

Exodus 14:19–31

My last church in Dursley was close to Berkely and Oldbury nuclear power stations. Consequently I had a few nuclear physicists in my congregation. I also had an evolutionary biologist and a bio chemist and a few doctors. It was interesting to hear how they squared their scientific outlook with their faith and their reading of scripture

Francis Collins is an evolutionary biologist and heads up the National Human Genome Institute in Washington. He is also a committed Christian and says ‘the work of a scientist who has the joy of being a Christian, is a work of discovery which can also be a form of worship. As a scientist, one of the most exhilarating experiences is to learn something... that no human has understood before... a chance to see the glory of creation.’

Science fiction often becomes science fact. Our latest advances includes artificial intelligence and concerns about how that may threaten the human race. It’s hard to believe.

Our biblical text today tells of the parting of the Red Sea. It is an amazing story. It’s hard to believe.

There is a joke, where Moses is praying to God to release his people from bondage. The voice of God booms from the clouds, ‘Moses, I have good news and bad news!’

‘What’s the good news?’ asks Moses.

God says, ‘If Pharoah will not let my people go I will send down a rain of frogs, and a plague of locusts, a plague of flies, and I will turn the Nile to blood’. ‘Wow’ says Moses. ‘And if Pharoah’s army pursues you in flight’, continues God, ‘I shall open a path for you in the Red Sea only to close it again and drown his army.’

‘That’s incredible,’ says Moses. ‘But what’s the bad news?’

God replies ‘Before I can do all this, you must write an environmental impact statement’.

The Parting of the Red Sea is one of those biblical stories that for most folk is hard to believe. With things like the Large Hadron Collider and artificial intelligence perhaps we should be more open to the impossible becoming possible and the laws of physics being revised. But ask most people the suggestion that the Red Sea was parted to allow the Israelites to cross before closing in on the Egyptian army and they will probably raise an eyebrow. ‘Is this story true?’ is a common question.

I remember a programme on TV not so long back which had Jeremy Bowen investigating the story of Moses and speculating that the crossing of the Red Sea was in fact the crossing of the Reed Sea, a shallow marshy area at the top of the Nile Delta. There was a volcanic theory. In the 16th century BCE, the Greek island of Santorini blew up causing an ash cloud and a tidal wave. Was this what the ancients saw as a sign from God. The TV programme was trying to make the biblical story more feasible.

Modern scientific investigations and rigorous historical studies have contributed to life in many ways. But these patterns of thought can also trap people into believing that a story must be narrowly assessed as either true or false. Perhaps we need to open up the question of truth in rich and deeper ways.

Even when we are confident that a particular story in the Bible is factual, that does not guarantee that the story is meaningful today. People who have faith in Jesus today provide the best proof that Jesus is alive.

Children from an early age start asking the question 'is this story true?' Many leave church and depart from the Christian faith because they believe that faith involves taking your brain out.

How you respond to that question 'is this story true?' is important.

You could say 'Certainly. We know that many people in those times lived their lives like that and had those kinds of problems.' In other words, the circumstances are true.

You could say 'yes it is true for me. This story helps me to see this particular truth'.

You could be honest and say 'I don't know. I just love the story because it teaches so many things'.

Or you could say 'you know I wonder if it's true as well?'

I'll be honest and say I have difficulty believing that the Red Sea parted. I don't know if it happened or not? I wasn't there. I also have great difficulty in believing in the God represented here in this story – a God who would deliberately kill the Egyptian first born children and wipe out the army.

It's a mighty miraculous witness of God's power! Make no mistake, this was great news... for some. But, it was at the expense of wiping out a huge army of Egyptian

soldiers, chariot drivers and horses. This part does not sit well with me. I know that the Egyptians were awful to the Israelites, and I know that they were given 10 chances (plagues) in order to reconsider and change their ways, but I struggle to celebrate one people's freedom and not mourn the loss of another. It is a story that has been repeated throughout history to justify the victory of one people over another – God is believed to go with one side, but not the other. When the power of God is celebrated in this way and an act of mass destruction is justified, I'm sure I can't be alone in having a moral dilemma.

