

**The LORD said, 'For I will pass through the land of Egypt this night, and will smite all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgement: I am the LORD.**

*Exodus 12: 12*

The Exodus is the greatest single story in Jewish history. It is the initiating and defining event in biblical faith and it is the backdrop for the entire Christian narrative. Walter Bruggemann, easily one of the most respected Old Testament scholars in the world, says of the exodus that 'almost no compelling evidence for its historicity exists.' Yet, as a memory kept alive through Jewish literature and liturgy, it is central to biblical faith. All that happens in Jewish history, all the events that befall the community, are interpreted in light of the exodus event. The Book of Genesis, the story of creation and early human history, is written after and in light of the exodus event and the exodus is the backdrop for the life of Jesus. This morning we focus in on one particular part of the exodus, the Passover.

For almost five hundred years, the Israelites were the slave people of the Egyptians. Finally, in the thirteenth century BCE, a man was born who would change the course of history, not only for his family or people in his own time but for the whole human race forever. Moses, a Hebrew slave and/or royal son of the Pharaoh, has a vision, hears the voice of Yahweh and sets about the liberation of an oppressed people.

Desmond Tutu said:

How frequently I was in South Africa, but also in other parts of our African continent, to speak about the God who had encountered Moses at the burning

bush – the one who heard the cry of the oppressed rabble of slaves, who saw their suffering, who knew and who would come down to deliver them. Those were words that resonated among our people at mass funerals after yet another massacre by the security forces.....

A story, the historicity of which cannot be proven, was recited in a different continent almost three and a half thousand years after the event to the oppressed enslaved people of South Africa – and that story resonated. It inspired hope. The enslaved people of South Africa heard the words of Yahweh, ‘I have seen the affliction of my people and I am come down to deliver them.’ On behalf of what Tutu calls a rabble of ‘undeserving, stiff-necked slaves’, Moses goes to Rameses and asks for their freedom. The Pharaoh refuses and there follows the story of ten plagues, of which the Passover is the final one: there is blood in the Nile, frogs, gnats, flies, the death of the animals, boils, hail, locusts, darkness and, finally, the death of the firstborn, ‘man and beast’. Only with the death of Pharaoh’s oldest son, Egypt’s heir, does Ramesses let the people go. What on earth are we to make of the stories of the plagues today? Are we really required to believe that Yahweh, the God of Israel, the creator of the universe, the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, our God, the one we come here every week to worship, sent ten plagues upon the Pharaoh and his people – blood, frogs, gnats, locusts, darkness, the firstborn and all the others? Is this how God, our Absolute Reality, deals with His sentient creatures? Are the plagues the handy work of a tribal interventionist god?

It will come as no surprise to you that I believe that the exodus story needs to be read with a great deal of care. Robert Davidson, an Old Testament scholar and former Moderator, likes to say that ‘In the hands of the ignorant the Bible will confirm their

every prejudice.’ Like all events in the Bible, the exodus event is history, theology and story or myth all wrapped up together. Could it be that the plagues were all naturally occurring phenomena and that even the death of the firstborn throughout Egypt was an event which had an explanation other than the brutal intervention of a tribal god? The Egyptologist Flinders Petrie observed in 1911 that ‘The order of the plagues was the natural order of such troubles....’ The plagues, then, were a natural phenomena and the death of the firstborn, perhaps, can be explained in similar, non-supernatural, terms. I shall not comment on them all but let me begin with the blood.

In Exodus, we read, ‘Moses struck the water of the Nile, and all the water was turned into blood. The fish of the Nile died, and the river smelled so bad that the Egyptians could not drink its water.’ If this were the only time that the Nile had turned into blood, then it might be a miracle. But it was not. Three hundred years before the birth of Moses the Nile was said to have turned into blood. An ancient Egyptian text reads, ‘Lo, the Nile overflows yet none plough for it....Lo, the river is blood. As one drinks of it one shrinks from the people and thirsts for water.’ ‘Red tides’ in salt water seas are not uncommon. It is caused by the accumulation of a certain algae with red pigment. In 1998, the following article appeared in the Independent:

It looks like a biblical plague. The waters around Hong Kong have succumbed to a scourge known as the red tide, which is gobbling up marine life. This lethal build-up of toxic organisms has occurred before but never with the vengeance with which it has hit Hong Kong in recent weeks. Sham Cunhung, Assistant Director of Agriculture and Fisheries, said yesterday that it had wiped out 150,000 tons of fish, half of Hong Kong’s fish stock, in just four weeks.

