

Freedom and the pillar of fire

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Exodus 13:17-22

The desire for freedom is very deep; it is God's gift. The slaves in Egypt wanted to be free.

Every one of us wants to be free from something or another. We all have something that ties and restricts us. We yearn for freedom from illness, debt, anxiety, bad memories, harsh experiences of the past—and from our own failures; freedom from the expectations placed on us and from the daily grind.

Exodus 13 reminds us of Israel's journey to freedom and God's part in it.

The LORD went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people. (Exod 13:21f.)

God went before them in power and light, always seen. God's direction was clear. The people needed to be certain of God's direction as their situation was dangerous and their path uncertain.

How can we go more deeply into personal freedom from fear, hurt or whatever else holds us back? What does this story tell us of God's provision for our freedom?

Firstly we see the guidance of God. God will guide the people whose dream for freedom has actually resulted in taking the first steps. That is true in the life of nations, it is true for the life of a church, and it is true for our personal life. We must choose, decide and walk; and on the journey we encounter the God as companion and power—the "cloud" by day and the "fire" by night!

Secondly, there is remembering. The Holy Spirit keeps the story of freedom alive. But we are human beings, not only with minds, but also with hearts and hands and feelings. Therefore we need tangible symbols to remind us of God's presence.

And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph who had required a solemn oath of the Israelites, saying, "God will surely take notice of you, and then you must carry my bones with you from here."

The Eucharist and Baptism are tangible symbols, but there are others.

Thirdly, God went in front of the people. It is interesting that our text describes God as being "in front" of us. Generally we think of God as being "above" us; and then it's easy and tempting to use God to validate what we think about down here. So we take our ideas and expect God to agree somehow. But if God is right in front of us, then God isn't hidden 'away up there'. God's presence causes us to think about moving, about going in God's direction, away from things as they are and where they are.

In the early part of the journey it was enough that God directed Moses where to march; Moses knew the country, and the road; but when they reached the wilderness, they needed a guide, and the Lord became their guide. Wesley says in his notes:

What a satisfaction to Moses and the pious Israelites, to be sure that they were under a divine conduct? They need not fear missing their way who were thus led, nor being lost who were thus directed; they need not fear being benighted, who were thus illuminated, nor being robbed, who were thus protected. And they who make the glory of God their

end, and the word of God their rule, the spirit of God the guide of their affections, and the providence of God the guide of their affairs, may be confident that the Lord goes before them, as truly is he went before Israel in the wilderness, though not so sensibly. They had sensible [that is material or tangible] effects of God's going before them in this pillar. For, it led them the way in that vast howling wilderness, in which there was no road, no track, no way—marks through which they had no guides. When they marched, this pillar went before them, at the rate that they could follow, and appointed the place of their encampment, as infinite Wisdom saw fit; which eased them from care, and secured them from danger, both in moving, and in resting. It sheltered them from the heat by day, which at sometimes of the year was extreme: And it gave them light by night when they had occasion for it.

1 Corinthians 10.2 says that the children of Israel were baptized unto Moses in the cloud. By coming under the cloud they signified putting themselves under the command of Moses. For us, the cloud also signifies the special guidance and protection that the church—those baptised into Christ—may experience. And so we journey together, each with a part in the journey of freedom. With the gift of freedom comes the invitation to claim what God has given. And the journey of freedom needs discipline and sometimes brings hardship. We are challenged to the journey of freedom! It may be a personal journey. Or it may be a journey where together we working for others so that they may be free.

Liberating God, hear our prayers for people who are oppressed today, as you heard the cries of your people enslaved in Egypt and raised up Moses to lead them to freedom.

Walk with people who are:

coming out of long-stay psychiatric hospitals unsure of their place and their welcome in the communities where they want to live;

coming out of prison after long sentences unsure of their ability to break the pattern of former behaviour and association;

coming out of the darkness after years of anguish, rejection and open hostility and learning not to be ashamed to be lesbian or gay;

coming through the bleakness of giving up drugs or alcohol unsure of their ability to face life without those supports;

coming through the waters of grief and loss unsure of their ability to live alone.

Walk with all who counsel and support them. Walk with all who were once enslaved on their journey to freedom.

Say to them through us, 'I will be your God and I will make you my people.'