

Sermon

Sunday 14th September, 2008

Lessons

Exodus 14: 19 - 31

Matthew 18: 21 – 35

The Exodus is one of the greatest stories in history. In a thousand years it will still be one of the greatest stories in history. For five hundred years the Hebrew people were the slaves of the Egyptians. Then, in the thirteenth century BCE, Moses, one man, challenged one of the most powerful men in the world at that time, the Pharaoh. With the Pharaoh's refusal to free the Hebrew people, ten plagues came upon the Egyptians culminating in the death of the firstborn. It is with the death of the Pharaoh's son, Egypt's heir, that the Hebrews are set free. As they make their way across the desert land, they are led by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. William Williams wrote:

Open now the crystal fountain
whence the healing stream doth flow;
let the fire and cloudy pillar
lead me all my journey through:
strong Deliverer, strong Deliverer,
be thou still my strength and shield.

‘Let the fire and cloudy pillar lead me all my journey through.’ Listen to the account in the King James Version of the verses we heard read this morning:

And the angel of God, which went before the camp of Israel, removed and went behind them; and the pillar of the cloud went from before their face, and stood behind them:

And it came between the camp of the Egyptians and the camp of Israel; and it was a cloud and darkness to them, but it gave light by night to these: so that the one came not near the other all the night.

The pillar of cloud led the people of Israel by day and by night the pillar of light, the pillar of fire, kept them safe. The pillar of fire led the people of Israel to the Red Sea and there Moses struck the water, the sea parted and the Israelites crossed on dry ground. Moses struck the water a second time, the water flooded back and the Egyptians drowned. Again, from the Authorised Version, we read:

And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the LORD caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind all that night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided.

And the children of Israel went into the midst of the sea upon the dry ground: and the waters were a wall unto them on their right hand, and on their left.

And Moses stretched forth his hand over the sea, and the sea returned to his strength when the morning appeared; and the Egyptians fled against it; and the LORD overthrew the Egyptians in the midst of the sea. And the waters returned, and covered the chariots, and the horsemen, and all the host of Pharaoh that came into the sea after them; there remained not so much as one of them.

Thus the LORD saved Israel out of the hand of the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead upon the sea shore.

Surely it is one of the greatest stories in history! Yet, as I said last week, the exodus event is kept alive through Jewish literature and liturgy for there is almost no evidence for its historicity. What are we to make of the pillar of cloud leading the people of Israel and the pillar of fire by night? And what are we to make of the dividing of the Red Sea, the escape of the slaves and the murder by God of the Egyptians?

There is a scholarly, scientific view that the pillars are no more than the eruption from a volcano. In 1980, Mount St Helens stood 9,677 feet high, but the eruption, the pillar of cloud, rose to more than 50,000 feet into the air. In 1256, the glow of the

eruption near Medina in Arabia was seen over five hundred miles away in Syria. The pillar of cloud is smoke from an erupting volcano and the pillar of fire is volcanic fire which becomes visible in the dark. The story of the Red Sea and the dividing of the waters are also open to re-interpretation. Most scholars are of the view that the water in question was not the Red Sea since that is too far south but the Sea of Reeds in the north of Egypt. The Sea of Reeds is a marshland prone to rapid flooding. Another view is that the water is the Gulf of Aqaba to the north of the Red Sea, where a ridge of land is exposed as the wind pushes back the sea. So long as the wind is strong enough it is safe to cross. The Book of Exodus refers the strong east wind. These scientific views, these non-supernatural explanations, are interesting and helpful but they are not the most important point. It maybe that the pillar of cloud, the pillar of fire and the parting of water all have explanations which are naturally occurring phenomena but it is the theology which has been attached to these events which is most important to us. What are we to make of the pillars, the division of water, the liberation of the slaves and the murder of the Egyptians?

