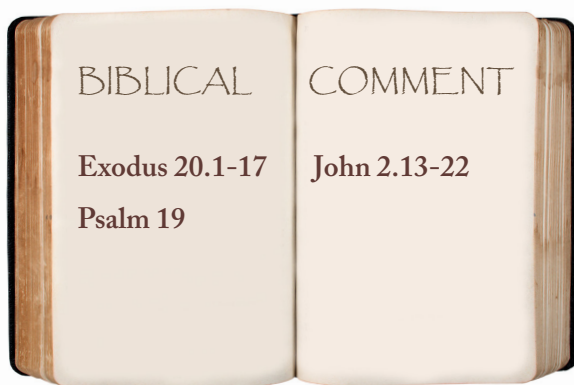




The Law revives us

WEEK 3: EGYPT

This week we walk and pray with the Christians of Egypt. There has been a Christian presence in Egypt since New Testament times and it is one of the largest in the Middle East region.



The Book of Exodus is of course the story of how the Jews came to leave Egypt and journey towards the land of promise. But it also tells how the Law (the Torah) was given by God, through Moses.

With the departure from captivity and oppression, and on the journey to wholeness and liberation, there is also an obligation. A critical aspect of the People of God's journey towards the land of promise is the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai. Without the Law the people are lost. Although sometimes our theology speaks of the Law as something that binds in a negative way, the Psalmist tells us 'the law of the Lord is perfect and revives the soul' (Psalm 19.7).

The Psalmist gives us an important clue as to the significance of this Law: the Law given by God is not like human law that binds and even oppresses but one that liberates and revives; it calls us to be a different sort of human community, which is founded upon justice and the worship of and faithfulness to the One God. This is in contrast to other sorts of communities and societies where priorities and values might be very different.

The Lenten journey through the wilderness therefore is one that is not aimless meandering, looking for spiritual succour from wherever we might find it, but is one that requires us to be led by the Holy Spirit, and the law of God.

In adversity (and the People of God in Exodus and Numbers certainly encounter that) the Law becomes the context by which the community lives: when they are tempted to act in ways that are unjust, the Law compels them to return to God, and when times are hard the Law gives them reassurance.

But how easy it is to corrupt the Law, to change the commandments into something that lays burdens upon people! Jesus' actions in the Temple, for example, are against those who only see the Law as a means of profit. But the aim of the Law of God is to set people free even under the burdens of hardship, threat and persecution. The Commandments of God nourish and sustain his people at a time when the rest of world is slow to respond to those crushed under the weight of militarism and power.

Who are the Christians of Egypt?

Egypt is home to the Copts, one of the world's oldest Christian communities dating back to the time of Christ. Although Egypt's Christian population is the largest in the Middle East, they are still in the minority. Coptic Christians (part of the Oriental Orthodox Church), account for about 10% of the population.

What's it like being a Christian in that context?

In Egypt the government does not recognise conversions from Islam to Christianity; certain interfaith marriages are not allowed either. This prevents marriages between converts to Christianity and those born in Christian communities, and also results in the children of Christian converts being classified as Muslims and given a Muslim education.

The government also requires permits for repairing churches or building new ones, which are often withheld. Over the past two years, there has been a spate of attacks against Christians and church buildings. Yet there are many vibrant community projects led by Christians in Egypt. One example is the Coptic community project in the middle of a Cairo slum. This is what one of our supporters wrote when she visited:

To say the traffic in Cairo is bad is an understatement. It is a nightmare, even on the highways and main streets. But branch off these into the poorer quarters and it becomes even worse. Getting to the Salaam Centre in Ezbet al Nakhel, one of the slums of Cairo, is a challenge in itself. This is where the Daughters of St Mary, a convent of Coptic Orthodox nuns, work with the Zabaleen, Cairo's mostly Christian rubbish collectors.

Most of the residents of Ezbet El Nakhel come from Upper Egypt and moved to this area to find work. Chronically overcrowded, around 6,000 garbage collectors now live here. Whole families - including the children - make a living by collecting the garbage from the homes of the people of Cairo and sorting it for recycling. They collect paper, plastic, and anything they can make use of. Many of them still use donkey carts to transport the garbage. The garbage collectors live in an isolated way because of their work, the bad smells and the fire and smoke produced by burning garbage.

Turning off the main road into this crowded, noisy, dusty area, after a huge struggle you reach an animal market where flocks of goats and sheep appear to be feeding on plastic bags - or the lucky ones on some green leaves. Everywhere there are donkeys pulling carts - thin,

exhausted-looking animals, so essential to the work of the garbage collectors. Turn into the heart of this slum area and you'll reach the Salaam Centre, situated in a narrow alley. This is an oasis of peace with a beautiful shaded garden.

The Sisters run several projects, including an ambitious project comprising literacy teaching, education for human rights, health and small income generation projects. 'The women are very creative', says Sister Maria, who is in charge at the convent. 'They come up with many ideas.'

In a neighbouring room there's an education project for the children of the garbage workers who go back to picking up rubbish as soon as the morning school has finished. These are children of mixed ages - and the training is a range of subjects, from basic literacy, to English and computers - which they love! The Sisters and volunteers try to keep them motivated - they are very malnourished, so they are given biscuits before they go to work.

In the Salaam Centre garden, women sit and drink something or enjoy a few quiet moments appreciating the peaceful atmosphere the Sisters have created before returning to the bustle and squalor outside.

Questions for discussion

1. What is your response to this week's Bible readings? How do you respond to the story from Egypt?
2. How might an Egyptian Christian read the story of the Exodus - Egypt as a 'land of oppression' and a 'land delivered from'?
3. Do you think that events in Egypt and the wider Middle East are having a detrimental impact on inter faith relations in your community?

Prayer

Loving God,
As we remember our brothers and sisters in Egypt,
We ask that you continue to inspire them to be
your people,
Faithful to the Gospel,
Revived by your Law,
And a witness to the self-giving love of God
That is made known in Christ Jesus.
Amen.