

Now the Festival of Unleavened Bread, called the Passover, was approaching (Luke 22:1)

In 2007, I was preaching in North Yorkshire, and took the opportunity to visit a friend of mine

- It was an interesting and in many ways most unlikely friendship
- It lasted for 32 years, only ending when Katherine died on New Year's Eve 2011
- And when I went to visit her, it was the first time I had seen her for 31 years
- For she had been the domestic bursar, in charge of meals and housekeeping, at my hall of residence
- Which was my student home for the three years that I was student in Leicester
- In 2007 she told me, 'you were the most homesick student that I ever met'
- Perhaps that is why I remember some of the things that happened as I set out for Leicester
- The previous day was spent travelling as far as Birmingham
- But a few nights before that a friend and her family had hosted a farewell meal for me
- I don't remember the starter but the rest was lemon sole and baked Alaska
- It was not a very happy meal for me because all I could think about was the days that would follow
- It was, therefore, a celebration with mixed emotions

Sadly the parents of one of my teenage friends divorced meaning that my friend had to move a long way away

- That was rather tough for a teenager, to leave family, friends and school colleagues behind
- But a few days before the big move, my friend's mother threw a big party
- It was, to my great surprise, an event characterised by loud music and excessive drinking
- It's hard to be good company to people who are in various stages of drunkenness when stone cold sober
- But, looking back, it was a celebration with mixed emotions

One of the pivotal passages in the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) is the transfiguration

- It is a turning point in the ministry of Jesus who, from Luke 9:31, heads to Jerusalem for the last time
- His journey to Jerusalem is linked with his being taken up to heaven (Luke 9:51)
- It is because he was heading for Jerusalem that the Samaritans did not welcome him
- He went on teaching in the towns and villages on his way to Jerusalem (Luke 13:22)
- Threatened by Herod, Jesus went on, saying ‘surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!’ (Luke 13:33)
- and Jesus speaks with compassion for Jerusalem, despite the way it behaves (Luke 13:34)
- throughout the Gospel, Jesus predicted his death (Luke 18:31-34) – it would be at Jerusalem

In great detail, Luke records various incidents between the Mount of Transfiguration and the cross of Calvary

- all the Gospel writers include a narrative about the Last Supper and in this passage (Luke 22:1-13)
- Jesus deals with the practical preparations for the Last Supper, a celebration with mixed emotions
- At the transfiguration, two men, Moses and Elijah appeared in glorious splendour, talking with Jesus
- They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfilment at Jerusalem (Luke 9:30-31)
- The word that we translate ‘departure’ (*exodos*) is the same word that we use for ‘exodus’
- Literally it means ‘departure’ but ‘figuratively’ it means ‘death’
- For Jesus’ last journey to Jerusalem is also linked with his being taken up to heaven (Luke 9:51)
- we should not fail to notice that Jesus is speaking to Moses – the word ‘exodus’ is charged with meaning
- this exodus or deliverance of God’s people from Egypt was celebrated at the Feast of Passover
- Strictly speaking *the feast of Unleavened Bread* was distinct from *the Passover* (Num. 28:16f.)
- But the two occurred together and they could be regarded as the same festival
- So this passage is about:

I THE PLAN FOR THE PASSOVER

The Passover was the most important festival of Israel's year – the feast of the Passover was only one day

- But it was followed by, and connected with, the seven day festival of unleavened bread
- So that sometimes the one name served to describe both festivals
- perhaps a little like we now tend to roll Christmas and New Year into one
- The Passover recalled the last meal that the Hebrew people ate in Egypt
- this was when God 'passed over' the houses of the Hebrews but the first born of Egypt were slain
- The festival of unleavened bread recalled the first days of the journey out of Egypt
- this was bread of haste (all done in a hurry), no time for leaven to do its work I suppose

At the time of Jesus, a celebration recalling deliverance from a foreign oppressor was significant

- For the Jerusalem and Judea were occupied by the Romans – a celebration with mixed emotions
- But as the time for the celebration approached, Luke records the preparations in some detail
- Peter and John were Galileans and being visitors to the capital city were not really sure where to begin
- So Jesus gave them a sign of a man carrying a pitcher of water – which might not seem exceptional to us
- But was as likely as a man pushing a pram in a mining village – not done, that was for women
- In Judea, if a man had to carry water he would carry it in a skin and not in a pitcher
- It is this unlikely man that Peter and John must follow and find a room all set-up for them
- Again, Luke observation that the room is furnished seems like an insignificant detail to us
- but the reason is that they were to recline at table and eat at leisure
- when they were slaves on the run they were in a hurry, this was supposed to mark that they were free
- this meal was not eaten alone but in the company of 10 – 20 people

