



ST HELIERS CHURCH
& COMMUNITY CENTRE



TAKEAWAY SUNDAY SERMON

**17th September 2023, 16th Sunday after Pentecost,
3rd Sunday of Creation**

*Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and turned the sea into dry land, and the waters were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. The Egyptians pursued and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. At the morning watch the Lord, in the pillar of fire and cloud, looked down on the Egyptian army and threw the Egyptian army into a panic. He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, "Let us flee from the Israelites, for the Lord is fighting for them against Egypt." Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers." So, Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the Lord tossed the Egyptians into the sea. The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the great work that the Lord did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses. **Exodus 14:21-31***

*And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. A windstorm suddenly arose on the sea, so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves, but he was asleep. And they went and woke him up, saying, "Lord, save us! We are perishing!" And he said to them, "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?" Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a dead calm. They were amazed, saying, "What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?" **Matthew 8:23-27***

Sermon: Horse and rider he has thrown into the sea

It needs to be said that God doesn't come across particularly well in the story of the Exodus. Especially if you're one of the Egyptians.

We hear today how the Israelites finally escape from slavery by miraculously crossing through the Red Sea to safe ground. It is a momentous and joyous occasion.

Unless you're a soldier in Pharaoh's army. In which case, the liberation of Israel comes at the cost of your death as the waters of the Red Sea come crashing down upon you.

And the author of the story is unashamed that the God of Israel is at the helm, fighting against the Egyptians and causing this mass death. What do we do with this warrior God?

Even for the cause of liberation, how can we justify the violence and the death? ...Maybe you could say that the death of the soldiers was a legitimate cost of war – after all, the soldiers were professional soldiers. They knew what they were in for.

But I imagine many of the soldiers were simply doing their job. Why should they die at God's hand for the stubbornness of their autocratic leader? Especially when God "hardened" Pharaoh's heart against the Israelites in the first place? Why would God not fall back on non-violent means, and instead choose plagues and floods?

And that's to say nothing of the slaughter of the first borns -- which was referred to last week and which, we would say today, is nothing less than a war-crime. Why should the children of the Egyptians suffer for their parents' mistakes? What sort of God is this who takes out his fury on innocent infants?

We would be right, I think, to question the moral compass of such a God. And it raises the question how we are to read this text today. Do we simply gloss over the parts where God is an orchestrator of mass death? Do we focus on the freedom and the joy of the Israelites without attending to the awful cost of that freedom?

...I have this habit in my sermon writing of opening a massive can of worms and then wondering how on earth I'm going to get the worms back into the can again...

...for me the clue to interpreting this passage is in the Song of Miriam, which Ruth referred to earlier in the opening prayer. Miriam is one of the freed Israelites. And offers a song of praise to God as a response for the freedom of her people.

Moses also offers a song. But Miriam's is different. Moses, a typical man, seems to like the sound of his own voice. His song is significantly longer, while Miriam's is short and to the point, nothing more than a refrain that condenses Moses' song to two lines:

"Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea."

Notice that there is no mention of Egypt per se. The armies of Pharaoh are simply referred to as "horse and rider", reduced down to their function as instruments of war. Calvary and war-chariots pursue, hunt down, attack, kill.

Here the “horse and rider” is a symbol of human violence and domination. The one in power who subjugates the weak and the vulnerable, who by strength of arm enslaves and rules over.

It is this horse and rider that God has triumphed over gloriously. In the Exodus, God has definitively, emphatically, categorically brought human violence to its violent end. Thrown it the sea to be engulfed by the chaos.

I want to suggest that the story of the Exodus is first and foremost just that. A story of God’s judgement on the ways of human domination and violence – ways that lead ultimately to chaos and to the demise of human beings and of the earth.

You know, in the scriptures, when we hear about the sea and the wind and the waves our ears should prick up. The sea is a recurring motif of chaos, evil, the uncreated primordial mass before God separated the waters, brought forth dry land, and created the world, with order and meaning and purpose. So the author, I think, is suggesting in the drowning of Pharaoh’s armies, that this is where our human desire to dominate and control others will lead us – to our unmaking. We will uncreate ourselves. We will give ourselves over to chaos and evil. Violence is never the way....or at least it is certainly not the way of God, who is determined that human cruelty and violence will come to an end.

