B Lent 4 pm   11th March 18
Place: St Mary's   Ex 6.2-13
Theme: Consequences and the Wrath of God
Rom 5.1-11

♦ We live in a world of consequences. Our real actions have real consequences. Unlike the virtual world, where you can die and start again any number of times, our actions can have serious and enduring consequences. This gives us a seriousness and dignity as human beings, God gives us the gift of freedom and the real consequences that go with it and make it meaningful. God gives us real power and in doing so takes us seriously as independent creatures, as persons in our own right. We are not avatars responding to events according to the settings of our programmer.

♦ Sadly, we use our power and make our choices careless of our creator and without sufficiently understanding what the consequences will be. We have done ever since Adam and Eve shared the fruit of the tree of knowledge. At the moment that they choose to ignore God and do what they want they also discover the life destroying consequences of that for themselves and the whole of creation, which is corrupted by their action.

♦ Because we see that our actions continue to have consequences we like to think that we are free agents. In reality, we are born into a world that is

already corrupted by sin and our choices are limited. This is what Paul means when he talks about the slavery of sin.

♦ The Hebrew slaves in our first reading were born into actual slavery. Their actions, choices and lives are severely curtailed by their enslavement to the Egyptians. Pharaoh had ruled that any boy born to them must be slaughtered and they are being driven hard by their task masters to work seven days a week making bricks without straw.

♦ It might seem that in contrast to the Hebrews Pharaoh is free. I have long pondered why it is that the book of Exodus talks about God hardening Pharaoh's heart after each of the first nine plagues when his first thought in response to them is free the people. Each time after the plague has hit, he considers freeing them and then changes his mind and continues to enslave them.

♦ I think that this hardening of Pharaoh's heart is not God making things much more difficult that they need to be, but rather represents that Pharaoh has no more freedom in this situation that the slaves do.

♦ It reminds me of the documentary I watched a few months ago about the man who set up the Silk Road, a web site for selling drugs on the dark web. He thought of himself as a great libertarian who was setting people free to enjoy the drugs they wanted to have without the

interference of the state and ensuring the quality of the product. Inevitably, given the enormous amounts of money he was making, those around him got greedy and someone seemed to have stolen a large amount of money from him. Despite the high ideals he had set for himself he ended up being drawn into violence and death and within a few years had ordered a murder before finally the authorities tracked him down and arrested him.

♦ If Pharaoh is to maintain his power, he has to slaughter the baby boys, he cannot allow his slaves to be set free. In many ways his choices are as limited in the system that he benefits from as the slaves who are oppressed by it.

♦ In talking about the slavery of Sin Paul wants us to recognise that we do not have the power to save ourselves. We are caught in a trap, stuck in a web, suffering the inevitable consequences of our own and other people's actions.

♦ How does God respond to this? God loves us, but God hates our sin. I have long felt uncomfortable with the idea of the Wrath of God. It cannot be avoided in our reading from Romans today, but how helpful it is to pair it with the reading from Exodus. How could a God of love not be angry with Pharaoh for slaughtering the baby boys of the Hebrews? How could a God of love not be angry with the evils of the slave trade and the millions who lost

their lives and were stolen from their communities. How could a God of love not be angry with Hitler and the death and concentration camps of Nazi Germany? How could a God of love not be angry with us for our many small acts of disobedience, carelessness and selfishness; for the arrogance to think that we can be good on our own and that we don't need God? For our folly and our pride when we think we know best?

♦ Wrath is the other side of love, it is the response to love betrayed, disregarded or rejected. We cannot have a God of love who does not hate our sin, hate what we do to one another, ourselves and him.

♦ It is what God does in response to that wrath that is important. He does not do what we do. He knows our weakness, blindness and folly, that we are all really like the Hebrew slaves who 'would not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and their cruel slavery.'

♦ God's response to his wrath and our sin is to come to us in his Son Jesus Christ, to share in our broken world, it's griefs and sorrows, and to take those griefs and sorrows on himself. He, the only one without sin, shows how inevitably the sin in the world cannot help but destroy what is good. He accepts all the consequences of the sins of the whole world in his love for us and willingly dies on the cross for our salvation. In

being obedient to God, never failing in his love for God or for us, he overcomes sin and death on the cross. That is why his blood saves us. He gives his life for us and takes away the sins of the world.

♦ So what do we need to do in the face of the brokenness of the world and the wrath of God? We need to accept that we cannot save ourselves, that whether we are a pharaoh or a slave we are stuck in a broken world and we contribute to its evil. We need to fully and deeply understand both the extent of our sin and God's wrath and that terrible though those are, God's love and grace are even greater and cannot be defeated by them. Then we discover that Christ's burden is light. That we don't have to try and save ourselves or anyone else, rather we need to simply learn to love and forgive others as we know ourselves to have been loved and forgiven.