

Sermon delivered by the Rev. Prof. Ron Nicholson

Sunday 7 August 2011

Being held up in safety over the waves.

Today we've got one of the most loving passages in the Bible and what seems to be one of the most hateful. Let's see if we can make sense of them. The loving passage is that bit from Paul's letter to the Romans. If ever you have harboured hostile feelings towards Paul for what sometimes might seem to be his rather fierce judgements or his views about the place of women, prepare to give them up now. "I love my people so much", he says, my people of origin, the Jews, that I would give up my own hopes of salvation for them. I would be prepared to be cursed, in Geek *anathema*, cursed before God, condemned, if only they could thereby be saved. Isd there anywhere a more loving statement than that. I'd give up heaven for you.

The horrid passage is the one from Exodus; all those poor Egyptians drowning. "The Lord rescued Israel from the Egyptians and Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the shore", it says. Poor Egyptians. Pharaoh may have deserved his fate, but the Egyptian soldiers were just innocent pawns. "Israel witnessed the great act that the Lord had performed against the Egyptians", says Exodus. There is something horrid about the gloating of the Israelites, the assumption that God had killed all their enemies. Well, we'll come back to that.

I've been trying to think of examples to illustrate Paul's willingness to sacrifice even his own salvation for the love of his people. I can think of lots of examples of saints willing to sacrifice everything for God, but that was in order to gain ultimate salvation. To give up salvation for love - who would do that? I wondered whether I could use Princess Margaret as an illustration? Older people here will remember how Princess Margaret gave up her hopes of happiness with Peter Townsend because he was a divorced man and to marry a divorcee was against the teaching of the Church of which her sister was the nominal head. She gave him up for duty to her people, her Queen and her church. The Archbishop of Canterbury said she should, and I have never quite forgiven Geoffrey Fisher whose advice seems ironic in the light of later developments in the Royal Family. She was willing, for love of her country and her people, to give up her personal happiness. And then the rest of her life was a bit of a mess. So maybe its not such a good example. Maybe you can think of better ones. Giving up one's hopes of happiness with God for the sake of someone else: can you think of examples that would fit that? Well yes, of course you can, the greatest example of all. Our Lord Jesus took on himself the curse, the anathema, the separation from the Father, for the sake of the salvation of all of us; for love of us. Paul is just following in the footsteps of his Lord.

But God did not leave Jesus cursed and separated. After the desolation of Good Friday the Father would not abandon him. And perhaps this helps us understand these Bible passages today. Let's come back to the story of the Israelite escape through the Red Sea. And let's not be too judgmental about the Israelites. Just like Rugby players of today cross themselves or point on high when they have dotted down a try, the Israelites, the underdogs, wanted to thank somebody when they won a surprising victory. It's good to be thankful. We don't have to buy into their interpretation; we don't have to believe that God is on the side of the Sharks - though I am sure he is - or of the All Blacks - which he probably is as well - and we don't have to share the ancient Israelite belief that God drowned the Egyptians. But sometimes, without having a logical theology to tie it all up, we just want to be thankful, we just want to remember that whatever successes we achieve are by God's grace. What matters to us is not their theology of their time, but what the story means now to us and has meant to Christians over the centuries.

Water can mean lots of things. You can think of water is a beautiful spring in the dry wilderness feeding our thirst. Or you can think of water as a terrible tsunami destroying all in its path. The Bible, Old and New Testaments, has both thoughts in mind. Water gives life. Water can destroy life. Before the universe came into being, says the beautiful poem of

creation in Genesis, there was just darkness and chaos while water covered the earth. There is just chaos and nothingness until God establishes order and tames the water.

So it was a very scary thing, to venture into the Red Sea. In their understanding of the story they were oppressed and frightened and without hope. God said to them "Be brave and I will lead you through the danger and the chaos." That took faith and courage, and their faith and courage brought them safely to the Promised land, into the safety of order and the law, the Torah, the ways of the Lord.. That's how later generations understood the story, and for Christians the story reminds us of baptism in which again we enter the waters and emerge into the new life leaving behind the chaos of destructive sin and accepting the calm of God's order.

And with that in mind we turn to the gospel. It's one of the few gospel stories told by John as well as the other three gospels - well, in this case except for Luke who for some reason doesn't tell us the story - so the writers of the New Testament thought it very important. You mustn't think of it just as a miracle - Jesus walking on the water. I mean, I know that's very impressive but you must look for and see the underlying meaning. Again, it is dark. Again, the waters are raging, with huge waves, like the primeval chaos before creation began. The disciples are afraid, like the ancient Israelites were afraid. They are afraid they will drown like the Egyptians. We too sometimes feel we are going to drown in chaos, in uncertainty, in worries, in our own faults and sin. We too sometimes feel we are in the dark. And in the darkness, Jesus appears to them. He is not drowning. He is not consumed by the waves. He walks safely over the waves and he says you can too.

And we can't help but remember the story of the Red Sea. That's what the story meant, or at least I think so. The chaos won't consume you, if you have faith in Jesus. So Jesus gets into the boat with them and the boat comes safely to shore. That's why one symbol of the Church is that of a boat. That's why the part of the church you are sitting in is called the nave, after the Latin *navis*, a boat. The people of Christ sail safely over the waves.

So back to Paul again. What he is saying we can perhaps understand to be that for love of his fellow Jews he'd be willing to face the darkness and the chaos of life separated from God. Like Jesus. But Jesus was not left in the darkness. In Jesus, in Christ, the darkness is transformed into light, the chaos is tamed into order. Perhaps we lesser mortals like to cling to what is familiar and safe, We cling to security, whether that is the security of family or marriage or class or race or the security of a safe job or even the security of familiar ideas. The unfamiliar - leaving the security of the known, leaving the security of the familiar is too scary for us. We fear we will be engulfed in the waves of chaos.

But sometimes we have no option. Sometimes, like the Israelites of old, it is either walk through the waves or be overcome by the Egyptians into slavery once more. Sometimes, like Paul, we may be called for love or for duty to leave what is dear and familiar and safe. Or sometimes what was familiar just doesn't work for us any more. Or circumstances - divorce, retrenchment, the present alarming dip in the stock exchange - destroy our security. And as we grow older, we all face the reality that what is known and familiar is drawing to an end and death inevitably approaches. If we think of the disciples today, if we put our hand into the hand of Christ, we will, though we may fear, be held up in safety over the waves and brought to the harbour of a new land. And we too will bow before him and say, "Truly, you are the Son of God."