



SILVER STREET MISSION

Regular Sermon 2006

The first month

Exodus 12: 1 – 16

Rev. Peter R Green, Sunday evening, 01 Jan, 2006

JAY WROTE me an e-mail during the week in which he said, “I think its awesome how God is working in our church!” I agree! In 20 years, we have not seen what we have seen this year.

I began a ‘beginning of the year’ sermon on Wednesday afternoon; by Wednesday night I knew I had to change direction, because not only were we having the welcome into membership of Jay tonight, but now we were also having the baptism of Steve Tuatoka.

God is really at work. Just as he was at work among the Israelites nearly 4 000 years ago.

I believe that this passage is very important to what we are doing today with Steve, because Steve told me about how he understood baptism as his confirmation of his undertaking with God, and he wanted to do it on this special day, because he felt that he wanted to start the year in the right way. He wanted to be able to give the first fruits to Christ. He wanted to pay his tithe so that the rest would also be dedicated.

As the Israelites prepared to leave Egypt, God gave them strict instructions on how to celebrate the passover feast through the succeeding years, and, for nearly 4000 years, Israel has been doing as God instructed.

When God released Israel from Egypt, he confirmed his covenant with the Patriarchs; he confirmed his legal undertakings to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

This departure from Egypt was God’s great saving act towards his people.

And we confirm our place in God’s Covenant by baptism as a confession of saving faith. Israel sacrificed its lambs. Israel covered itself with the blood, and ate the bread and drank the wine; Christians are baptised, covered by the shed blood of Jesus, and share the bread and cup together to confirm the new covenant in Jesus’ blood.

Steve, it’s easy to read *Exodus* and, if you don’t think about it, you will miss an important fact. You get the impression from the Bible that over 1 000 000 people left Egypt and travelled all the way to Canaan.

That would be impossible.

A disciplined army of 1 000 000 marching with desert kits on a modern, well-constructed, level highway would stretch nearly 60 km. That’s from here to Warrimoo!

Only you’ve got old people, you’ve got babies, you’ve got people who could run miles and people who can hardly walk. You couldn’t manage that crowd, particularly when Pharaoh was chasing them. He’d have killed them before they reached the sea. This is why we should always think when we read the Bible.

The fact is that, in a sense, Israel was an evangelistic nation. They set out — several thousand of them, perhaps with a couple of hundred people who had chosen to join in with the Israelites while they were in Egypt — and others joined them along the way.

In fact, archaeological discoveries show that much of the conquest of Canaan was peaceful. The Bible tells of the battles where the conquest was not peaceful; but many people saw the

coming Israelites as liberators, and joined them. It's like how vast numbers of Italians saw the advancing Allied troops in World War II as liberators from their dictator, Benito Mussolini, and joined the Allies straight away.

That is why Israel needed circumcision and it needed the Passover.

These shared rituals were how people confirmed themselves as participants in Israel. They might have shared no ancestry with Abraham, Isaac or Jacob. They were still adopted into the Patriarchal tribe, just as we are even today through faith in Jesus.

Israel was an inclusive community. You were welcome to throw your lot in with them.

And, Steve, tonight you are declaring yourself. You are throwing your lot in with the community of Jesus.

You told me about some of the works that Jesus has done in your life, and I am glad.

But you need to confirm that you belong to the Lord who has done such mighty deeds. That is why we get baptised.

I became a believer on 8 July 1962 at an open air meeting in Goulburn Street in the city. It was at that point that I began the process of surrender to Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

I confirmed that decision by passing through the waters of baptism about 18 months later. I needed to make it public and declare that it was real, and the church needed to see that that was how I stood.

I needed to see for myself that my decision was real. I needed to hear myself declare where I stood with Jesus, too.

But, Steve, you have a different experience from mine, and, in a way, it is even more vital that you should declare your faith in this way.

There have been many Christian believers in my background, and they fall into four basic categories.

Some, like my great-grandfather Taylor, and like me, were converted through the preaching of the word and the testimony of believers. Sam Taylor was in a pub when the Wesleyans came and began preaching on the verandah. By the end of the sermon, he was a believer in Jesus and, at the end of his very long life, he still clearly declared his Methodist faith.

Others were deathbed conversions, like my father and his father. Both came to Christ when they were forced to stop and consider where they really stood with him, and both were only forced to stop when they knew they were dying.

One, my mother, was converted through a search of the scriptures at one of those crisis points in life, when she was very aware of her need for change.

And one, my grandfather Arnold Taylor, the son of the convert in the pub, was very like you, Steve.

Obviously, he grew up in a Christian family.

He said that, at one point in his life, he knew he was not a Christian, and, at another, he knew he was, but he could not pinpoint the date or time or circumstances.

And that's not uncommon if you grow up in a Christian family and among Christian people.