And that includes violence against the earth, I think. We routinely talk about human violence and domination over human beings – and that’s certainly true. But as you know it is the Season of Creation, so it is worth acknowledging that human violence comes in many forms, including against our fellow creatures and the very ecosystems we depend on to live. We’re realising this with startling clarity today. Our will to dominate and control will indeed be our unmaking.

It struck me, as I sat with the story this week, that even the natural world rises up in protest against the armies of Pharaoh. The wind and the waves and the sea get on board. I realise I’m reading into the text somewhat here. But neither do I think it’s too much of a stretch to say that we are seeing something similar today as our natural world revolts against our human mismanagement and the sustained abuse of our common home.

If the Exodus story is anything to go by, then we have to reckon with the fact that God is bringing these abusive ways to an end. There is no room for them in God’s future.

And there is of course a future. For we know, as Miriam tells us, that God has triumphed gloriously. The people of Israel are led through the waters of chaos and death into freedom and new life with their God. A new way has been opened up.

If the story of Exodus is firstly a damning indictment on human violence, then it is equally, if not more so, an affirmation of our potential to live in a different way. It is an assertion that God has not abandoned us to our fate but is stepping in the space between: between the pursuer and the pursued; between the abuser and the abused; between the perpetrator and the victim.

And as God steps between, the cycle of violence is broken, and a new way is opened up for life together with one another and – I would hastily add in these times – with our earth.

Through God’s salvation we are being made new.

You know, if the drowning of Pharaoh's armies is an act of unmaking, of uncreation, of returning to primordial chaos, then the freedom of God's people through the waters is an act of new creation.

One commentator alerted me to this fascinating connection: if you remember back to the creation narrative in Genesis chapter one, God creates the heavens and earth in seven days, right? And on the third day God separates the waters so that dry land appears. The separation of the waters is a separation of the chaos, bringing order, space for life. And as a result, we see the bursting forth of all manner of flora and fauna, the created order which we depend on for our life.

So just as in that first act of creation in Genesis, now in the Exodus, God once more separates the waters to reveal dry land, enabling a path through the violence and chaos into freedom and new life.

It's slightly graphic imagery, the commentator suggests that the breaking of the waters evokes the breaking of the waters at birth. In other words, the people of Israel are being born again. The imagery wasn't lost on New Testament authors, who quickly applied the Exodus story to the imagery of baptism.

So this is an act of new creation. A new way of being human. And in this new creation, there is no place for violence and warmongering and domination. The horse and the rider, God has thrown into the sea. And they are no more.

You and I, we are people of the new creation. People freed by the waters of baptism into new life with our God. It means, I think, that we are committing ourselves to that new way, learning to living in harmony with our fellow human siblings and with our natural world. We are becoming the people of the Exodus. On the way from enslavement to the ways of violence into freedom together with our God.

It makes sense to finish this reflection by referring once more to the work of groups like the Tāmaki Estuary Protection Society. It would be easy for us to think that the problems are too big, that for every piece of rubbish picked up, one hundred pieces will find their ways into the soil and the sea. But that, I think, is to miss the point. In attending to the earth with acts of loving kindness, we are changing ourselves. We are cultivating within us a different relationship with the earth. We are shifting our mindset away from a utilitarian relationship of domination over the earth. And we are moving towards a relationship of stewardship, care, and responsibility, learning to see the deep connection between our actions and the destruction or healing of the world around us.

So I commend the Tāmaki Estuary Protection Society to you as well as their clean-up afternoon on the 24th. And of course, there are other groups that operate in our area committed to caring for our local environment. I'm mindful, for instance, of Graham Mathieson and others who are active in Pest Control in Dingle Dell. Wonderful work.

May we reconnect with one another and with our earth. May we cross through the stormy seas. May the horse and the rider, be dethroned. And may God triumph gloriously in us, through us, beneath us, above us. Amen.