II THE PLAN OF DESTRUCTION

Passover was a time when political feelings, understandably, ran high

- God had delivered his people from Egypt; Jesus has been hailed by some as the Messiah
- Luke makes it very clear that Jesus was welcomed by the common people
- So much so that to arrest Jesus would have been politically very dangerous
- but the chief priests and teachers of the law were looking for a way to get rid of him
- this was not easy because of Jesus' popularity with the people, so open arrest was not really an option

It is a mark of the standing of Jesus that he is noticed by the chief priests – the religious leaders are against him

- his enemies have been scheming for a long time but their attempts to lynch him or arrest him failed
- The treachery of Judas provides the perfect solution, Luke is horrified that Judas was one of the Twelve
- Jesus' enemies are delighted and agree to give Judas money, which we know was 30 pieces of silver
- Judas will betray Jesus when there is no crowd present

There is a sense in which the chief priests and teachers of the law represent all that Israel has become

- not what it started out as being, they have a religious system, but cannot accept Jesus as Messiah
- And so a conflict arises, around the question of the identity of Jesus, who is he?
- it is not clear why Judas betrayed Jesus, for money does not seem to be the only motive
- the Bible simply says that Satan is ultimately behind it, it is in essence a spiritual battle
- but today the church presents a feeble challenge to the world that takes no notice
- the Satanic plan is only to destroy but the divine plan is:

III THE PLAN OF SALVATION

The calendar of what we call 'Holy Week' is notoriously difficult to compile

- the synoptic gospels have a different arrangement from the Fourth Gospel, John
- one particular difficulty is the day on which the Passover was sacrificed
- one possible solution is that there was an official and unofficial calendar operating

The Passover was celebrated after sundown, though by our reckoning this was the same day

- by Jewish reckoning the next day had begun
- in other words what we call Maundy Thursday evening and Good Friday morning and afternoon
- would in Jewish thought have been the same day

This Last Supper and Lord's Supper would be a sign in itself of all that was necessary to defeat Satan

- by the very way the Satan and his cohorts plan to do away with Jesus, Jesus will win the ultimate victory
- The prospect of all that was to come is very much a celebration with mixed emotion
- But through the death of Jesus on Calvary's cross, God's plan of salvation is fulfilled
- Jesus was tempted, yet obedient; crucified, yet risen; dead and buried, yet alive
- His death accomplished a personal victory but not only a personal victory, for the promise was fulfilled
- Jesus now inaugurated a new exodus, the Passover was Jesus himself
- The blood to cover his people was his own, now he leads in triumph and his people follow
- In the victory parade the captive enemy is led in chains, but his people are led to freedom
- This procession eclipses what we call Palm Sunday, this is the Messiah's glorious, victory parade

So often in Luke's Gospel, but all the more so in what follows, we are presented with a personal choice

- will we align ourselves with Jesus and his plan of salvation
- or with his enemies and those who would kill him, what I have called the plan of destruction
- All these decisions will ultimately be based on the two great questions, 'who is Jesus?'
- and 'what will I do because of what I believe about him?'
- and, as is often the case, it is the 'religious people and their leaders' that oppose Jesus

While I don't want to be misunderstood, one of the great challenges today is the 'respectability' of Christianity

- we are perceived as being so 'respectable', so 'genteel', so 'establishment' that we present no challenge
- the name 'Methodist' was originally an insult, levelled against some Oxford undergraduates
- committed to reading, prayer, regular church attendance and doing good in the community
- in the following century the Salvation Army were attacked by Skeleton Armies (street-gangs)
- because of their dramatic preaching and their attacks on the evils of alcohol abuse
- today's Christians will also be vilified if we will not endorse the views of the world at large
- when we question and challenge the way that society is going
- but personally and institutionally, we are bland – simply perceived as irrelevant, dull and boring
- but it is interesting to note that in the New Testament, the common people welcomed Jesus gladly
- while the powerful, and the religious people, chief priests and Pharisees opposed him, killed him
- in my first circuit, someone was criticising me behind my back for being always on about the same things
- You know Jesus, the Bible, worship, prayer, fellowship, witness, evangelism, mission and service
- To which my noble defender replied 'What do you expect him to be on about?'
- Who persecutes you, as together we proclaim God's plan of salvation?