The Song of the Sea in chapter 15 gives expression to the joy at the overthrow of Israel's enemies. Such sentiments fall below the religion of the Old Testament at its best and foster a kind a nationalistic and vindictive sentiment that has been turned against the Jews themselves over the centuries, culminating in the atrocities of the twentieth century.

Jewish scholars were embarrassed about this story and how it reflects God's character. In the tradition of Midrash where the Jewish rabbis reinterpret the scriptures through the ages, stories grew up around the Red Sea exodus. A Jewish legend tells of God's words to an archangel, who was celebrating the defeat of the Egyptian army in the sea. The Holy One had sat in judgment of the Egyptians. The sea consumed them as they were buried alive in its waters. In response to the judgment the ministering angels wished to utter a song of praise and joy in front of the Holy One. Before they could begin, the Holy One rebuked them, "My children, the works of my hands are drowning in the sea, and you would utter a song in my presence?!"

For modern readers, Exodus 14 often raises questions about God's character. Couldn't God have saved the Egyptians, too? Remember that the storyteller who recorded the stories in Exodus was a person of that time and worldview. Christ would bring us a fuller revelation of God: a God who didn't resort to violence to get his way but absorbed the violence through the cross. Pastor Martin Niemoeller, imprisoned in concentration camps during World War II, said, "It took me a long time to learn that God is not the enemy of my enemies. [God] is not even the enemy of [God's] enemies."

But I can also stand here and say that I know the story of the parting of the Red Sea is true. It is gloriously and at times painfully true. It rings true in human experience. The African American slaves knew this story as they endured hardship and oppression. They longed for redemption, the chance for freedom and the Promised Land. Their spirituals connected with the story of Moses. Out of the United States experience of slavery, a spiritual was sung which was itself a kind of *midrash* on Miriam's refrain. It goes:

O, Mary, don't you weep; don't you moan.

O, Mary, don't you weep; don't you moan.

Pharaoh's army got drowned.

O, Mary, don't you weep.

When I get to heaven gonna put on my shoes.

Gonna' run round glory and tell all the news.

Pharaoh's army got drowned.

O Mary, don't you weep.

The heavenly shoes signal the longing of slaves – barefoot is vulnerability and shoes are the freedom to run, to make the big walk out of slavery. Mary is certainly Miriam, but even more, she is all the Mary's who stand at the foot of the cross tempted to despair. Yet these same women go to the tomb and find it empty.

The Exodus is remembered while looking upon the cross and clinging to the vindication of resurrection. From the slavery to death to the hope of new life.

The Civil Rights movement of the sixties had Martin Luther King invoking the story of Moses and the road to freedom – the journey to the Promised Land.

I can see the forces of the Egyptians as representing the forces of evil and their punishment by God as representing the hope for a better world. Justice comes to those who wait. The work of God is always on the side of the oppressed. The movement of the Spirit of God is always the unstoppable move towards freedom. "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice" is a famous quote popularized by [Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.](#)

Desmond Tutu who struggled against the injustice of apartheid saw in the story of the the exodus God's bias towards the oppressed. He said "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality." He also said

'I never doubted that ultimately we were going to be free, because ultimately, I knew there was no way in which a lie could prevail over the truth, darkness over light and death over life.'

I've known this story of the Red Sea to be true of people caught in depression or in addiction. They stand in the land of slavery and oppression – they long for release and freedom – yet it's a scary thing to walk into the Red Sea to cross over to the other side. Is it better to stay with the old habits and way of life that you know, than risk the chaos of a new lifestyle.

I've known people in counselling who come into counselling because they know they have a problem that isn't going to go away. The counselling helps them see where the pain is coming from and often that process of discovering the source of the pain is so painful that they shirk back and run away. They want to get out of Egypt but when they are shown a Red Sea to cross they lose their nerve – they don't want to confront the issues – they'd rather stay in the pain because at least they know where they are – the alternative of dealing with that pain is just too painful. The Promised Land is there before them but the journey towards it is just too scary to contemplate.

