Sermon for 24th in Ordinary Year A

Readings: Exodus 14:19-31; Matthew 18:21-35

i

We all know the story of the Crossing of the Red Sea, but do we know what really happened? Is it ever possible to know fully “what really happened” anyway? To ask the question “What really happened?” betrays our modern, western cultural setting. It reveals the unspoken assumptions of our age.

Some commentators in recent generations have tried to make it more palatable for our modern post-Enlightenment world. They have suggested that it took place near the Bitter Lakes, near to today’s Suez Canal. They say the marshy ground is better known as the Reed Sea, so crossing it on foot was a lucky escape, whilst the bogging down of chariots was a bit more predictable. Understood in that way, the story is remarkable; memorable certainly; but a miracle? Hardly.

The same rationalistic approach has been applied to other stories too. Jesus wasn’t walking on the water but on a sand bar; the crowd of 5,000 took out their own packed lunches when seeing the generosity of the little boy offer his loaves and fishes to Jesus and so on.

The New Testament, however, walks a tightrope on such occasions between overly fantastic presentations as you would expect in a legend, and a rational, matter of fact account which endangers the revelatory significance of the story itself. Imagine the reporting the Press would give today if someone went around raising the dead by his word of command, curing the sick by his touch or feeding the crowds from miniscule resources. Try retelling those stories in today’s tabloid newspaper language and then compare that to the rather matter-of-fact way they are told by the New Testament writers.

Mark, for example, recounts that “the whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases” (Mark 1:33-34). So many miracles, they are not even recorded in any detail at all.

The matter offends and confuses our modern western scruples further because there *are* legends and fairytales incorporated into the bible, predominantly in the OT, so that makes drawing the line between legend and history even more problematic for a culture that is already sceptical about such things.

This is a huge dilemma for the Church today. Christian faith demands that we accept God has revealed his nature and purpose in historical events, historical people and supremely in an historical figure from Galilee, Jesus of Nazareth. Some historical events which are claimed to be revelatory are completely mundane and a matter of personal perspective: so when Jeremiah sees which way the steam is blowing from his cooking pot, it may reveal to him that danger was approaching from the north, but a boiling pot stretches no credulity, whether we accept Jeremiah’s interpretation or not.

Other happenings, witnessed by many, appear to defy the laws of physics or biology: walking on the water, the parting of the Red Sea, the raising of Lazarus from his tomb. These events strain our modern western credulity. We measure what is possible by the limits of our experience and understanding. That is a wise thing to do, for it guards us against chicanery and exploitation, but applied arbitrarily and without discernment, those modern rationalistic scruples become the invisible bars of our spiritual prison.

ii

The trouble with us humans is that we tend to swing between extremes. Either we believe every story in the Bible in a literal way, including folk tales of men living inside whales (big fish at least) for three days, and talking serpents that lead young women astray, or we reject the whole caboodle and even question whether Jesus ever actually lived!

Truth does not disclose itself to such lazy thinking; truth demands struggling with each event, each story, each interpretation and then making a judgement on each and then putting it all together making an assessment of what is “really happening” – and for Christians and other people of faith – even after that careful, educated, academic scrutiny, the answer is that among all the confusion and doubt and across huge cultural and historical differences – God is at work.

Christians acknowledge that folktales masquerading as history in the modern sense of what we mean by “history” need reappraisal for today’s audience.

What are we to make today of St Patrick ridding Ireland of its snakes, St Aidan’s prayers which turned the winds to save Bamburgh castle from fire, or weeping statues of the Madonna? At the end of the day, it little matters what we make of these relatively minor stories. But whether we think God enabled the Israelites to flee across the Red Sea, or whether Jesus rose from the grave or not – everything hinges on what we make of those claims. The universe is a completely different place if God did do those things to a universe in which no God acted in such ways.

The account in Exodus 14 tries to tell a sensational story in a less than sensational way by modern standards, but its reference to walls of water on either side of the Israelite column of escapees is intended to say that this event was NOT a mere meteorological fluke, no trick of the wind, but the intervention of God.

In the same way, the empty tomb is not offered as a mere sermon illustration of the psychological damage the death of Jesus inflicted upon the traumatised disciples. The resurrection is told as historical event, witnessed by many over a period of weeks between Easter and Ascension.

Now you may not accept their interpretation, but if you do dismiss their testimony, it must be on the grounds that you think that they were either mistaken in their perception, or wilfully deceived by a third party, or were deliberately trying to mislead.

The question demanding an answer is: even if legend and folk tale are mixed in with historical facts interpreted by faith, as opposed to historical facts interpreted by scepticism, what *happened* to those people of that culture to make them interpret these events in such a religious way that was widely accepted in their time and continues to be so by so many today?

iii

Of course, if God has revealed his nature and his purpose in historical events such as those recorded in the bible, then it is supposed to influence our lives in a profound way. Not only do those great events of our salvation history serve as our permanent reference points about God, life, death, meaning and value, but it also means we should be on the alert for how God appears to us in the more commonplace events of our lives – and then respond accordingly.

For the Christian claim is not that God manifested himself in the lives recorded in the pages of the bible, but that is how God is for all people and for all time. God, who is love, reaches out in grace to all his children, but supremely in Jesus Christ.

When we discern, by faith, that God was in an event – that discernment changes the course of our lives.

Our reading from Matthew 18:21-35 is a parable that depicts what happens when people do not discern God’s grace in their lives and learn from it. The wicked servant was forgiven a monumentally huge debt of ten thousand talents, yet in the story he did not perceive that “event” as a gracious act from which he could direct his own actions towards the man who owed him a measly sum of one hundred denarii. The failure to perceive the wondrously good thing the king had done for him and apply that lesson to how he treated the man who was indebted to him had terrible consequences.

It matters hugely whether you see only what is on the surface of life, or whether you see beyond into life’s deeper, spiritual significance.

Was it indeed just a house fire that the five year old John Wesley escaped from by having the presence of mind to pull a blanket box across to the window, enabling him to reach out of the window into upstretched arms to safety? Or, was his mother Susanna right, claiming John was a “brand plucked from the burning?”

It was her interpretation through the eyes of faith that helped mould John’s life and change the course of history. I am reminded of an old hymn by George Herbert:

Teach me, my God and King,

In all things thee to see,

And what I do in anything,

To do it as for thee.

A man that looks on glass

On it may stay his eye;

Or if he pleaseth, through it pass,

And then the heaven espy.

**Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard**

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