The former Bishop of Durham, David Jenkins, challenges the notion of supernatural miracles. He says that a God who uses 'what might be called laser-beam-like precision and power' at times of His choosing leaves us with 'a very terrible dilemma.' Writing about Jesus, though it could equally apply to the Exodus miracles, Jenkins states:

We are faced with the claim that God is prepared to work knock-down physical miracles in order to let a select number of people into the secret of his incarnation, resurrection and salvation, but he is not prepared to use

such methods in order to deliver from Auschwitz, prevent Hiroshima, overcome famine or bring about a bloodless transformation of apartheid. Such a God is surely a cultic idol. That is to say, that he is a false and misdeveloped picture of the true and gracious God drawn up by would-be worshippers who have gone dangerously and sadly astray. If such a God is not a cultic idol produced by mistaken and confused worshippers, but actually exists, then he must be the very devil. For he prefers a few selected worshippers to all the sufferers of our world. Such a God is certainly not worth believing in.

What, then, are we to make of the ‘miraculous’ escape of the Israelites? We are intelligent, rational and self-conscious creatures. We know that we have evolved from squid-like creatures of millions and millions of years ago. We live between the monster and the saint. We are morally ashamed of our propensity to violence and aggression and we are inspired by men and women, individuals, who rise above the herd to live a morally enlightened life. We know greatness when we see it. We know what it means to be moral and we will not believe in a God who is morally less than we are. God has given us that insight, that gift. So, a God who kills Egyptians while saving His own tribe is out. A God who supernaturally intervenes with a pillar of fire but cannot put out the fires of the death camps is out. And, a God who led His chosen people through the desert to a land flowing with milk and honey but will not save the people of Darfur is out. What can we say of God today? In what way is He with us? How does He act, if at all?

Let me return to David Jenkins. Jenkins said, ‘God is interwoven with and committed to our flesh and blood, our obedience and collaboration and our freedom and limits.’ This past week we have heard much about that great underground tunnel in Geneva. On Wednesday, on Radio Three, there was a programme on for

astronomers with music whose theme was the stars or the planets and the pieces were interspersed with poems. One poem caught my imagination and I want to use it as a metaphor. It is called *Cosmic Gall* written by John Updike. He is writing of Neutrinos – particles which travel almost at the speed of light and pass through matter undisturbed. *Cosmic Gall*:

Neutrinos, they are very small.
They have no charge and have no mass
And do not interact at all.
The earth is just a silly ball
To them, through which they simply pass,
Like dust maids down a drafty hall
Or photons through a sheet of glass.
They snub the most exquisite gas,
Ignore the most substantial wall,
Cold-shoulder steel and sounding brass,
Insult the stallion in his stall,
And, scorning barriers of class,
Infiltrate you and me! Like tall
And painless guillotines they fall
Down through our heads into the grass.
At night, they enter at Nepal
And pierce the lover and his lass
From underneath the bed – you call
It wonderful; I call it crass.

The poet calls the neutrinos ‘crass’. I call it wonderful. Jenkins said that God is ‘interwoven with and committed to our flesh and blood, our obedience and collaboration and our freedom and limits.’ Does God not pass through everything, the most exquisite gas, the most substantial wall and infiltrate you and me? He is interwoven with us, committed to our flesh and blood, inviting our obedience and collaboration and never, never interacting or interfering with our freedom and our limits. No metaphor can be pushed too far but what a wonderful image: God

infiltrates everything and invites our obedience and collaboration. The parable of the Unforgiving Servant is Jesus teaching us the forgiveness, mercy and graciousness of God and inviting us to mirror that way of being and living. The Israelites looked for the active, living Spirit of God everywhere in their life and experience and that's the lesson for us this morning. Our theological interpretation of events maybe different from that of the Hebrews three and a half thousand years ago but we are one with them in our sense that God infiltrates everything. They used their intellect to make sense of what they felt in their heart and soul, of what they experienced in their life. We can do no less.

This morning at this Table we will see bread and we will see wine. We will hear Jesus say, 'This is my Body. This is my Blood.' With the eyes of faith, we will see Jesus. The Spirit of God permeates, infiltrates everything. If miracle is about insight, then this morning we will witness a miracle.

Amen.