



## Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

11<sup>th</sup> September 2011

*Exodus 14: 19-31, Psalm 114, Romans 14: 1-14, Matthew 18: 21-35*

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen

It gets a little complicated this morning, so I give you that heads-up so you can tune your ears in, and some of this is going to require re-reading during the week because when I read it again I thought I really need to sit with it a bit longer.

“Exodus” in the dictionary has a number of definitions:

the second book of the Old Testament

the departure of the Israelites from Egypt.

a journey by a large group to escape from a hostile environment

It can also be appreciated as a life movement, as the movement or process of “Exodus”, because exodus is a powerful theme in terms of our understanding, and our appreciation of life and of God. It is one of those core movements that pervade the whole of the scriptures like the force of gravity pervades the world; it is one of the givens in life’s unfolding – as your life unfolds you will encounter the process of exodus.

To more fully appreciate the classic ‘crossing of the Red Sea’ as told in the Old Testament reading today, the story has to be unpacked beyond its literal context. For many this event is accepted as a part of the history of the people of Israel - the hand of God guiding the people of Israel to the Promised Land and tossing the Egyptians into the sea. But in this context it only serves a very particular agenda for the people of Israel. When we read of ‘the Exodus’ as a mythologising, a creative writing of a legendary past to explain and influence the present cultural or socio-political situation, we do not open ourselves to the universal illustration that this narrative provides. Certainly this reading serves well the people of Israel, but very much at the expense of the Egyptians; and in that orthodox context it quite clearly also represents a very one-sided appreciation of the Divine. In such a one-sided context there is a Divine Racism in which God is seen to act for one people against another; God brings Israel into the land of Promise and implements a “Pacific solution” against Egypt, by tossing them into the sea.

When we fast-forward this ‘historical account’ into the present and look at Israel today, we find that defence spending is 6.9% of GDP, compared with 4.7% USA and 1.9% Australia. We might therefore question where their legendary journey to the Promised Land has actually led them? Another comparison that calls into question our classical understanding of this Old Testament narrative is

apparent when we look at it alongside the two other readings for today, for then we discover an apparent conflict in regard to the Divine nature and purpose of God's divine being. The second and third readings speak of a Divine forgiveness and yet the Old Testament narrative speaks of a Divine hand that destroys the Egyptians *even after* they had decided to flee in defeat.

The Exodus reading, like all the narratives in the Bible, gives us a story in which to consider our own story. It is a retelling or reframing and an unfolding of the story of Adam and Eve; more closely it can be seen as an unfolding of the Noah and the flood narrative. For although written by, and so written from a "people of Israel" perspective, its true value as a sacred text is to be only to be found in its translation into the universal context. We must seek ourselves in these stories, not read them from afar as if they talk of someone else.

To more fully appreciate this, and many other Old Testament narratives in their wholeness and fullness we should replace the "People of Israel" with "God's Chosen". That still, however, carries the baggage of People of Israel. So a better transposition is to replace "People of Israel" with "what God chooses to be". If we want to contemplate the real depth that such a translation enables, what we are seeking to do is to look into the universal truth of the Scriptures and to do this we must replace the object of the initial story, "Israel", with the second part of God's naming of God's self at the burning bush. Remember the naming of the Divine as "*I AM WHO I AM.*" or "*I AM what I will be*". It is in that second "I am" that the universal orientation of Scripture is to be found, "*I AM what I will be*", and that's where we too seek to be found, for in that "I AM" so too "we are". I told you it was going to be difficult!

Let's go back to the text and see if we can find a simpler appreciation of what this narrative holds for us and for all. If we recap the activity of the story, we see that Israel is seeking freedom from slavery, from Egyptian oppression. As they leave (following a negotiated settlement with pharaoh), as they begin the experience of freedom and the movement toward freedom, the Egyptians chase after them. All that stands between the impending and obvious conflict is the Divine cloud. The Israelites escape in miraculous fashion through the sea; and the Egyptians, who at first followed, realize they are chasing a lost cause and so they turn away. As they turn away they are annihilated.

Again if we only see that in its literal context, a localized "People of Israel" perspective, such a story can lead to delusions of grandeur based on that Divine racism; it can lead to an expectation for superiority in war. Such an interpretation of the text might explain why Israel today is second only to the USA in terms of being a war-invested nation. They really have appreciated this text out of context or in their own context, and we probably still hold the text in that same light. Let's look again, a little closer at the action from the narrative; the surface reading, which looks like God's intervention, is betrayed by a subtle inclusion in the text of the story. The initiation of the 'divine activity' is clearly and cleverly and deliberately placed in the hands of Moses. In verse 21, '*Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea;*' Moses initiates the path toward freedom. And again in verse 27 '*So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea*': Moses initiates the drowning of the Egyptians.

