

Exodus 14:19-31; Romans 6:1-4

17.09.17

### *The Life of the Baptized*

It is, without doubt, the core, foundational event in the history of the people of Israel: this extraordinary miracle that took place at the Red Sea hundreds of years before Christ. You could say that what happened there on that occasion launched the nation of Israel, while the memory of this incident in the centuries that followed profoundly shaped their identity.

You may recall how this people, the descendants of a nomad called Abraham, had migrated down to Egypt and there they had grown and flourished, becoming numerous and prosperous. After several generations, however, a hostile king, Pharaoh, had come to Egypt's throne and had oppressed them, enslaving and exploiting them with hard labour. But God had heard the cries of the slaves. God had been stirred by their suffering and had resolved to rescue them, to liberate them from Egypt's shackles, and God had commissioned Moses for the task. And now after, after a long series of confrontations between Moses and Pharaoh, Abraham's descendants are escaping, pursued through the wilderness by Pharaoh's armies. And there they are trapped. Behind them come the Egyptian troops who are determined to bring them back to slavery, and before them lies the sea. Well, what followed is a mystery, but one that was enshrined in Israel's memory and story. In this account the sea parts, the escaping slaves walk through upon dry land, the Egyptians follow, panic, turn back, but are drowned as the waters close over them. And so God triumphs and the slaves are freed.

What I want to do this morning with this passage is to consider for a little while just what Israel learnt about God from this incident. What did they discover about God? After all, we have to bear in mind that at this point this God was a stranger to this people. The centuries in which they would get to know God had not yet happened. Indeed, maybe this is why the slaves were reluctant to follow Moses and to leave Egypt at all. Earlier on in the chapter, as the Egyptian army is closing in on them, the escaping slaves round on Moses and rebuke him: 'was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?... Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians...' And you might say that the slaves should have been a bit more trusting. Should they not have been confident that God would deal with

Pharaoh's army and save them? But they hardly knew God at this point! What did they have to go on? Moses, after all, claimed to have had an encounter with God in the desert when he said that God's voice had spoken to him from a burning bush, assuring him that he had heard the slaves' cries and would deliver them. Well, would you believe that? Why should they trust an unknown God and his alleged servant, Moses? This whole incident of what we call the exodus, the escape from Egypt, was a steep learning curve for the slaves. They were being introduced for the first time to a character who would dominate their lives in the centuries to come, someone who would be a constant presence in their story. And I want to consider what these slaves learnt about this God through that experience of liberation.

The first thing they learnt was that this was a God who was faithful, a God who would stick by Israel and hold onto them. Think of it his way. Centuries before God had appeared to their ancestor Abraham and had promised him that, despite being old and childless, he would have descendants who God would bless, and who would be a blessing to the world. That was God's promise. And in time Abraham had a son, Isaac, and in time Isaac had a son, Jacob, and Jacob was also known as Israel and it was his descendants that were now trapped in slavery in Egypt. And this could have been the end of the story. At this point the descendants of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob could have vanished into the sands of history. Pharaoh, after all, had genocidal tendencies and would have eradicated them. But that God who appeared to Moses in the bush in the desert had identified himself as the God of Abraham, and Isaac and Jacob. And that was why he was liberating the slaves – because he was faithful to his ancient promise to bless and to preserve this people.

So the slaves learn about the faithfulness of God and they also learn about what we might call the sovereignty of God, the fact that God is supreme over every other power and authority and rule. So the build up to the escape from Egypt is a series of confrontations between Moses, representing the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and Pharaoh, this trumped-up, pumped up tyrant. And the God of Israel wins every time. Indeed the God of Israel toys with Pharaoh, manipulating and controlling him, hardening his heart and bending his will like a puppet. Such is the sovereignty of this God! And then comes the actual miracle and the parting of the waters. And what we have to understand is that these waters represent elemental powers of chaos and destruction. They represent massive forces beyond human control. Just think of the power of

