**Parting the Red Sea (Exodus 14) Sermon Sept 17th 2017 –**

 A famous story from the Bible today, one which as we have seen, has been made into a film several times – from Charlton Heston and the epic Ten Commandments, to Christian Bale and the not-so-well-remembered Exodus: Gods and Kings of 2014. This story marks the end of the Israelites’ flight out of Egypt, and begins their forty years in the wilderness, making their way to the Promised Land.

The parting of the Red Sea became one of the big stories, one of the defining events for the Jewish people in their faith and their identity. Their Exodus from Egypt is a story that they would go back to time and time again to teach them about where they came from and where they are going, and is a story that they *still* go back to time and time again. The Exodus and the crossing of the Red Sea is the key liberation event that formed them as a people, and that speaks to them about the nature of God and about themselves.

 I kinda told the kids the story already, but a recap…

 **Joseph** and his technicolour dreamcoat opens a way for the Israelites to go to Egypt and escape famine in the land where they are living. Initially they are few in number (just Jacob and his off-spring), they are welcomed by the Egyptians, and they prosper. However, **a new dynasty** rises and takes the throne of Egypt with a new Pharaoh. This dynasty fears the Jews because of their growing numbers, and they enslave them, forcing them to work and even throwing their babies into the Nile river to drown, as a way of keeping their population down. In their oppression the Israelites remember their God and cry out for liberation! And God answers, sending **Moses**, a failed prince and reluctant prophet. After much complaining in front of a burning bush, Moses hardens up, goes to the Pharaoh, and demands in the name of the Lord that he “let my people go!”

Pharaoh values his slaves however, and he refuses. In response the Lord then sends 10 plagues on Egypt, until the Pharaoh gives in, and does indeed free the people. God then leads his people out of Egypt, but not along the safe flat roads up north along the coast. Instead God leads them out into the wilderness on the road less travelled, and across to the Red Sea…

 After they leave though Pharaoh changes his mind, gathers his army, and sets out to kill them all. And so God’s people find themselves trapped! They can see land and hope and freedom off in the distance, but for now they are stuck between the Pharaoh and the deep Red Sea. They are helpless and they panic! In terror they begin to moan at God and Moses saying “weren’t there enough graves in Egypt for us to be buried there and not in this terrible place? We told you to just leave us alone and let us be slaves! Better to live as a slave than to die in the dessert…”

 And this is where the Israelites learnt a key lesson about themselves. On the shores of the Red Sea they learned that if it had been up to them, ***they would have stayed slaves in Egypt***. Sure they would have complained and bemoaned their oppression and the injustice of their situation, sure they would have prayed to be set free – but they would have done nothing to free themselves. And as for them, is it similar with us? What enslaves and oppresses us? What do we cry out to God about?But, in as far as we are able, *are we doing anything about it ourselves*? And if God did actually send us a saviour to lead us out into the desert with the promise of bringing us to a future land of plenty, how would we react? Would we follow out into the unknown? (Our Western society is a case in point. The most affluent and well-educated civilisation in history; but also the most lonely, depressed and mentally unwell. How do we feel about the chains that enslave us?)

Back to Egypt though… And this is the point in the story when the miracles click in. **A pillar of cloud and fire** appears between the Israelites and the Egyptian army giving the people time to take a breath, and Moses calls on the people to calm down, stand firm, and take a breath. Good advice when we are in a panic… Moses then stretches his staff out over the sea and God sends a wind which blows onto the waters all night. *This is a slow miracle*, but by morning the wind had opened up a path through the water, giving the people safe passage to the other side.

Some people have an issue with miracles though - especially miracles found in these ancient stories written down 2 ½ thousand years ago, but which speak of events that happened long before that – and a lot of effort has been put into rationalising how this whole thing might have happened. Was it a volcano? Was it an earthquake? Does the Bible calling it the Sea of Reeds and not the Red Sea mean it happened further north where the sea was shallow and they could’ve just walked across?

