

GOD'S RESCUE PLAN – MOSES & THE "RED SEA" (Ex. 14.10-31; Mt 17.1-9)



In my student days I did a **hard trek** with a group. It seemed unending, although it was only 14 days and not 40 years. A real problem cropped up one day – we had to cross a huge watery mass. The people in front got over ok, but I had to jump to safety as what seemed like half a mountainside slipped away. Sadly, the folk behind didn't make it. That's just one of many examples in my life when God has obviously been looking after me.

Actually, it **wasn't quite like that**, but then stories do get exaggerated when passed on. We were doing a high-level walk round Mont Blanc, and the watery mass was the thawing snout of a small glacier. It was my size 13 boots that proved just too much for the ice, and I had to jump to the far side as part of the glacier slipped away. I certainly wasn't the most popular member of the party as the others had to do make a lengthy detour to reach our mountain hut. Guess who had to buy the drinks that night!

It's the sort of escape **story that gets passed down the generations**, just as the stories about Moses we've been thinking about recently (the Burning Bush, the Plagues) were passed on throughout the Old Testament and referred to in the New Testament as well. (In **today's Gospel** passage, Moses appeared on the mountain top with Elijah at Jesus's transfiguration.)

For the Israelites, the important thing was the **theology of God's saving actions** rather than strict historical or geographical accuracy. They knew nothing about the laws of nature, so "miracles" weren't an issue. Only the fact that **God had rescued his people** mattered.

For them, the crossing of the sea was the crux of **God's rescue plan**. Hardly had the Israelites got free from Egypt after the Plagues (the other Brian spoke on Psalm 105 last week) when a stubborn Pharaoh pursued with a detachment of a professional army which had seen off surrounding nations. The bondage of slavery threatened once more. The people were terrified and thought that they had been better off doing Pharaoh's hard labour (vv. 11-12).

**Not an easy situation for Moses**, on the receiving end of their bitter recriminations and grumbles, just as he would be for the next 40 years in the desert. Unlike today's Gospel reading, this period was certainly no "mountain top" experience for Moses. If Moses had thought that all would be plain sailing on the march to the promised land, with God himself as master of ceremonies in the pillar of cloud and fire (13.20f), then he had got it very wrong.

### **So what can we say for sure?**

The **Hebrew name** for the place where God rescued his people means Sea of Reeds. When the Old Testament was translated into Greek two or three centuries BC, the Red Sea error occurred. Most commentators think it refers to an area of marshes around the Bitter Lakes, or shallow lakes to the East of the Suez Canal.

As we've already seen, you don't have to play "Chinese whispers" to know that **stories can so easily grow in the telling**. So perhaps we shouldn't get hung up over "*the walls of water on their right and on their left*" (v.29), or the idea that "*the entire army of Pharaoh*" was destroyed (v.28). In the case of the so-called "Red Sea" crossing it was the hair's breadth escape that made all the difference between life and death to the Hebrews. It was a real wonder, evidence of God's timely care as he used natural phenomena and supernatural powers to save his people.

A "*strong east wind*" (v.21) blew hard all night and **lowered the level of the marshy lake** sufficiently for the Hebrews to cross. At the critical moment when the chariots were pursuing, the wind ceased (again, God's well-timed work), the chariots got waterlogged, the horses panicked, and the charioteers sent in pursuit of the group of runaway slaves, were drowned. Incidentally, "Riders" is

a mistranslation, for cavalry with riders did not occur until the first millennium. Notice that in the triumph song of Moses and Miriam, there is rejoicing that “both horse and **driver** the Lord has thrown into the sea” (15.1,21).

It’s time for our **mystery to be solved**, since you’ve all been puzzling over the map extract you should have been given.

Does anyone know its origin? Any cathedral lovers, perhaps? It is from the **Mappa Mundi in Hereford Cathedral**, the largest medieval map still in existence. It was made around 1300 and shows the history, geography and destiny of humanity as understood in Christian Europe at the time. It shows:

- 420 towns (how wonderful that **Jerusalem**, marked with a crucifix, is at the centre – top LH corner on extract)
- 32 people (including Noah with his ark and our hero **Moses** on Mount Sinai - between the red trouser legs).
- 15 Biblical events (including the **route taken by the Israelites out of Egypt**, looking like a dual carriageway where it crosses the lower red trouser leg, the so-called Red Sea). If you follow the meanderings of this route, you’ll see where the Israelites got lost in the desert and then, finally, found their way to the ‘Promised Land’.

This map isn’t just centred on Jerusalem. I want to emphasise that this escape route from Egypt is the **only prominent track shown**, an indication of its importance to any Christian understanding of how God rescued his people.

I would encourage you to **take home this little extract** from the Mappa Mundi, dig out a good magnifying glass to see what else you can decipher, or alternatively explore the excellent inter-active website. Best of all, go to Hereford Cathedral to see the real thing, helpfully interpreted.

### **So what can we learn from Exodus 14?**

**FIRST OF ALL**, we must remember that what happened at the Sea of Reeds became absolutely central to the faith of Israel. This was **the** saving event, **the** crux of God’s rescue plan so regularly referred to by prophets and psalmists as well as New Testament writers.

Israel passed **from slavery to ultimate freedom** and all the tyranny that Pharaoh represented was swept away. These were waters of destruction and waters of new birth. This is where Israel as a nation was born.

**SECONDLY**, the battle belonged to God alone, and to none other. As Moses said: *“Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring to you today. ... The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still”* (vv.13f).

Notice that although the **decisive action came from God**, his human agent Moses had his part to play, both by his words and by actively participating in God’s plan. And **we too have our part** to play, if God’s will is to be fulfilled.

For there are also times in our faith pilgrimages when the **going gets difficult**. At such times, Christians need the help of both God himself **and** of a “Moses” to see them through. We can discover that, like the pillar of cloud, the God who has been our leader becomes our protector (vv. 19-20).

Just as **Moses spoke words of encouragement** to the terrified Israelites on the shore of the “Red Sea” (vv.13-14), so it is **up to all of us**, church ministers and lay folk alike, spiritually and practically to strengthen other Christians to press on when things get hard.

**THIRDLY**, haven’t we a **lot to be thankful for!** The two “songs of Moses” (Exodus 15 and Deuteronomy 32), have been used regularly in Christian worship. Exodus 15 speaks of praise (vv.1f) and wonder (vv.11f) at God’s salvation of his people.

*“The Lord is my strength and my defence; he has become my salvation. He is my God and I will praise him, my father’s God and I will exalt him”* (Exodus 15.2).

These words emphasise the **essential relationship** between Moses and God, and rejoice at his “story so far” – his rescue from the bullrushes, his commissioning for service at the Burning Bush, his part in freeing his people from slavery, and his leadership skills during the difficult journeying.

So **let’s think back over our own faith lives** and use Moses’ words to celebrate something of our own experiences of God’s help.

*“The Lord is my strength and my defence; he has become my salvation. He is my God and I will praise him, my father’s God and I will exalt him”* (Exodus 15.2).

Whatever you do, **keep this little map** of a key route in God’s rescue plan so that you may be an **encourager like Moses** and can also **rejoice at your “story so far”**. And it doesn’t matter if you get carried away when passing on your story to others!