

Sundays between 11 and 17 September, Ordinary 24 Year A

Returning to the mysteries of Ordinary Time brings back the pattern of Continuous and Related OT Readings.

OT Continuous

Exod 14: 19-31

This story encapsulates much of the modern dilemma for believers. Did this event take place as recorded in Exodus chapter 14? Can we find a “natural” explanation for the apparently extraordinary behaviour of the Sea of Reeds?

As so often we come back to the question: what did it mean? in preference to the search for a logical explanation implied in the previous paragraph. For those who recorded the history of these events, for the benefit of much later generations of Israelites, the meaning was straightforward: they (the Israelites) had been delivered by a series of events that defied natural explanation; the cause of these events requires only one explanation – the hand of God.

In our time we have been seduced into believing that these explanations are mutually exclusive. We cannot (we suppose) accept a natural, logical explanation, while at the same time seeing in these events a clear sign of divine deliverance. Either you accept the biblical account as complete and completely satisfactory, or you reject it entirely and settle for a natural explanation (and several have been proposed). Yet this is precisely the call of faith. It is not a choice between two alternatives; it is an invitation to live in two worlds simultaneously, acknowledging the power of reason to explain things while at the same time asserting that there is another way of looking at a story, a way that is equally valid.

One of the “several explanations” points to the occurrence of a monumental earthquake which caused the waters of this marshy terrain first to recede then to advance in a terrifying inundation of the land. This is known to have happened at about this time in history. It is possible that this factual story (remembered no doubt as a genuine legend) might have been woven into the tale of escape and deliverance.

Either

Ps 114

This exuberant psalm celebrates in some detail the events described in Exodus chapter 14 and following (the incident of Moses striking water from a rock comes a little later in the book).

Or Exod 15: 1b-11, 20-21 (as a canticle)

This passage is known as Miriam’s Song of Triumph, or simply, The Song of Miriam. It is believed to be one of the very earliest communal songs marking

the deliverance from Egypt. God's power over nature is celebrated, underscoring Israel's claim that its God Yahweh is indeed the source of their liberation.

OT Related

Gen 50: 15-21

We may have encountered this reading some six weeks ago, when it was used in the context of an evening service.

This passage tells of the death of Jacob, after he and his tribe have made their home in Egypt. He is surrounded by his sons (except for Joseph, who understandably has his mind on affairs of state). When they realise their father is dead, they are immediately troubled by the thought that perhaps now Joseph will now be free to exact his revenge for the dreadful wrong his brothers had done to him as a young man. And now he has all the power in his hands. No wonder they are alarmed!

But Joseph is reduced to tears as he explains once again that he simply doesn't think in terms of vengeance. God's hand was in those events of long ago, and in everything that followed; God's purpose was to ensure the survival and well-being of the family of Jacob.

Ps 103: (1-7) 8-13

This psalm is often read at funeral services. In it we are reminded of our utter dependence on the love and generosity of God. We are also left in no doubt that this love will not let us go. In particular it reassures us that nothing we have ever done can ever block the path of God's love!

Epistle Rom 14: 1-12

In his correspondence with the Christians in Rome as well as Corinth, Paul had to deal with the issue of kosher food – food that met exacting criteria for its purity. This is not about health and safety or kitchen hygiene (except incidentally); it is about observing religious regulations about certain foods. For the urban Christians of the great cities of the Roman Empire, these fell into two categories:

- kosher regulations about permissible foods;
- anxiety about food on sale in the markets which had been offered to pagan gods in pagan temples;

Some Christians of Jewish origin (or those who had been so persuaded by Jewish Christians) remained sensitive to the kosher issue; many Christians (whatever their origin – Jewish or Gentile) operated a precautionary principle in respect of food offered to idols which was then placed in the human food chain. Uncertain whether this contact with forbidden worship would harm them, they chose to avoid it. Others took a different view: these pagan gods

are mere fantasies; they simply do not exist; therefore no harm can come from meat offered to them in superstitious worship; therefore we are free to eat this meat.

There was a third position, which Paul was advocating here. Addressing those who were inclined to dismiss the anxiety about meat that had been offered to idols, he reminded them that in buying and eating such meat they might upset those cautious people who felt unable to eat; this would disrupt the fellowship. There are, he pointed out, times and circumstances in which we should freely surrender our liberty-of-conscience, in order to protect more timid souls from anxiety.

Gospel Matt 18: 21-35

Forgiveness is a difficult topic for us to wrestle with. It is not easy to forgive, even when you are yourself the person most injured; when the person most injured is your dead child killed by a hit-and-run driver it is even harder because you may feel yourself to be the continuing guardian of that child's best interest, and you cannot forgive on their behalf.

We are also, rightly, troubled by the need for public disapproval to be signalled beyond any doubt, by due punishment. Forgiveness – particularly when it seems to be on offer at a bargain price (what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace”) – can feel as though we're saying “what you did doesn't really matter”.

But in this story, we are reminded that punishment, or making amends, is not always possible. This doesn't, however, remove the need to repair the damage to relationships, and that is clearly at the forefront of Jesus' mind here. So to insist upon punishment may actually be counter-productive; it may simply prolong the trauma both for the offender and the offended, and for the wider community too.

The master's generosity in waiving the servant's debt was born, perhaps, of a recognition that to throw the servant in prison wouldn't actually solve anything. The only way forward, painful though it might have been for the master, was to write off the debt (a conclusion that Directors of Financial Institutions have had to reach as the Credit Crunch of 2008 crunched ever more tightly). We can now, perhaps, see why the servant's subsequent refusal to work to the same standards in his own dealings was so appalling. Clearly it wasn't the debt that mattered; it was the relationship.