

The Bible's Theme

My aim in this lecture is to take up the themes of variety which we examined last time in the context of the Torah or Pentateuch, where we recognised four major streams or sources of writing: but approaching it this time from a more Olympian viewpoint. I would like to examine the process by which the Jewish Bible takes up what many of us would see as its principal theme, which we can call by its prime expression *Exodus*.

I suppose that the word itself can express in a very comprehensive way the business of becoming human; our birth is a coming out of darkness into light, and the path of our existence, at its best, is a continuation of that process of being born, being *delivered*, as we say, out of the darkness and into the light. Take your language seriously; if there are relationships within the language we use that are to be discovered, it would be foolish of us to use our magnificent vocabulary in a half-aware fashion. If we want to offer anything to others who are sharing this big story of coming to humanity, it should be by offering them a rite of passage for whatever stage of their journey they are on.

The Church is sometimes called our mother; we might also consider her as a midwife, whose task is to ease and assist the successful arrival of new people into a world that is welcoming. Any mother would wish to see her own joy at the birth of a child mirrored in the eyes of the midwife; and I think that priests and deacons ought to see themselves as rejoicing as they see the process of birth passing new milestones in the journey of those whom they serve.

From the foregoing, you might guess that what I want to discover today is the way in which the pattern of Exodus can come to function as the template of the religion of the Bible, that is to say, of our religion. As the religious foundation of the faith, it will need to be built on in innumerable ways by the hosts of believers who will use it to explain and illuminate the whole of their human experience. And as each of them faithfully seeks his or her individual meaning in this pattern, so they will all feed it for one another, displaying its function in ways that are always renewed and enriched by their own new realities. This is the meaning of canonisation in the Church, where the Church solemnly recognises the way in which one of the family has built successfully on the foundation that unites us all, and wishes to offer the image of a saint to the whole family for encouragement and education.

The Bible elaborates the master-imagery of the Exodus in very many literary forms, whose functioning can all teach us new ways of entering into the heart of the matter of our faith. To take a single example, you might think of the Christian celebration that sits at the heart of the mystery that unites us. The Easter Vigil, designated as the portal to Christian initiation, takes the form of a long meditation on the entire sweep of the Scriptures. In its history it has taken various paths in various places, which no doubt Fr Harvey might be willing to investigate with you. But it has always enshrined the same pattern, and set before the Church in every time and space the same theme which resounds in the whole Scripture and the whole Church, which we call by the generic term “the Paschal Mystery”.

There is good warranty for this way of presenting the ultimate truth of Christ:

²⁵ Then he said to them, 'You foolish men! So slow to believe all that the prophets have said!

²⁶ Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer before entering into his glory?'

²⁷ Then, starting with Moses and going through all the prophets, he explained to them the passages throughout the scriptures that were about himself. *Lk 24*

There can be no doubt that this was the first trolley-dash through the Bible, delivering from its pages before the astonished eyes of Cleopas and his companion not only the revelation of the mystery of the cross, but the illumination and resolution of their own perplexity and devastation in the aftermath of the first Good Friday:

*Did not our hearts burn within us
as he spoke to us on the road
and opened the Scriptures to us?*

The task of Christian preachers is the same as that of Jesus within the narrative of the first Easter. When we understand that, we can see the working of the hand of Christ himself in the making of the great Christian feast: he went up to Jerusalem, as Luke's Gospel makes very clear, with his mind full of the meaning of Passover; on the way he is transfigured on top of the mountain, with Moses and Elijah

speaking with him of his Exodus, which he would accomplish in Jerusalem.

He chose the time and the place at which he would precipitate the events which we now hold in such veneration, and which we express day by day in the liturgy of the Last Supper. What other time could he have selected, except for the feast of the Jewish Passover? And where could he have chosen to go to do this, except the city of royal destiny, the city of sacrifice, the city of the Ark of the Covenant?

³¹ Just at this time some Pharisees came up. 'Go away,' they said. 'Leave this place, because Herod means to kill you.'

³² He replied, 'You may go and give that fox this message: Look! Today and tomorrow I drive out devils and heal, and on the third day I attain my end.'

