

LENT 2024

JOURNEY to FREEDOM

SATURDAY 9TH MARCH

READ: Exodus 13:11-16

‘Every firstborn male among your children you shall redeem.’ Exodus 13:13

“Cake or death?” That’s a pretty easy question. Anyone could answer that. “Cake or death?” “Eh, cake please.” “Very well! Give him cake! Now you! Cake or death?” “Uh, death, please. No, cake! Cake! Cake, sorry. Sorry...” “You said death first, uh-uh, death first!” “Well, I meant cake!” “Oh, all right. You’re lucky I’m Church of England!” So went Eddie Izzard’s famous ‘Cake or Death’ sketch in his 1998 tour, *Dress to Kill*. In context, the sketch pokes fun at extremist religion and playfully imagines the form that violent fundamentalism might take should it capture the Church of England, centred as the latter is (Izzard opines) on tea with the vicar, village fetes, and limp handshakes.

‘Cake or death?’ is a pretty easy question to answer. And so, in Exodus 13:11-16, is the question, ‘Redeem or death?’ While in the case of a firstling donkey, if it were weak or malformed one might opt for ‘or death,’ since the redemption price was a sheep (v.13), there was no ‘or death’ option for firstborn children: they must be redeemed – and the redemption price (set in Numbers 18) was five shekels. Redemption of the firstborn hearkens back to the Passover narrative (ch. 12), when in a mighty act of judgment-and-salvation, the Lord took to himself the firstborn of every family in the land of Egypt. Every firstborn faced the sentence of death, but the firstborn Hebrew children were redeemed by the blood of the Passover lamb. In perpetuity the Lord establishes, in today’s passage, the firstborn in every future Israelite generation (and their livestock) similarly belong to Him – as a sign of his ownership and rule of all His people.

Five shekels seems cheap to redeem a human life – it’s between £60 and £80-worth of silver in today’s market. But reading this text as Christian interpreters, we know that that price was not the real redemption (how could it be? – Hebrews 10:4), but a prophetic token in earnest of the true redemption-price to come later in Israel’s history: the blood of God’s own firstborn Son.

As we read this passage in Lent, let us look forward to celebrating the solemn feast of our redemption from sin and death, being humbled by the inordinate costliness of our ransom that God in Christ was pleased to pay; being stirred to remember not only in thought (‘an emblem on your forehead’ 13:16) but also in deed (‘a sign on your hand’ 13:16) that we are not our own, we were purchased at a price (1 Corinthians 6:19-20); and being challenged to proclaim boldly in our evangelism (with all gentleness and respect) that the choice before all people is ‘Christ or death.’ And once the Lenten fast is over, offer cake as well!

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