There is a story of a highly educated US theology professor who was asked to go and preach at a Southern Bible-believing Black-American church. He read today’s story from Exodus 14 when one of the exuberant members of the congregation called out “Hallelujah, a great miracle! God saved his children and lead them through such deep water on dry ground!”

 To which the professor, who did not believe in miracles, replied… “Ah yes, well actually the Red Sea extended a lot further north then than it does now, and this crossing probably happened in a northern marshy area where the water was only about 6 inches deep. So, *only 6 inches of water* – there was no miraculous parting of the sea!”To which the exuberant member of the congregation called out again “Hallelujah, a great miracle! God drowned Pharaoh’s army in only 6 inches of water!”

And that’s my way of saying, let’s not go there… I believe that when we come to the Bible we should come in humility, allowing the Spirit to speak to us. Yes I love history, and I think the context of a story can really open up new understandings to us – but putting ourselves above the Bible in a way that tries to explain the stories away teaches us nothing. The Bible is a ***gateway*** that invites us to step forward in faith - to draw near to God, and to draw near to *listen*. And as Jews and Christians alike have drawn near to God through this story over the centuries, they have heard the Spirit speak powerful truths to them about the nature of God displayed in the parting of the Red Sea.

- That God hates injustice and will act to save the oppressed

- That God will sometimes lead us along the hard path through the wilderness

- That God can open up a way forward, even in the wilderness, even when the path is blocked and there is no way

- And that as well as saving the oppressed, God will act to punish the oppressors…

I do feel a bit squeamish about the fate of those soldiers. After all they were just out there doing their job, prepared to carry out a genocide as ordered by their king – much like we are told the soldiers in Myanmar are doing at the moment. But, this was the same army who murdered the babies of the Israelites, throwing them into the Nile to drown. This story speaks something of God’s justice and of the way God has ordered the universe, in that they themselves end up in a watery grave. Those who drowned the innocent are themselves drowned….

 And that last bit isn’t a warm fuzzy, cuddly-God kind of story is it? But this kind of justice is seen in the teachings of Jesus as well. “The first will be last and the last will be first”; “blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth” ; “those who live by the sword, will die by the sword.”

 And so the Israelites, those who at this point in the story are the meek and the oppressed, pass through the waters on dry ground, and emerge safe on the other side.

- They enter the water as ***refugees***, they emerge as a **nation**

- They enter in ***panic*** and hopelessness, they emerge in **faith** and with a destiny

- They enter in ***fear***, and that fear is refined into **awe** of God

 And so, what about us?

 ***On the personal level***, is there a situation in life that is enslaving or oppressing us? Have we entered into a time in the wilderness? Are we in a place where we feel trapped and there is no way out? Are we living in fear of the world?

 Perhaps we could remember this story…

- Remember how God displayed his desire to release the captives and free the oppressed.

- Remember how God can open up a way forward, even in the wilderness, even when there seems to be no way.

- And remember how God is in the business of transforming our fear of the world into awe of our Creator.

 *But let us also remember that our faith isn’t dependant on how we might be feeling right now*! Faith and truth transcend our feelings. Good times came and go, stresses and hardship will always enter our lives from time to time. But what endures in our faith through the good and the bad is the **cross**! For the cross reminds us that God has already opened up a way for us through the waters of sin and death in Jesus Christ – his life, his death, and his resurrection are the dry land on which we walk.

 In opening our lives to the resurrected Christ we become God’s children like the Jews of old

- we are bound together as a people,

- we find faith and hope and purpose,

- and our fear of that which would oppress us is turned to awe at God’s goodness and grace.

 As we know, we will still encounter experiences of fear and despair at times in our lives, but in Jesus God has defeated the power of sin and death. There is hope, there is a way - Jesus is our path of liberation. Let’s stop and pause now like Moses called the Israelites to do, to be still and remember Christ, and to open our hearts to him afresh.