

Exodus 19:1-8,20:1-3 (1 Peter 2:9-12)

Why are you here? Good question to ask (what doing here, why did you come)

- Don't get me wrong, pleased you are here (or be on my own) – one of those awkward people, always thinking!
- Turn to neighbour and ask them 'why do you come to church?' (PAIRS TIME)

Might have been lots of reasons:

- Worship God (good answer – probably the best!)
- Learn about God (another good answer)
- Time to think and reflect
- Meet friends and be part of a community
- Place of mystery, away from ordinary world
- Habit or tradition

All valid answers: worth asking these questions more often in a world which largely rejects God, or at least behaves as if He isn't real – where attending church or being part of a Christian community is an unusual life choice now rather than the accepted norm. What does it mean to be part of the church? What are we doing here?

That question connects us with today's passage. In fact, at the heart of this passage is that very question which God's people must have been asking as they came to Mount Sinai 2 months after leaving Egypt – what are we doing here?

Simple look at a map makes this very obvious (**SLIDE**) – EXPLAIN Goshen here (area of Egypt where settled), then journey (recap likely crossing place), Marah, Elim, Rephidim. But promised land is here. Is that the route you would take?

So why are they here? Ch19 a hinge chapter for Exodus – Sinai mentioned in 18:5, but formally introduced here at start of ch19 READ v1-2 – clue that significant moment about to take place. And God about to answer that question for them. They're going to find out why they're here – and what he tells them I think is profoundly relevant for us too. *What does it mean for us to be the people of God?*

Use 3 phrases from text – get your bibles open p76-77: 'brought you to myself' v4, 'be my treasured possession' v5 and 'kingdom of priests' v6...

Brought you to myself v4 – READ v4 – beautiful phrase, quite striking, not just for imagery. If I was an Israelite, I might have said: 'But I thought the point was to bring me to the promised land?' Here God says : 'actually no, the primary reason for me rescuing you was to bring you to *myself*. I am your most important destination.'

Worth reflecting on this – this explains why had come all way down to Sinai, way off track. Yes, promised land was still part of plan, but actually God was going to meet them all directly first. Not just Moses this time, *whole* people are going to meet with God. QUOTE Motyer p191.

Literal meaning here – when God says ‘I rescued you and brought you to myself’, he means literally ‘I rescued you to bring you to meet with me, here on this mountain’. And of course that’s what he does, as he gives them the Law, starting with the 10 Commandments (had first of them in reading).

But deeper meaning here too. What has God been teaching the Israelites in last few months? To trust him, to know who He is, that He loves them, that He provides for them. God has been bringing them to himself for some time, teaching them who he is and being their God. Journey’s been unbelievably exciting, but also painful. There have been highs but also lows – terror of day before crossed Red Sea, fear of starvation and thirst in desert – through it all God has been bringing them to himself.

Something here for us too. Where has God brought you on your journey in life? You know, we might have so many answers for that: new home, new job, new calling. He might have brought you your family or brought you to this church. You might also have a strong sense that God is bringing you to our promised land, heaven. And these are all good answers, and of course heaven is our final destination.

But we must never forget that God’s primary purpose for our lives is to bring us to himself.

It means before we go anywhere else *we must come to him*. It also means that we see our whole lives as a *journey towards himself*, and to try and interpret where we find ourselves through that lens. There’s a mystery to things in the world and we need to be careful not to try and say ‘God made this happen’ about every life circumstance. We have our free will too, as do others who may or may not acknowledge God. But we also need to remember to ask this question when we face situations in life: how is God in this? Is he perhaps using this to bring us back to himself? *Because nothing, absolutely nothing, matters more.* It was the first lesson he had to teach the Israelites, and it is the first lesson for his people in any age.

Lots more I could say about this: how it affects what we pray for people who aren’t believers; how it affects the way we see heaven – but not time today. Will pick those up another time!

Be my treasured possession v5. God loves his people. He brings them to himself because he loves them. And so he longs to pour out all that love on them – or as he puts it, for them to be his treasured possession. But it brings us to that big theme here of covenant – of what it means for God to make a covenant with his people. See the word in v5 – mentioned several times already in bible, especially with Abraham. What is a covenant and how does it work? Promise based on love. Not a contract, tit-for-tat – unconditional commitment. Can break a covenant, but unlike a contract, a covenant can be patched up again because it is rooted in unconditional love. This one looks on the surface to be conditional v5 ‘if you obey me fully....’ – but God’s *love* unconditional, only his *blessing* conditional on obedience.

