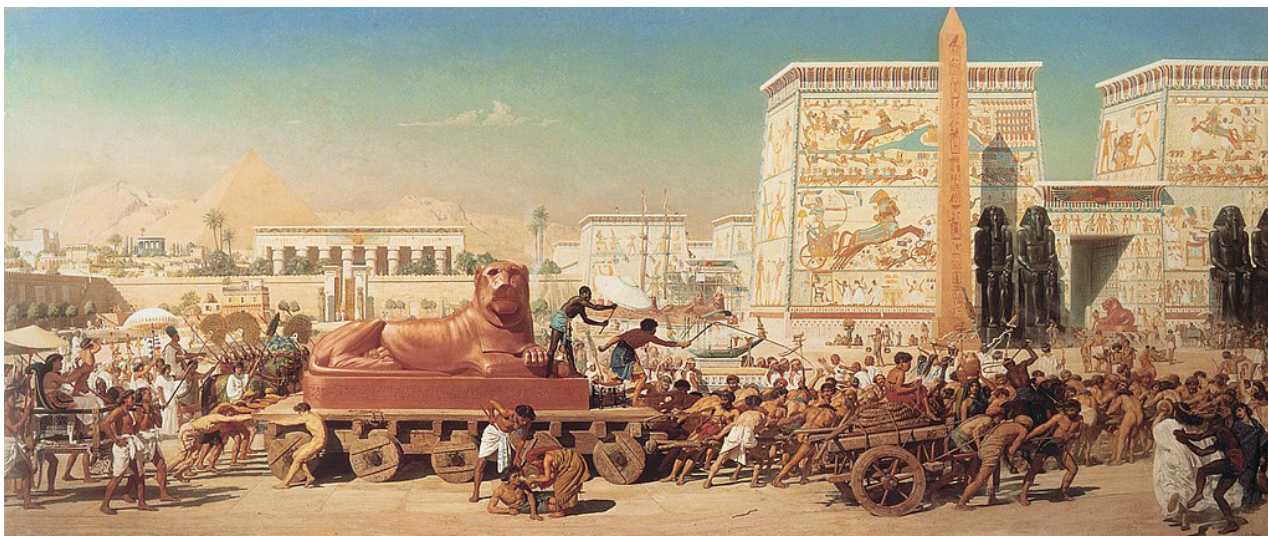


## Study 2 - Prisoners to Release



Edward Poynter, Israel in Egypt, 1867

### Say or sing together:

*He comes the prisoners to release,  
in Satan's bondage held;  
the gates of brass before him burst,  
the iron fetters yield.*

### Icebreaker:

Where, or when, in your life would you say you have experienced real freedom, either physically or spiritually?

*'It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.'* (Galatians 5:1)

## In Satan's bondage held

The word 'bondage' has changed, or expanded its meaning over the centuries, with English usage in the Middle Ages (c476-1440 A.D.) relating to those such as the tenant farmer, or villein, entirely subject to a lord or master to whom he paid dues and services in return for land. Most European peasants in the Middle Ages lived like this.

In Genesis, we find the Israelites travelling from Canaan to Egypt, with God telling Jacob that the experience would build them into a great nation. Several generations later, they found themselves under real bondage to an Egyptian Pharaoh, concerned their increasing presence would lead to trouble.

They endured forced labour under Egyptian slave masters, but even this had no effect on population size, so the Pharaoh ordered all first-born male Israelite babies to be slaughtered. The story, told in Exodus, continues with the woes of the Israelites, and introduces Moses, who, with God's help, will lead these oppressed people out of bondage and into a promised land.

In recent translations of the Bible, we don't find many examples of 'bondage', but we read about being burdened by 'a yoke of slavery' (Galatians 5:1) and becoming 'slaves of sin' (Romans 6:6-7) and this is the image behind the hymn-writer's words.

### Questions:

- Q) What kinds of things we encounter in life can become burdens that are difficult to shed?
- Q) Sin is not a word that is used much outside of a religious context. How would you explain it to a non-churchgoer?

## From slavery to so much

(Read John 8:31-36; Hebrews 2:14-15; Titus 2:11-14)

To Jesus, being 'in bondage' came in many forms, not just related to sinful behaviour (which can have a firm grip on so many), and in John's Gospel he's talking to Jews who were very much in bondage to the vast number of rules, laws, and even superstitions that governed everyday life, along with a teaching which left them blinded to the appearance of the Messiah.

