

Thought for the day, 24 April

Adriaan van Klinken (All Hallows)

Readings: Exodus 18:1-12 and Colossians 3:12–4:1

One of my favourite negro-spirituals is the song “Go Down, Moses”. I specifically love the [version sung by the African American singer, Paul Robeson](#) (1898–1976). The deep baritone sound of his voice seems to echo the voice of God, instructing Moses to go to the Pharaoh (the Egyptian ruler) and tell him to let God’s people go.

God’s people, the Israelites, were held captive in Egypt, forced to work as slaves. Moses was called by God to lead them out of slavery and bring them to the promised land of freedom. African American slaves in the 19th century identified with the people of Israel, and derived hope from this biblical story.

The lyrics of the song are based on Exodus 8:1. Ten chapters later, Moses has fulfilled what God had called him to do: the Israelites have been rescued out of Egypt. Moses’ father in law, Jethro – when he learned what has happened – praises God, because it is “the Lord who rescued you from the hand of the Egyptians.”

For Jethro, as for Moses and the people of Israel, faith in God is born out of the experience of liberation – liberation from the powers that oppress us as human beings. God wants to see his people out of slavery; God wants his people to live in a land flowing with milk and honey. This experience of liberation from Egypt is at the heart of the Hebrew Bible and the Jewish faith.

This experience is also at the heart of our Christian faith. In the New Testament, Jesus becomes the new Moses, who liberates us from the forces of evil and death. That is what Easter is about.

It’s ironic, therefore, that today’s New Testament reading has an instruction that reads: “Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything.” Similarly, it instructs wives to submit to their husbands. True, the same text tells husbands to take care of their wives, and slave masters of their slaves. Yet the radical promise of liberation has disappeared. Instead, Paul instructs his readers to be compassionate, kind, humble, gentle and patience.

Today we see plenty of examples of these virtues: compassion with people affected by the disease; patience with lockdown measures; support of key workers. Wonderful! Yet I hope that the current situation also brings to the fore this radical vision of liberation for all. Especially so because this pandemic exposes the gross inequalities in our world. Let’s imagine a post COVID-19 world with abundance of life for all God’s people!