So it's not a free pass to an easy life. God rescued Israel *first*, he took the initiative – as he does with us, saving us through Jesus, making himself known to us – but there are consequences. A covenant does have 2 sides – God always fulfils his side, he is totally faithful. *Israel's* side is to obey God fully, or to use that phrase in v6, be a 'holy nation'. The word 'holy' means 'set apart', in other words we have a special calling, to live according to God's law. And that is simply a way of saying 'to live a life that pleases God,' to try and live out his instructions as revealed in the bible.

What's amazing is that even in the instructions God gives, he also includes instructions for how to put things right when we inevitably fail. The sacrificial system seems hard for us to grasp today, and of course Jesus has fulfilled it – but what we might choose to wonder at is how God in his grace knew we would mess up, and so he gave his people ways to sort things out as part of his law!

But note that in all of this, God's promise to his people is that if they are faithful, then 'of all peoples you will be my treasured possession.' God wants to pour out special blessings on his people. Our obedience is not so much to pacify a scary deity but as a response of love to his grace and mercy, and also in faith that our obedience will also bring further blessings from God.

You are his treasured possession. Do you really believe that? God loves you. He thinks you're special. You can't earn his love, so don't even try. I still meet people who talk the language of being good enough for God. Of course you aren't! None of us are. But he loves you anyway. Obedience is simply the outpouring of gratitude at what God has already done. And as we do that, God blesses us even more.

And if you've come today feeling bad at some way you've let God down – remember it's a covenant not a contract – it can be patched up because it's based on love not on legalities. Covenant word might sound technical or religious, but it's such a fundamental word. So many people, even Christians, think they can only relate to God on basis of contract, and once it's broken, it's broken. But it's a covenant: God still loves us, he's incredibly patient – there's always hope. If never really grasped that before, let that thought sink in and change your life.

Again could say more about what covenant thinking means for a marriage (other human covenant) or how covenant thinking would transform way we see other human relationships, including those in churches, but no time – some other day!

A kingdom of priests v6. Another odd phrase – what does it mean? (Apologies to You Are Here group – covered this last session. Reminder – benefits of midweek group!) Priest = go-between or mediator. Represents God to people and people to God. What mean here? Israel had another role. Relationship with God not just an internal affair – they were meant to be a light to the nations as well. Their priestly role was to represent God to the world, and in a sense the world to God in prayer. God's purpose was for Israel not just to enjoy his blessings, but to show what a relationship with him would be like, and for other nations to look at Israel and think – 'yeah, we want some of that! This Yahweh must be the real God, we'll follow him.'

Story of OT shows how they didn't live up to this – but that was always the plan. And it's still the plan. So Peter uses this same phrase in the other passage: we, the Church, are a 'royal priesthood' – royal because we serve the king. And priest, because we live out our lives in the world around us, representing God to the people around us, and bringing the people around us to God in prayer.

One of great misunderstandings of church is how we've let word 'priest' apply only to a special sort of person, to the leader. We're all priests. It's why I don't like to use the term. I can sort of accept I have a particular priestly role – a priest with a capital 'p'. But I don't like the word because of the misunderstandings it causes. Don't any of you think that you're not priests! Story of Bob (EXPAND).

A bigger role for church – it's not just about us. We're a kingdom of priests sent out to make a difference in the world, to bring others to know God's love, to show them what a real life with God looks like. Quote Temple – 'only institution...'

As I conclude, two applications. Firstly, here's 3 questions we need to ask about our church services and meetings – does it allow God to bring people to himself? Does it teach people and enable them to be God's treasured possession? And does it equip people to be priests in the world?

And secondly, let's return to where we started... So what are we doing here today? Here's 3 good reasons from the passage: to recognise that first and foremost God is bringing us to himself. We come to church to worship God for who he is, basically just to be with him, and also to keep reminding ourselves that being with Him is a better use of our time than anything else.

But we also come to remind ourselves that we are his treasured possession; that he has rescued us and in response we give our lives to him again, we live out the covenant God has made for us.

And finally we get equipped and fired up to be God's representatives, God's priests in the world. It's not just about us. Every church needs to keep telling itself that again and again. We can't keep this to ourselves. Frankly, God judges churches who do. May that not be us!

So as I close, what is God saying to you today? Which of these phrases do you need to hear?