But there are people who make it to the other side. There are people who step out into the Red Sea in faith and find the waters part and the path opening up to the other side. In these ways I can say that the Parting of the Red Sea is true. God works wonders in people's lives, faith is the bridge, that opens the Red Sea and leads them to the Promised Land. There is no telling them that this story isn't true!

As for miracles and parting of Red Seas I have an open mind but well know those issues have their dilemmas.

I mentioned last week about my call to ministry. I spoke about a particular verse in John's gospel that kept recurring 'by coincidence' but I also hinted that there were also other things going on in my life at that time. I shared at the Pause for thought on Thursday one of those things – so forgive me those who were there for repeating the story.

My journey to becoming a church minister was something I resisted. I thought ministers were scroungers who didn't do a proper job and only worked one day a week.

After University I became one of Maggie Thatcher's three million unemployed. Please God may we never go back to those days. I worked in a Pork pie factory to earn some money. Then I became a Church Community Worker on a couple of council estates in the City of Nottingham which was a great experience of the church reaching out to serve

its local community. I then got a job as a social work assistant with Nottingham social services. My manager was pressing me to train to be a fully qualified social worker -he could see a good professional career for me. People in my church were encouraging me to consider candidating to become a church minister. I wasn't keen. I was a proud northern bloke who wanted to make it on my own. I was still committed to working for my church, but I thought I could contribute better financially and in focused time by having a secular career.

As a social work assistant, I had my own caseload of non-statutory needs. I went out to visit this old lady and her son. He had that form of diabetes that was causing him to lose his eyesight. Macular degeneration meant he now only had tunnel vision. He had been caring for his mother for many years as she suffered with osteoporosis. But he couldn't go on. I was there to arrange for his mum to go into care.

At the end of my visit, he got down on his knees and started crying. He was so upset at not being able to care for his mum. He said can you pray for me. I said, 'no I work for the county council'! But I said I do believe in prayer, and I would pray for him in my own time.

I have great respect for social workers. They deal with all the problems of society without any thanks and usually all the criticism for when things go wrong. There is nothing predictable when you deal with people: you can't control outcomes. You learn distancing techniques so that the desperation of some of these personal cases don't get to you. But something about this case made me pray that evening and I still remember to this day being moved to tears in prayer for this man.

The following week, having arranged a care package, I returned to visit him. I met up with a trainee social worker who wanted to see what a social work assistant did. We knocked on his door. When he answered and saw me, he grabbed me and danced in the street. He had got his eyesight back. He said the doctors couldn't explain it, but this miracle had happened, and it was very evident that it had happened. The trainee social worker was gobsmacked. She said, 'does this usually happen?' As if it's part of the service of being a social worker? 'Only on Thursdays! 'I joked in bewilderment.

She had to go back to the office before me as I had other visits to make. When I finally got back to the office word had spread. It was one of those moments when you walk into a place, and everything stops and goes silent. Then the joker in the office punctuates the silence with a quip 'can you do something about the weather?'

Dave my line manager, who had been urging me to train as a social worker but who knew I was thinking about the church, said 'Well I guess you're going to become a minister'.

'I guess so Dave' I said.

I said last week that training for ministry was in a sceptical academic environment that wanted to apply reason to faith. Demythologisation was in fashion – these miracles in

the Bible can only be taken as symbolic actions, but not necessarily literally. Yet I had had this experience of something miraculous – so I couldn't deny it. Stuff happens. It leaves a lot of questions as to why it happens to some but not others, why it doesn't always happen. There is a complete mystery. We are dealing with a God beyond our thoughts and feelings. But we are still dealing with the Creator of all, the redeemer of all, the saviour of all.

If you have a metaphorical Red Sea to cross – have faith – seeks God's help and guidance and may the God of Moses, the God of Jesus be with you.