

A Kingdom of Priests - Exodus 19

Series: Out of Egypt - Exodus

Date: 2 August 2026, 8th Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's Battery Point

Texts: Exodus 19, (20:18-21), 1 Peter 2.9-12

Mission statements

One of the things that companies and organisations often do is develop a vision or mission statement or a motto. This is designed to capture something of who the organisation is and what their purpose is, what they are here to do. It's meant to shape everything in the organisation. Sometimes these can be pretty bland and boring. But sometimes they really fly. The motto for my parents mission Global Recordings Network was "faith comes by hearing". It's a quote from Romans 10.17 and it's their motto because their aim as a mission is to get the good news of Jesus to people in their own language by means of audio recordings. They started with vinyl records, then moved to cassettes and now they have an app. We've got a vision statement as the Anglican church in Tasmania. Does anyone know it? To be a church for Tasmania, making disciples of Jesus. And we've got one as St George's. We're the light on the Hill. We exist to see people drawn to the light of Christ, transformed by the light of Christ and sent out to shine the light of Christ. It can be a helpful thing to work out a personal vision statement or life motto as well.

I wonder if the people of Israel in the Old Testament had a mission statement? Today we're looking at Exodus 19. It's at the high point of the book where God himself comes down on Mt Sinai and meets with them. In that encounter God gives them an identity and a mission. And if there was ever a mission statement for Israel it's verse 6 where God says to them, "you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." This is who God called his old covenant people Israel to be and what he wanted them to do. And actually, it's what he calls his new covenant people, the church, to be today. That's what we're looking at today. In my newsletter I said we were going to look at chapter 20, the 10 commandments today as well, but that's too much so that will be our next sermon in Exodus. So let's dive in.

The Story so far

We're not going to understand this text unless we look at what has happened in the story so far. Back in Genesis 12 God called Abraham and gave him three promises: that he would become a great nation, that he would be given a land and that through his family all peoples on earth would be blessed. Fast forward hundreds of years and Abraham's descendants, the children of Israel are slaves in Egypt. They cried out to God in their suffering and God sent the prophet Moses to lead them out of slavery so that they might meet with him and worship

and serve him and not Pharaoh. God saved his people with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm through the plagues and then he brought them safely through the waters of the Red Sea and then he provided for his people with water from the rock and bread from heaven.

Now at last Israel has come to the foot of Mt Sinai, the very place where Moses himself first met God in the burning bush, back in chapter 3. Moses goes up the mountain and God says, this is what you're to the children of Israel:

"You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. ⁵ Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, ⁶ you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

Let's look at this more closely.

You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.

We've just summarised that story. And this was a fresh memory for the people of Israel. Just a few months earlier they had been slaves under the thumb of Pharaoh. But God had heard their cries, he had remembered his covenant with their ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, he had compassion on them and he had come down to rescue them. He personally had brought them to himself. God's promise and saving actions are the foundation of Israel's relationship with him and come before the obedience he will call them to, as we will see with the 10 commandments in chapter 20. The sequence in the story of Exodus shows us a fundamental theological truth: Grace proceeds Law. That is, the gift of God's law comes *after* the act of God's redemption. Obedience to God's law is our response to what God has done in graciously saving us. His saving work is the ground that makes our response possible. We are not saved because we obey. We obey because we're saved. Or to put it in New Testament language, "we love because he first loved us".¹

But even as I say that, you might ask, doesn't that go against what the next verse says?

Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.

There's a few steps to unpacking this. First, what is the covenant that God is talking about. The word covenant means something like an agreement or contract with responsibilities

¹ 1 John 4.19, cf. 4.11

and blessings detailed for keeping it, and curses for breaking it. It was a common feature of ancient near eastern life, particularly between kingdoms. The covenant God is speaking about here is the covenant he made with Abraham that we mentioned earlier, and how this has passed down through the generations to Israel now at Mt Sinai. Chapters 20-24 will outline the responsibilities Israel has in order to keep the covenant. But that initial promise to Abraham gives the purpose of the covenant: that through Abraham's family all people on earth will be blessed.

The point becomes clearer when we read the next sentence. The NIV translates the next word as “although”, but if you look at the footnote in your bible it gives an alternate translation as “for”, and this is the most common way to translate the Hebrew word *ki*. Going with “for” makes the whole thing make more sense:

Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession, *for* the whole earth is mine, and you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Keeping the covenant is NOT a condition for Israel's salvation. Rather it is the condition for their fulfilling of God's covenant purpose for them as a treasured possession - to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. That is to say, all the nations belong to God. But out of all the nations of earth, God has chosen the children of Israel for a special task. To be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. This is how they will accomplish the purpose of God's covenant with Abraham, to bring God's blessing to all the peoples on earth. This is Israel's mission statement. How will being a kingdom of priests and a holy nation accomplish this mission? Let's take each in turn.

A kingdom of priests

What is it that priests do in the Bible? Well in the Old Testament the priests served God by doing two things. First, they taught the people God's law.² Through teaching the priests would make God known to the people - his word, his ways, all that he had done. And when the priests failed to teach we read in the prophet Hosea, “there was no knowledge of God in the land.”³

Second, the priests would bring the sacrifices of the people to God. The sacrifices were a means of cleansing and atonement for sin and so they would restore the people to

² Cf. Leviticus 10.11, Deuteronomy 33.10

³ Hosea 4.1

relationship with God. The priests had access to the presence of God, and so through them the people could come acceptably to God.