³³ But for today and tomorrow and the next day I must go on, since it would not be right for a prophet to die outside Jerusalem.

³⁴ 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you that kill the prophets and stone those who are sent to you! How often have I longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you refused!

³⁵ Look! Your house will be left to you. Yes, I promise you, you shall not see me till the time comes when you are saying: Blessed is he who is coming in the name of the Lord!' *Lk 13*

We should turn then to our sources, and study them very thoroughly. The Church knows that in the Scripture there is something called the Hierarchy of Truth, which places certain truths above or below others that are more or less vital. Today I propose the theme of the Exodus to you as the central theme of the Old Testament, and (given its amplification in the hands of Jesus) of the whole Bible.



I think it important to distinguish first of all between history as related, for example, by the royal historians who composed the history of King David, or the more court-based writers who chronicled the doings of Solomon, and the writings in which the stories of the Exodus from Egypt are expressed. It is quite clear that the royal historians are operating according to rules very close to what we could call historiography; given the three thousand years that separate us from them, it is remarkable how readily we communicate with these historians. In reading Exodus, however, we are encountering a very different form of literature.

The prime difference is probably in the massive presence within the Exodus account of the miraculous, shown in the plagues that afflict Pharaoh, in the passage of the Red Sea, the miraculous feeding of the wanderers in the desert with manna and quails and the water from the rock, and the cosmic signs surrounding the delivery of the Law at Sinai.

It has been asked whether the readers of the scriptural account when it was cast into its present form - somewhere in the eighth century perhaps, estimates vary - found it much easier to believe in miracles than we do today. It is certainly true that in the pre-scientific atmosphere it is easier to have a sense of awe before the mystery of nature itself, and that there is much that cannot be given what we would call adequate scientific explanation. On the other hand, our own rationalist mindset is perhaps as deprived in the opposite direction of real experience of the world, since we are prone to ignore its wonder and become blind to its beauty because of our assumed capacity to explain it away. This is in its way as crippled a condition for humanity as is the mindset that cannot explain, and which yet attempts to come to terms with the world as it is. Alongside their restricted understanding, the ancient peoples of the earth, prone as they were to investing in magic and ritual to assist their passage through the world, did not neglect to sharpen their tools, to observe the realities that affected them, and to investigate as well as they could the conditions with which they had to deal.

The literary form of a miracle story has about it two things we find hard to deal with: firstly the thought that any happening - a plague, a solar eclipse, a tidal wave - should have about it any meaning beyond the blind operation of nature: and secondly the thought that all phenomena might actually happen under the aegis of an almighty Creator, who has not walked away from what he has made.

The gathering about the Exodus of miraculous phenomena testifies to the belief of the author, and of the tradition he is transmitting, that the vital experience which gave birth to the nation of Israel was indeed an act of God performed *with mighty hand and outstretched arm*; and this is the principal message of the author. Most of you will already have studied the part of Canon Charpentier's little book about reading the Old Testament which explodes the Pentateuchal sources in the description of the Red Sea miracle; the presence within that extract of three of the four voices displays the continuing significance of what is written over the whole spectrum of the Torah's composition. Already, as the Canon points out, the generations are adding their perceptions to the account; he goes further to point to the song of victory which follows on from the story, and explains how the hymn adds specific stanzas which refer forwards to various consequences that can be traced back to the Exodus: for instance, the conquest of the Promised Land, the taking of Jerusalem, the building of the Temple on Mount Sion. These realities were, of course, entirely unknown to the people of the twelfth century BC; but the generations who have embellished the Scripture that speaks of them have wished to trace what was vital to their lives back to the mystery which they believed gave them birth.