It has some advantages. You generally have a good grasp of the breadth of Christian concepts. You find many parts of Christian living come easily, because you have seen it modelled.

On the other hand, it is easy to have a superficial understanding, to assume that you know it because you have heard it so often, yet not really to understand.

The absolutely central thing in the Christian faith is Jesus. You need to hold very firmly to that

fact. You can speak in the languages of humans and of angels, you can experience direct guidance, you can have been the channel for many great miracles, but they are never the central thing.

When Jesus sent the 70 out to preach and heal the sick, he did not give them authority over evil spirits, but they came back full of enthusiasm. We read:

LK 10:17 The seventy-two returned with joy and said, “Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name.”

But Jesus didn’t want them to make a mistake.

¹⁸ He replied, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. ¹⁹ I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you. ²⁰ However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”

That’s always the bottom line. Is your name written in heaven?

The central facts of the gospel are very simple and easy to digest.

God loves you and wants you to experience the very best in life, because the Bible says,

God loved the world so much that he gave his only–begotten son, so that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

I have come so that they might have life, and have it more abundantly, said Jesus.

The fact that we don’t experience anything like what life has the potential to become is a result of sin — individual and collective sin.

I do what hurts you, I do what hurts me, you do what hurts me and you do what hurts you, and we all end up hurting.

As the Bible says,

All have sinned and come short of the glory of God.

And don’t get tied in knots over what is sin and what isn’t sin. The bottom line is that the first and greatest commandment is,

Hear, O Israel! The Lord your God, the Lord is one: love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

Absolutely no one does that! We all fail at the starting post. Add to that the fact that every thing we do, even the best of things, is tinged with radical self–interest, and we stand revealed as pretty unpleasant creatures.

It’s no wonder that the Bible tells us that

The wages of sin is death

and that

The soul that sins shall die.

Apart from God’s grace, we are all headed for hell at our own pace and by our own choice.

But God has intervened.

God commends his love to us in that, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us, as the Bible tells us.

He died, the just one for the unjust ones, to bring us to God.

God has acted for you and for me.

The blood that Jesus shed for me shall never lose its power. It reaches to the highest mountain, it descends to the deepest valley. It is eternal, it is once–for–all, it is all you and I need. It washes whiter than snow, and it gives life, for

...the life is in the blood.

So, Steve, you are here today because you know these facts, because you trust God’s great and precious promises.

You are here to confess your faith in Jesus, because, as the Bible says,

...if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. ¹¹ As the Scripture says, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame." ¹² For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile--the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

For everyone who repents and believes, there is a guarantee of salvation through Jesus.

Steve, you have come to declare that Jesus is Lord. You have come to confess that you believe that God has raised him from the dead. And you have already experienced some of the joys which come to us through the Holy Spirit who indwells us who trust in Jesus.

But let's take it all back to where we started. Steve, you told me how you understand baptism as confirmation of your undertaking with God. You told me you wanted to do it on this special day, because you want to start the year in the right way. You want to present the first fruits to Christ. In effect, you want to pay the tithe so that the rest will also be dedicated.

In other words, you are declaring yourself for Christ right from the beginning and preparing yourself to live with him and for him for the rest of your days and to eternity.

If this is what you are doing today, if you are declaring that Jesus is your Lord, because you believe that God has raised him from the dead, if you accept the gospel as it has been outlined today, then there is water here — what is to stop you from being baptised?

Let's go up to the water now.

When I return, I will want to speak briefly to everyone about following Jesus.

But, first things first — as Steve has amply reminded us tonight.

AFTER THE BAPTISM

Tonight you have all witnessed the baptism of our brother in Christ, Steve Tuatoka.

You have heard the gospel in outline, and the scriptures which confirm that message. You have heard of God's love for us despite our rebellion and sin. You have heard that sin deserves death, and you have heard how Jesus took that punishment upon his own shoulders so that we could be redeemed for God and set free from the penalty and power of sin.

And you have heard that God's great saving acts demand our response, how repentance and faith are required for salvation.

Tonight you have seen that this is more than theory. Tonight you have seen that this is something more than just an historical curiosity, which has now fallen into disuse.

Now you have seen Stephen doing exactly what the first believers did on the day of Pentecost, a few weeks after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Now you have seen that this is an everyday reality. You have been confronted by the need to respond to Jesus in a personal and realistic way.

So I appeal to you tonight to respond to Jesus. Don't go away without dealing with his call on your life.

If he has spoken to you tonight, respond to him. Invite him to be your Lord and Saviour, starting from this first day, going on forever.

If you know him already, but your faith has grown weak and cold, come back to him from today onwards.

Begin as you intend to go on.

Now is the day of God's acceptance; now is the day of salvation.

Do it now!

AMEN