So, Jesus acknowledges that there are Jews who are listening to him as disciples might with a teacher or rabbi, but to be real disciples they need to loosen the old shackles that bind them and embrace the life that he speaks of, letting that divine truth set them free.

Many today would express an interest in Jesus and his life, example, and teaching,

but be unwilling to accept the deeper truths about him and take the important step of faith to find that same freedom that Jesus talks about here.

The writer of Hebrews reminds us that Jesus shared our humanity, walked the paths that others trod and from that place of love and empathy can bring freedom from sin and even fear of death.

In his letter to Titus, Paul expands on this theme of release from bondage, and how through the grace of God we have the wisdom and knowledge of how to live out this freedom.

### Questions:

- Q) Jesus sees differences among those who truly follow, and those who simply listen to his words. How might this be relevant today and what can the Church do to address the issue?
- Q) Humility is a quality that writers of our scriptures saw and highlighted in Jesus' life. Within society, where do you see or not see humility, and how does that affect your own attitudes?

### Quotes:

*'Maybe Christmas, the Grinch thought, doesn't come from a store.'* (Dr. Seuss)

*'He who has not Christmas in his heart will never find it under a tree.'* (Roy L. Smith)

# The means of release

(Read John 13:1-9; 1 Peter 1:18-21; Hebrews 9:11-14)

John brings us to where Jesus recognised his time on earth was ending, and at this Passover Festival, he focused on what must shortly happen, with betrayal, trial, and sacrificial death. There is symbolism here, as this is a Jewish holiday that celebrated the exodus of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, and the saving of the first-born from death. A Passover Lamb would be sacrificed and eaten.

Jesus chooses this moment to take the place of a servant and wash the disciples' feet, a lesson in humility and service that would become an example for the apostles to imitate in their subsequent ministry. Peter objects, but to Jesus, this is symbolic of the spiritual cleansing that all need.

The apostle Peter became a leader in the church, latterly in Rome, and when he heard churches were experiencing persecution in other Roman provinces he wrote to them, encouraging faithfulness to Jesus. In this passage, he asks them to remember all they've been taught, for they know well that it was by 'the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect', that they found the new life that God promised. The NIV version uses the word 'redeemed' and



Ford Madox Brown, Jesus Washing Peter's Feet, c1854

this refers to slavery in ancient Rome, where freedom could only come after a period of service or by paying a price, either by the slave or someone else.

Hebrews brings us a theological explanation of the price that Jesus Christ paid for our freedom through the shedding of his blood, offered, says the writer, as a sacrifice to God for sin.

## Questions:

Q) We are in Advent, and yet it is difficult to ignore the journey that Jesus will make from a stable to the Cross, 'that he had come from God and was returning to God' (John 13:3). How can it help our understanding of Advent to consider the bigger picture?

Q) The Passover meal is full of significance for those eating it, the traditional Christmas meal perhaps more about overindulgence for those who can afford. Are there elements of our own Christmas celebrations can relate to our faith stories?

# The purpose of release

(Read Matthew 26:26-28; Ephesians 1:3-11; 2 Corinthians 5:13-21)

The Bible gives us the story of the Israelites' freedom from bondage in Egypt, and the continual love that God has shown to an often-disobedient people. The Passover meal speaks into that. Now Jesus introduces additional elements with the words 'this is my body' as he breaks bread, and 'this is my blood of the covenant' as he pours out the wine. The inference is of a sacrificial offering. As bread is broken, so will Jesus' body, and his blood will flow, just as with a Passover sacrifice.

Jesus' use of 'covenant' alludes to the Servant Song of Isaiah, where the chosen one becomes 'a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who

sit in darkness.' (Isaiah 42:6b-7). Jesus's sacrifice opened the gates so that we might welcome all into God's kingdom, experience his love and grace, and enter this covenant relationship.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians builds on this theme as he states that this was always God's plan, that through Jesus Christ all of creation might find unity and purpose, as sons and daughters of God's family on earth. Paul expands on this to the Corinthians as

he tells his readers that because of all that Jesus Christ has done for us, we are now 'Christ's ambassadors' with a ministry of reconciliation in the world.

## Questions:

Q) So, what are we to do with this knowledge of our own release from bondage?

Q) How would you explain the Church's ministry of reconciliation, in terms of the community in which your own fellowship meets for worship?

## Pause for prayer:

Pray for those heavily burdened with the load they carry daily, though anxiety, illness, abuse, overwork, or poverty, for example.