There may be some of you who have become possessed of a modern history of ancient Israel; it will certainly not tell the same story as the Bible, because as we have often pointed out the Bible is not a professional history-book. If you have come across the history of Israel written by Martin Noth, however, you will find stated as fact something whose possibility dawns slowly on all readers of the Scripture: that the whole story that precedes the settlement in Canaan - that is, from about 1250 BC onwards - is factually unreliable and can tell us little about the history of Israel. Noth's reasons for this radical stance stem from the fact that before the settlement of the tribes in Canaan, the idea of Israel hardly existed, and the tribes themselves were actually a rag-bag collection of disparate groups with a nomadic, therefore pre-literary culture. Everything in the sequence Abraham - Isaac - Jacob - Joseph - Oppression - Moses - Exodus - Desert wanderings is a literary sequence dreamed up as the prologue to a history of Israel properly so-called, which demands for its veracity the land itself. Noth is happy to concede that the stories used may be based on genuine events: that *some* Hebrews may have escaped from slavery in Egypt, that *some others* may have tried living in the desert south of Judah, but the sustained story running from Genesis 12 to Exodus 19 is clearly an invented framework from much later times, demanded by the needs of the emerging tribal confederacy in Canaan, which had to give an account of its past.

Exodus

The book of Exodus is the second of the five books of the Torah, composed of the first three sources (J, E, P). The material it contains varies immensely in age, and one of our perceptions is that it seems perfectly capable of standing alone, despite our natural assumption that it belongs to the series in which we now find it. For instance, there is very little to suggest that the story of Moses springs naturally from the long epic in Genesis 12 – 50 which tells the tale of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph and his brothers. That saga ends with the family reunited in Egypt, honoured and prosperous after vicissitude and intrigue. Exodus begins with a cursory mention of *a Pharaoh who had not known Joseph* looking on the Israelites with mixed loathing and fear, and beginning a fierce persecution designed to enslave and finally to eliminate them. The occurrence of the name *Abraham* is meagre in the extreme: it crops up a mere nine times in 40 chapters, all of them formulaic insertions recalling the covenant, in some such phrase as

as I promised to your ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob

It takes very little to realise that these incidental citations are the work of an editor rather than the author of the work in any of his manifestations. We can therefore read the various ways in which the story appears to begin as if they were absolutely primary beginnings: ways of telling how Israelite religion first began. The story of Abraham begins quite bluntly, with no preamble or introduction: God simply speaks to him, and he listens and obeys.

Our habit as readers of the Bible is to accept Genesis 1 as the first chapter, despite our awareness that Gen 1 is actually a late source emanating from the Babylonian Captivity, and that it is designed to be a commentary on Babylonian Religion, subordinating the various forms of nature worshipped by the Babylonians to the status of creatures obedient to a transcendent and awesomely invisible God. Our habit is to read all subsequent Scriptures as if they were written in the shadow of the Creation stories, as if the archetypal way of thinking about God has always been to think of a Creator. If instead we were to read Exodus, and allow it to stand alone instead of accepting it as Part Two in a series, we should experience God, not *primarily* as Creator, but as Redeemer. If this be properly considered, it will be

quickly seen that it puts quite a different complexion on the faith. We do not proceed, as believers, from a cosmological meditation on the First Cause of the Universe: we proceed from an encounter with a God who leans down to listen to our cry, who is moved to action by our oppressed state.

This *encountered* God is nearer to the classic stories of faith, such as the so-called conversion of St Paul in the Acts of the Apostles. Saul is breathing fire on his way to Damascus: his theological position is referred to as having been acquired at the feet of Gamaliel, the great rabbinic divine. But the transformation of his life is not accomplished by any theological progress or intellectual proposition. He is *met by Christ*, in a global experience which knocks him simultaneously off his horse and his path of life.

A story like that of Moses and the Burning Bush similarly operates on a level that does not depend on the intellect. But it would not be difficult to treat the encounter as told there as if it were the first moment of God's reaching out to humanity. And we recall that these Mosaic stories, in any case, were being told centuries before the seven-day story of Creation was written. It is practically certain that Moses had never heard the beginning of the Book of Genesis even in an extremely early form. We can also see that the nationhood of the Hebrew slaves is far from the yearning reality depicted by Verdi in *Nabucco*:

So say to the Israelites, "I am Yahweh. I shall free you from the forced labour of the Egyptians; I shall rescue you from their slavery and I shall redeem you with outstretched arm and mighty acts of judgement.

⁷ I shall take you as my people and I shall be your God. And you will know that I am Yahweh your God, who have freed you from the forced labour of the Egyptians.