wind and water revealed these past days in the United States and the Caribbean. There is America, the most technologically sophisticated nation on earth, capable of extraordinary ingenuity and innovation - and yet parts of it are humbled by a storm. It's overcome by a hurricane, its power cut off, its cities reduced to rubble. Here is nature dwarfing humankind. But this God, Israel's God, is Lord of the storm! God blows an east wind over the Red Sea to blow back the waters so that his people pass through, then returning to drown Pharaoh's forces. And no wonder that when Israel came to write its creation story it used these same images of water and wind. Recall Genesis 1:1 - 'in the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep while a wind from God swept over the waters...' Once again God rules over the deep, the watery forces of chaos, and there the wind of God hovers, ready to blow back the waters so that land may appear, and eventually life, and eventually human life. One again, in Genesis as in Exodus, in creating the world as in saving his people, on the shores of time as on the shores of the Red Sea, God is shown to be sovereign over every conceivable power or force or authority or throne.

These, then, were the core lessons of the exodus out of Egypt: this God is faithful, and this God is sovereign over all. And what Israel learned they Israel took with them into the journey of their life together. In time they were given a law to live by; and in time they were given a land to live in; and in time they became a nation and through it all, through all the changes each generation had to learn about these two things - about God's faithfulness and God's sovereignty, and what these meant in their time and context. How do God's faithfulness and God's sovereignty cash out in each new era and circumstance? And at times Israel found themselves questioning these things. In the centuries that followed they faced defeat and catastrophe and eventually exile in a foreign land and they had cause to question God's faithfulness. Or maybe God was not so sovereign and powerful after all. And they wrestled with these questions, and they found themselves drawn continually back to these events, these strange and mysterious happenings back there on the Red Sea shore, with Pharaoh behind them and the waters before them.

And so to us today, and those who have been baptised this morning. Like the children of Abraham of old and like all the baptised we have been called out of Egypt and through the waters. We have been released from

Pharaoh's grasp, freed from slavery and captivity and into a new life. As the Jewish poet and singer Leonard Cohen put it in one of his beautiful last songs:

I fled to the edge  
 Of the Mighty Sea of Sorrow  
 Pursued by the riders  
 Of a cruel and dark regime  
 But the waters parted  
 And my soul crossed over  
 Out of Egypt  
 Out of Pharaoh's dream

That's the testimony of the baptised! And it doesn't take much imagination to make this story of the exodus ours, for surely Egypt is everywhere - out there as well as in here, deep within us all. It doesn't take much imagination to discern Egypt, that place of captivity, out there in our wounded, suffering world - but also within our own conflicted selves. It doesn't take much imagination to identify Pharaoh, the oppressor, the tyrant, the agent of death, rampant in our world - but also within, lording it over us and holding us captive. The riders of that 'cruel and dark regime' are within and without and God's liberating summons out of Egypt is equally political and personal. And this is the life of the baptised, the same as the life of Israel: to discover what it means every day to live with a God who is faithful and who is Lord of all. And there are no blueprints, no templates - it's the task of the community of the baptised to help one another work it out. And as with Israel there are times when we question God's faithfulness, times when we may feel God's absence - sometimes, as with someone I spoke to this week, when we are going through the most trying and testing of circumstances. Like God's people Israel we experience exile and we feel forsaken. And at other times we question God's sovereignty: if God is so all-powerful then why cancer, or why earthquakes, or why hurricanes and devastation and destruction, and why more tyrants, why more Pharaohs ruling the world? And we as the community of the baptised must try to discern God's faithfulness and sovereignty when they are contested like this. As the community of the baptised we walk together, with one another, through the waters. And of course we are aided and strengthened by the fact that, unlike the slaves who knew so little of God, so much more of this God has been revealed since those Red Sea days. To them this God was a stranger,

while to us God's faithfulness and sovereignty have been revealed fully and finally in Jesus Christ

What a great passage for today as we celebrate these baptisms in the life of our church. God has led you out through the waters of baptism. Egypt is behind you. Pharaoh has been humbled. The riders of his cruel and dark regime lie scattered around you. Your soul has passed over. God is faithful and Jesus is Lord. Let us live together the life of the baptised – to the praise and glory of God. Amen.