So the priests brought God to the people through teaching and brought the people to God through sacrifice. And they also pronounced the blessing of God's name on the people in the wonderful words of the Aaronic blessing.⁴ They were servants of God, teachers of God's word, mediators between God and the people and those who brought God's blessing. If this is what priests were in Israel, then this was to be Israel's role in the world as a kingdom of priests - to serve God by bringing God to the nations and inviting the nations to come to God. We can see this in Psalm 67 which turns the priestly blessing into a prayer that the nations might come and praise God:

May God be gracious to us and bless us
and make his face shine on us –
so that your ways may be known on earth,
your salvation among all nations.
May the peoples praise you, God;
may all the peoples praise you.
May the nations be glad and sing for joy,
for you rule the peoples with equity
and guide the nations of the earth.

A holy nation

The second part of Israel's identity and mission was to be a Holy Nation. Just as priests were set apart, so Israel was to be set apart as a holy nation. Their holiness covered the whole of life. It meant not being like Egypt, where they had come from, or like Canaan, where they were going. So they would not worship the gods of the nations, but would worship Yahweh alone. Further, they would live by a distinct moral standard, different from the nations around them. Over the coming weeks we will see how the Law laid this out. We may be more familiar with the 10 commandments, but the whole legal code of the Torah covered things like social welfare, employment law and workers rights, disability, the administration of justice, slander, health and safety, neighbourly relations, racial equality, commercial integrity, ecological care, sexual justice.⁵ These laws were designed to create a just society where people could live in peace, *shalom*. Holiness meant Israel would be distinct, but also

⁴ The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face towards you and give you peace. Numbers 6.24-26

⁵ Eg. Leviticus 19, cf. Christopher J.H. Wright, *Exodus*, Zondervan, 2021: 343, Christopher Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, IVP, 2011

beautifully attractive to the nations, so that they might be drawn to the God who had saved them and find his blessing.

Being a kingdom of priests and a holy nation was Israel's mission statement. It was how they could bring God's blessing to the nations. And now we see what the *if* in verse 5 means. If they kept the covenant, then they would be able to accomplish their mission to be a blessing. Failure to keep the covenant would mean they were not a blessing. They were God's treasured possession, *for the sake of the nations*.

It's so interesting for me that the apostle Peter uses exactly this same language to tell us who we are and what our mission is as God's new covenant people, the church.

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

¹¹ Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. ¹² Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. ⁶

What is the difference between the Church and ancient Israel?

Well in the next verses in Exodus God comes down to meet with Israel on Sinai, in thunder and lightning and thick darkness and fire. But it's only Moses who can go up and meet with God. The people cannot go near or they will be destroyed. And when God speaks the people are terrified of his voice. It's literally the highpoint of Israel's experience with God in the Old Testament. And there's that tension. God is present, meeting with his people, but they cannot go near. There's a mediator who goes between them.

What's the difference between us and Israel? That day Israel promised, "We will do everything the Lord has said."⁷ But Israel failed in her calling. She did not keep the covenant God made with her. Instead of being a blessing to the nations, she broke the covenant and came under the curse for her sins and was cast out from God's presence.

⁶ 1 Peter 2.9-12

⁷ Exodus 19.8

But now Christ has come, the one true Israelite, who perfectly kept the covenant and who has brought God's blessing to the world. In him, God himself came down to be present with us. He himself is the mediator between us and God, uniting in his own person God and man. He is the Word of God, come in the flesh, revealing God to us. Through him we can draw near to God and not be destroyed. In him God has shown us mercy and rescued us from slavery to sin and the kingdom of darkness and brought us into his marvelous light. The true Israel is now all those who give their allegiance to Christ and are united to him, from every tribe and language and nation. Through Christ God has made us his own treasured possession and given us his Spirit, the holy fire of his presence, so that we can be a royal priesthood and a holy nation.

How can we be priests? That may sometimes be the title given to those in ordained ministry, but properly speaking this is for all of us. The whole earth is the Lord's, and so all we do can be an act of priestly service to him, at work, doing our studies, washing dishes, changing nappies, all to the praise of his glory.

We can bring God to those around us by sharing with them the great story of his saving grace and inviting them to meet him. We can bring the world and our neighbours to God through our prayers, asking God to act in their lives.

How can we be a holy nation? Through obeying God's word we can live such good lives that though those around us may accuse us of doing wrong, they will see out good deeds, empowered by the Spirit, shining with the light of his glory, that they may be drawn to Christ, and as they hear the message respond in faith and find life in his name to the praise our Father.

That is our identity and mission as the church - to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, to declare his praises to the nations and live good lives among our neighbours. That's how God's blessing flows through us to the world. You can be part of that. If you're part of the church, that's who you are. That's the dignity and worth that God places on your life. You are his treasured possession. And that's your mission as a child of God. Just like that has a particular flavour and shape for the Anglican Church in Tassie and for us as St George's as the Light on the Hill, you can live that out in your life as the person God has made you with all the gifts he has given you. And we do that together as God's people here at St George's. So will you hear this word to you today, like Israel heard God speaking on the mountain? Will you let this vision of being a kingdom of priests and holy nation shape who you are and how you live so that through you God can bless the world?