

Exodus 14: 10 – end, 15: 20-21

John 20: 19 – end

For those of us following the readings for Morning Prayer these last three weeks, the story of Moses and his cries to Pharaoh seemed to go on inexorably. Whether it was the identification with his plight, having been confined to our homes; or the exhaustion, day after day, of reading about plagues whilst our own plague of Covid-19 occupied our news, but when Easter Monday came and still the Israelites were not free I almost despaired. We had celebrated the resurrection of Jesus and yet it was not until Tuesday when we read the words ‘The Egyptians urged the people to hasten their departure from the land.’ – phew at last!

However, perhaps that experience is reflected in what many of us are feeling now. ‘Hallelujah, Jesus is Risen’ but we are still waiting to celebrate, or to return to normal life or go out of our homes. Somehow there is a bit of a hollow ring to that eternal statement of hope.

The Exodus story continues in our lectionary reading for this Sunday and again the reading is quite apposite for our own situation. It is very easy for us to become overwhelmed by the things of life; by the thought of many more weeks like the last ones. There is concern that stress-related illnesses will increase, with numerous things worrying even the usually most calm ones amongst us. As the saying goes, we can feel caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, not knowing which way to turn with the different ways forward being equally threatening, daunting and overwhelming.

So, we may wonder why, when concentrating on the immediate post-Easter events, we have a long reading from the book of Exodus today about the crossing of the Red Sea. In the past has certainly caused me some puzzlement, however thinking about the message of all our readings they seem to lead in the same direction and have much to say to us at the end of the fourth week of lockdown.

The people of Israel found themselves literally caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. They have escaped from Egypt and Pharaoh and his army have engaged in frenzied preparations and fervent pursuit of them. Every chariot and every horse and rider, indeed the entire Egyptian army is after them. The Israelites are understandably fearful for their lives. They are more aware of Pharaoh’s intent than of God’s and they cry out to God in desperation. Behind them comes the charging Egyptian army and in front of them lies the Red Sea, seemingly immovable, insurmountable and overwhelming. In their mindset, as so often in ours, they see only what is there – literal and physical and it seemed hopeless.

Thomas too found himself in a similar situation. His life, like that of all the disciples, had been radically changed by the man Jesus. He had given up everything to follow him. Yet, just over a week ago he had seen his friend, the one he had given up everything for, die on a cross. Had it all meant nothing? The future looked bleak. Jesus was dead.

But now the other disciples had told Thomas that they had seen Jesus alive again. On one hand his friend had died. It all seemed like he had to return to what he had known some time before, with no hope, but on the other hand what he had heard seemed so overwhelming too. No one had ever risen from the dead before. He had seen the stone rolled in front of the tomb. He had seen the spear and suffering. The possibility of this seemed impossible. In Thomas’ mind, as so often in ours, he only saw what was there – literal and physical – and it seemed hopeless.

Then on both occasions something happened. The Israelites are told to not be afraid. A word of reassurance that their worst fears will not be realised. God is on their side. The events begin with a divine initiative. The messenger of God, the cloud pillar takes up a position between the people of Israel and the Egyptians. Then God acts in and through a human agent, Moses who stretches out his hand and staff over the sea, and a strong east wind blows all night. The effect is an act of creation. Dry land appears in the midst of chaos and under the cover of darkness the people of Israel walk through the sea on dry land. In an act of faith they continue their journey.

As the morning breaks for Israel, the night falls on the Egyptians. The dry land is turned into a quagmire. The brightest and the best of the Egyptian military become bogged down. Terror stricken; they suddenly realise that they are literally in over their heads.

Thomas too was confronted by the reality of God's power over creation. For Thomas it was not enough to just take the facts as they had been relayed by the other disciples. He needed to see for himself that their words were true. We are all probably familiar with the encounter. A week after Jesus had appeared to the other disciples, Thomas gathered with them. He needed to see the marks of the crucifixion on Jesus in order to believe. Now he had his chance as Jesus came and once again



stood among them. If this was Jesus surely the person who had died had not been him? If this was a ghost, what did that mean? Jesus knew exactly what Thomas was thinking, he came to them with the scars of his earlier suffering and offered them to Thomas to touch. Yes, this was the same man who had died, his friend Jesus. The affect was an act of creation – Jesus Christ had literally risen from the dead and Thomas' doubts were immediately turned to belief as he took that step of faith.

When Israel saw the great work that God had done in allowing them to cross the Red Sea they responded in a number of ways: they revered God; they believed in God; they believed in God's servant Moses and they sang a song of praise to God for the life and blessing that had become theirs that day. We have here some of the oldest poetry in the Hebrew Bible. The song is a product of a new experience, an experience of both God and the people Israel as liberator and liberated. If there had not been a human response, what God had done would not have become known. The human response makes a difference to God.

We are not told if Thomas accepted Jesus' invitation, only that he engaged in an outburst expressing faith. Thomas' response to what God had done was to say, 'My Lord and my God'. St John's gospel closes in its earliest form, with a statement of the author's purpose. The signs were recorded to nourish faith, a faith that gives life. Jesus at the end of the gospel is proclaimed 'the Son of God.'

Feeling overwhelmed at this moment could be a time when we lose something of our faith. We look around for signs of where God is in our life, and not seeing him we feel as though he has left us high and dry which only makes the situation feel worse. It would be easy to despair as we almost want to see and feel Jesus and cannot. We do well to remember therefore Jesus' words to Thomas 'Because you have seen me you have believed, blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'

The Christian writer Tom Smail has written that 'it is often in the early stages of the Christian life, where faith most needs to be confirmed and built up, that God will often show himself to be the resolver, the who gets us out of trouble. When, however we become stronger and more mature, he

will honour us, not by giving the deliverance we ask, but by calling us to follow Jesus through the dark places, where no relief comes, to a new life that lies on the other side of the Red Sea of suffering and affliction we have to cross.'

Therefore, there is a need for us somehow to walk away from holding on to the visible evidence to having a living hope. We live and worship a God who is Lord of all creation, who can bring salvation both to a great nation and to a doubting individual and we have written evidence to prove it!

Today, in the midst of this trial that we are living through we too can rejoice in Jesus as our Lord and our God. Whilst we may at times not see much evidence of him, if we just cast our gaze wider, we can become aware of the small mercies, and the little (and great) blessings. We can both see and feel God's presence amid this crisis. These things together with Scripture, the activity of the Holy Spirit, and the prayer and worship of the church remain as constant reminders of God's love and God's power.

Stuck with the plagues for what seemed like an eternity, I for one, am so pleased that we have now got through the Red Sea bit. The promised land, with whatever that promises to bring – and life will never be the same again – awaits us. Christ today reveals to us that He is our Lord and our God; His own sufferings give us the hope to go on and are the stuff out of which he fashions his glory, and we can, as the Israelites and Thomas did, look forward and rejoice together.

Living God, always making new, the resurrection of Jesus challenges us.

We admit, Thomas-like, we find it hard to believe.

Your resurrection challenges us to trust, to have faith, to follow;

For, if Christ is risen indeed, then the world is changed.

We can hope. We can give ourselves to you. We can be confident in your love.

In hospital, at the grave, in prison, in the moment of darkness, in loneliness, in pain we can remember Christ is risen, and there is nothing at all to separate us from your love.

Come, Lord Jesus, live in us, our homes, our churches, our world.

Come, Lord, help us to believe even more.

And help us to live in you the new life, resurrection life, your life in us. Amen.