And if we now replace "the People of Israel" with "that which God chooses to be", if we remove the literal nationalism of the text and see this as a narrative for all and for us, we see it reveals to all a process for those who seek the path to Divine freedom. In such a universal appreciation the text even

goes beyond interpersonal freedom. (that is freedom from outside oppression). to intrapersonal freedom, a movement that promotes integration from conflicts within ourselves.

Contemplate again the movement in the story for yourself. What are the enslaving forces and oppressive forces active in your life? What holds you in slavery? What oppresses you? We can take it as a given that such forces are operative within ourselves, for they are clearly evidenced in our wider culture and in the wider world. Allow the narrative of the Exodus story to open your eyes to your own ‘Exodus’, your own desire for freedom. Where do you find yourself in Egypt? Aimlessly pushing a shopping trolley, watching reruns of B movies that you don’t want to see but you can’t lift yourself off the sofa? Where do we find ourselves in Egypt? From what (or whom) do we seek to escape? And where is your Red Sea (or seas)? Where is the chaotic and turbulent immovable barrier that stands in the way of our pathway to the Promised Land? Once you’ve made a list you might also add death to the list of your Red Seas – it affords another opportunity for contemplation of the path to freedom.

With these lists prepared, with a knowing of our Egypt, with a knowing of our Red Sea, we can then follow the movement of the narrative, follow Moses, and like Moses, stand before that which blocks our pathway. Go toward that which is in the way, because even that little movement already will have entailed a dialogue, a negotiation with the list of all that enslaves and oppresses us. And in order to get to that place, to the edge of our Red Sea, where we can confront all that blocks our path, we will discover we have engaged the movement of refugees. It’s a wonderful contemplative exercise that gives an enlightening appreciation of the whole refugee issue, an issue that our culture sees as a problem rather than a more obvious opportunity.

Now, again like Moses we pause, for we find ourselves on the very edge of chaos. Become aware of the two operative restraining forces - the fear that your Egyptians will overtake and destroy you, the fear that you cannot escape the path that enslaves you, and also become aware of the fear in seeing the impossibility of moving forward, the fear that holds us because we think we can’t get beyond our Red Sea. And in that place of fear, allow the cloud of the Divine to come between you and your fears. This is not the hand of God to rescue you, this is not one of those prayers that we make in desperation – ‘take it all away’, ‘oh help me God’ – that’s not going to happen. Buy a lotto ticket if you want help; don’t make those empty prayers. Rather look for the cloud of the Divine that comes always and forever between you and all that you fear, because it shows a real presence and a power.

*Then Moses stretched out his hand;* in the posture of prayer, Moses opened up a new possibility and it is in the same posture that we invite such insights for ourselves. From the place of prayer we can see the chaos stilled and the barrier before us parted. And from the place of prayer we move into the reality of our ‘Exodus’. What takes place then is truly miraculous. Initially there is an almost overwhelming sense that what is behind us will catch up with us and overcome us, because we no longer do we see the Divine Cloud that separates our Egypt and our Israel – it’s gone. We think we will be overwhelmed. However, the Divine Cloud is lifted, or rather in the posture and place of prayer we have breathed it into our being and it is us who are lifted. And when the fears of our Egyptian past see this miracle of transformation in us, they turn and are drowned in and by the very chaos we are moving through.

To drown those forces that enslave and/or oppress us is very much a part of the process that will lead us all to freedom – and when the path way is made clear then the process that will most enable our

progress is that of forgiveness. As we leave the first reading and discover our own exodus journey, we will feel the greeting that opens the second reading – ‘Welcome..... *those who are weak in faith*’.

And as we follow the text, having broken through our Red Sea.... 13 ‘*Let us [then] therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another*’. We will, on this journey, find the answer that Peter found in today’s gospel, that an orientation of forgiveness is birthed in our openness to seek the Promised Land, not as our destination – there’s no destination in today’s texts - but as the place we travel to together, a people of ‘I Am’ and a people named and formed by the Divine word calling us to itself - *I AM what I will be*. As we hear that divine calling, calling us into our Exodus, we might consider this week the seven or seventy seven opportunities we have to forgive, and first become aware of where we have not forgiven ourselves.

Consider this week, the movement of your Exodus, because your exodus is our exodus, it is journeying together; it’s got nothing to do with people of Israel, but rather everything to do with God calling the whole of creation into *what I AM will be*.

The Lord be with you  
Peter Humphris