The Nile may have gone red in the time of Moses, but was it the work of a tribal, interventionist god? The science of what happened is marginally more complicated than I have time to deal with here but the central point holds: the blood was red toxic algae. The first six plagues occurred in a biological sequence; the seventh, hail, attracted the eighth, the locusts; and the ninth, the darkness, a sand storm, happened at the correct time of year: *khamzin*, sandstorms, are common in spring and can last up to three days. I hope that you are finding this hugely interesting: I am! What of the tenth plague, the death of the firstborn?

Unlike the first nine, the tenth plague is not a naturally occurring phenomenon. In the Book of Exodus, we read, ‘At midnight the Lord struck down all the firstborn in Egypt, from the firstborn of the Pharaoh, who sat on the throne, to the firstborn of the prisoner, who was in the dungeon, and the firstborn of all the livestock as well.’ The LORD commanded the Hebrew people to spread the blood of a lamb around the doors of their homes so that when the LORD came to smite the Egyptians He would, if He saw the blood, would pass over that home. ‘At midnight the Lord struck down all the firstborn of Egypt.’

There is a scholarly, scientific view which states that it is significant that the hail preceded the locusts. The hail would have left whatever remained of the harvest in a very wet state. The locusts will have eaten much of the crops and the remainder would not only be sodden but also contaminated with locust droppings. The sodden, contaminated crops were held in grain stores which, because of the sandstorms, were

sealed. Mycotoxins can be deadly. In Britain, in 1961, over 100,000 turkeys died after being fed mouldy peanut meal contaminated by mycotoxins. Once the sandstorms had gone, the grain stores opened, their contents meagre to begin with, it would be the firstborn males, the eldest, those culturally most important, who would be fed first. Internal bleeding would bring a rapid and sudden death. Are the scholars right?

Why were the Israelites, the Hebrews, not similarly affected? Well, storms and locusts and frogs and hail can all be said to be localised phenomena. The Hebrew people, the slaves, did not live among the Egyptians; they did not live on the best land. They lived in Goshen which was close enough for them to walk to work each day but out of sight of where the Pharaoh lived.

So much for the science: what can we say about God? As people of the twenty-first century, we are people of science whether we are professional scientists or not. We have a real problem with a God who intervenes in this tribal fashion and we have a morality problem with a God who is seemingly brutal to one people while favouring another. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks describes the ten plagues as the nearest the Bible comes to a Greek tragedy. The Pharaoh's obstinacy rises to tragic proportions with devastating consequences for his own people. In closing his ears to Moses, Pharaoh can no longer hear the anguish of his own people. Of the Nile turning red and the other naturally occurring plagues, Rabbi Sacks asks which view of 'miracle' do we support – a suspension of the laws of nature, or an event which occurs within nature

but by happening when and to whom it does, reveals a providential pattern in history’?

The Rabbi wishes us to accept that the plagues were naturally occurring events but asks us to understand that the timing and manner of their occurrence, when and to whom, reveals the purposes and plan of God. This is what theologians mean when they talk of providence: God will provide and things will work out, God’s hand is invisibly yet perceptively guiding history. Sacks explains that the plague of darkness, the sandstorm, is an historical event but also theology. The Egyptians worshipped the sun and Moses calling forth a sandstorm, bringing darkness over the land, means that Yahweh is more powerful than the Egyptian god. What can we comfortably claim about God in all of this?

The poet and priest, John Donne, wrote, ‘The world is the theatre that represents God, and every where every man may, nay must see him.’ Faith means to have a sensibility towards God. It is to see Him with the heart out there in the world. It is to feel the warmth of His hand upon our own lives. The ancient Hebrew people read into or saw in these naturally occurring events the providence of God. It is not that in these astonishing events alone they saw the hand of God, but that in all of life they looked for God. ‘The world is the theatre that represents God, and everywhere every one must see Him.’ In our time, we must not allow science, philosophy and wealthy modern living to push us towards suspicion and agnosticism. Perhaps the lesson which lies at the heart of the Exodus story is not so much the ten plagues, the final escape or even Moses himself. Perhaps the point, after all, is the Pharaoh: he closed his eyes and ears to God. He therefore was never going to believe: he was never

going to see. In turning his back on God, the Pharaoh destroyed his own people. Faith does not mean that we need to swallow whole fantastic stories about supernatural miracles, great interruptions into the natural laws or a tribal god who smites the firstborn, young and old. Faith means living life in a whole sense, bringing together our reason, our science, our philosophy, the feelings of our hearts and our awareness of the Spirit which unites all things. I would be more sceptical about the providential hand of God than many but I passionately believe in the Spirit that unites all things. The Hebrew people believed in God and looked for Him in their lives. They felt His hand upon their lives and, though our theology maybe different from theirs, constant seeking and wrestling with God is instructive for us today.

Amen.