

Pentecost 17
14/9/2008

Mark the Evangelist

Exodus 14:19 - 31
Exodus 15:1 - 11
Romans 14:1 - 12
Matthew 18:21 - 35

The Exodus and the call to new life

The Exodus is one of the epic stories in the world and it has inspired or affected many others. John Bunyan drew on its themes in *Pilgrim's Progress*. The Boers of South Africa claimed the Exodus as a defining story. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* has some resonance with the Exodus, and we know well how, in the face of slavery this narrative provided African American people with hope and strength: "*O Mary don't your weep don't you mourn... Pharaoh's army got drowned, O Mary don't you weep.*"

At the end of my first year as a theological student I went home to work on the wheat bins. It was a quiet siding, there was time to read and during that summer I discovered the Exodus. My home church asked me to take a service and I preached on this story as a call to move forward into life. It wasn't popular because they heard it as a call to change. It was a watershed, and in many ways reflected my own journey of leaving an old way of life and living my way into a new one.

The escape at the Red Sea is a core story for Jew and Christians. In passing through the waters the people of Israel regained their identity and were set free to be God's people. We must not underestimate the extent to which this story still provides a basis for hope in the future and a frame of reference through which the people read and understand their relationship with God.

The core belief arising from the Exodus was that it was no fluke of nature that saved Israel. It was God who delivered them. Even though Moses was co-opted to be God's agent, the power of God is the source of what happens throughout. God answered the cries of the people God divided the sea and clogged the wheels of the Egyptian chariots so that they were routed when the water rolled back. And it is God who is praised when in jubilation Miriam (which is another name for Mary) leads the people in song: *I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously, the horse and the rider he has thrown into the sea.*

The Egyptians lying dead on the shore remains a troubling aspect for us, but while this story presupposes an event it transcends history, offering a message of cosmic and mythological proportions. The Cloud and Fire are symbols for God: present yet mysterious. (We have already met the fire in the burning bush, and we will meet the cloud again when Moses ascends the Holy Mountain to be given the Law.) This impenetrable and incomprehensible power intentionally comes between Israel and its enemies. Egypt is a symbol for all that opposes God: whatever is chaotic, oppressive and enslaving, including what seems reasonable: legitimate power structures that do not act justly.

The cosmic proportions do not end here. Consider how at the creation a mighty wind swept over the waters and God spoke. Light shone to repel the darkness, the waters of chaos receded to create dry ground, and life was called forth where none had existed. The graphic captures the point that the power of God rules over the waters, and the people pass through on dry ground. Exodus is different in that life already existed but now, on the basis of grace, a group of refugees trapped by an evil power were recreated: transformed into citizens of earth and claimed as God's people. The freedom and life they received had nothing to do with their cleverness or strength. Left to their own devices they would have been swallowed up like Jonah in the whale. Their salvation was gifted to them: the one named I AM WHO CAUSES TO BE the Holy One of Israel chose to reach out to the people in mercy and walk with them in a mission of liberation.

For Christians the Exodus story is foundational because it connects with another event that has mythological and cosmic implications. It provides the pattern for Easter, our core story in which Jesus is the new Moses. At Easter Jesus goes forward into a new exodus: he enters the chaos and darkness of death, and in the Resurrection leads the people of earth over into a new life of freedom from all that keeps them from God. This is what is meant by the forgiveness of sins. And this is the basis for the sacrament of Baptism in which we pass through the water and, in the name of God, receive our identity and calling as Christians.

Was there a day or a period of time when we entered into a struggle, which changed our life? Did we come to a crossing point, a place where we have had to face a decision - shall we go forward or back, and the choice involved dramatic losses and life giving consequences? Who for us represents the dark, threatening forces of Pharaoh's oppressive regime dedicated to preventing our entry into freedom? What are the fearful armies that pursue us, before whom we fear for our life? What was it that we believed would engulf us and sweep us away? Who filled the role of Moses for us, the visionary who reminded the people of God's promise of life? And who has functioned as the stern leader, challenging us to move forward, despite the discomfort and fear of what lay ahead? And where did we find that we were graciously supported and protected in unexpected and unforeseen ways so that the things that sought to rob us of life were conquered or turned away?

The Exodus is told and retold - for one reason only. To recall God's work for the people by the shores of the Red Sea and to remind them to give up their desire for comfort and security and risk the journey of faith. We continue to read this story because we believe the God of Israel is the God of Jesus Christ, and see in him a similar pattern of grace and mercy extended towards us. The essence of this is made clear in the Gospel parable for today where the Kingdom, the opportunity to live in the sovereignty of God, is pictured as an unlimited and unquantifiable gift that cannot be calculated. If that is so, the only possible response is to give up one's own agenda and allow this gift to renew the disposition of our heart, so that we begin to live a new life. This is akin to taking up our cross. It means giving up the self-centredness and the power games that are so much a part and parcel of the ethos of our time. It means making the call of Christ the first thing. And it means living in the grace he gives in such a way that we offer to others the same freedom and regard that we have received.

As a congregation a cracking church that has the potential to threaten our future by pushing us off focus and using all our resources surrounds us. And we live in a cultural context that no longer knows what we stand for. Yet within these earthen vessels, these walls and these lives, rests an incalculable richness. We know of the One who has the resources to liberate, renew, and transform. This is the one who has called us to be his people, and to live in the hope he gives, even when all that is negative in life threatens to overwhelm and engulf us. So may we renew our trust in this calling, allow ourselves to be fed once more by him who comes to us even now, in Word and Sacrament, and go forth to share with the world the life he gives. Amen.