⁸ Then I shall lead you into the country which I swore I would give to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and shall give it to you as your heritage, I, Yahweh." '

⁹ And Moses repeated this to the Israelites, but they would not listen to Moses, so crushed was their spirit and so cruel their slavery. Ex 6

The sense that God's initiative is designed to transform the lives of this fallen people *in ways they do not know how to desire* is extremely clear. In this sense the notion of God as Creator is implied in the radical effect of his salvific deed. His relationship with them is not to be determined by their perception of him, but by his desire to liberate them for purposes of his own.

The question should be posed: what is asked of the Israelites by way of participation in their own redemption? After all, the popular perception of religion is deeply involved with ethical considerations and a true way of life. In the hierarchy of truths in the Book of Exodus, this theme is secondary:

¹⁰ As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up -- and there were the Egyptians in pursuit of them! The Israelites were terrified and cried out to Yahweh for help.

¹¹ To Moses they said, 'Was it for lack of graves in Egypt, that you had to lead us out to die in the desert? What was the point of bringing us out of Egypt?'

¹² Did we not tell you as much in Egypt? Leave us alone, we said, we would rather work for the Egyptians! We prefer to work for the Egyptians than to die in the desert!'

¹³ Moses said to the people, 'Do not be afraid! Stand firm, and you will see what Yahweh will do to rescue you today: the Egyptians you see today you will never see again.'

¹⁴ Yahweh will do the fighting for you; all you need to do is to keep calm.'
Ex 14

Furthermore, the actual purpose of the saving deed of God is written within his own being, not determined by any of the realities of the human situation:

⁵ Yahweh then said to Moses, 'Why cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to march on.

¹⁶ Your part is to raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, so that the Israelites can walk through the sea on dry ground,

¹⁷ while I, for my part, shall make the Egyptians so stubborn that they will follow them, and I shall win glory for myself at the expense of Pharaoh and all his army, chariots and horsemen.

¹⁸ And when I have won glory for myself at the expense of Pharaoh and his chariots and horsemen, the Egyptians will know that I am Yahweh.'

The features of the Exodus are therefore becoming clearer.

- The people is oppressed, to the point where it can no longer be said to care for its survival; the ultimate agenda of enslavement is the death of the enslaved, whose humanity has become a possession of others, and whose will has been utterly subordinated to the will of others. This engenders a rich symbolism of the power of evil to dehumanise and paralyse.
- God has heard their cry, and has stooped to the earth to investigate their state; he has decreed the downfall of Pharaoh, and decided upon the location of the Promised Land. This theme of divine favour will ground every instance of redemptive act in future.
- He will appoint his minister to be the earthly agent of the divine will. The approach of God to Moses is of great significance. The relationship of God to Abram was entirely personal; but Moses has a vocation which involves a whole people. The theme of divine adoption of human leaders will continue to be crucial to the whole structure of the faith. God's calling of Moses is recounted in different ways several times.
- The opposition between God and Pharaoh sets up a polarity that will influence the rest of the Bible. The possibility of opposing God is, in the Scripture, a constant source of awe and a way of mapping human experience. The hubris of Pharaoh stands for all forms of blasphemy and selfishness; Moses, by contrast, is accorded the adjective *meek*, and despite the giant status he enjoys in the Israelite tradition, he personifies the humility proper to the creature in the presence of the divine. (Note, however, that there is not the slightest trace at this point of the tradition of the garden of Eden and the anthropology which later thinkers, and particularly Paul, will draw from it.) The insignificance of Moses in human terms - for instance, in his own eyes, or in the eyes of Pharaoh - makes yet more remarkable the impact of the divine powers he wields.
- There is a theme of division and judgment within the tradition. The signs and wonders accompanying the work of God create parallel effects in Israelite and Egyptian alike. More significantly, the eventual miracle at the Sea of Reeds displays the power of God to make the cosmos an instrument of his justice; the sea, for example, unites in itself the power to save (it divides to make a dry path for the chosen people) and to punish (it returns to its bed and drowns the enemies of God). The whole poetry of a cosmos obedient to the divine will flows from this imagery: that the same cosmos may be experienced by us as terrifying and inimical notwithstanding.