

Oliver Appleby baptism talk

The story of Moses

1 Peter 2:4-10

In our Sunday sermons / talks at the moment we are taking a quick trip through the major stories of the Bible. Not just to hear again those stories which may be very familiar to us, but to see how they all fit together. How the story of the ancient people of Israel that we hear about in the Old Testament of the Bible links in with the story of Jesus and the Christian Church which began in the New Testament and which we are still part of today and into which we will be baptising Oliver.

This Sunday we have arrived at the story of Moses – perhaps the most significant character in the Old Testament history of Israel.

Kate has just recapped the major points of the story.

How Moses received the initial call from God. How God interrupted what was an ordinary day, as Moses was doing what he did every day, tending the sheep. How God called him to a new task. And how Moses protested that he couldn't possibly do this, and then how God promised to be with him and equip him.

Clearly what God was calling Moses to was something big. But he still calls people today. Sometimes to big things, perhaps more often to small tasks. New jobs, something within the church perhaps, a different role within the community. Whatever it might be, for most of us (well for me at any rate) the initial response is almost always – you've chosen the wrong person; I couldn't possibly do that; there are countless others who are far more skilled or better able to do it. But God always comes back in the same way that he responded to Moses. That he would be alongside us. That in his strength nothing is impossible.

Moses job was to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt. The Israelites were economic refugees or migrants who had settled in Egypt. The then King (or Pharaoh) had welcomed them (as we heard last week). But as time went on the Egyptians began to resent them. They are taking our jobs, they are a threat to law and order. Familiar protests. And yet the Israelites were useful. In reality they did the jobs no one else wanted to do.

The new Pharaoh clamped down on them, treating them more and more harshly – almost like slaves. But he was not prepared to let them leave and settle elsewhere. They were too useful to him as labourers and perhaps as scapegoats.

So Moses task seemed like an impossible one. To lead a huge number of people from this oppression and slavery when the might of the nation of Egypt would oppose him.

And this story of course became the most significant story in Jewish history – known in the Bible as the Exodus. Leading the people from slavery to a new home – a promised land – a land (as the Bible describes it) flowing with milk and honey. A story that has been adopted

by people through the ages – a story of how God himself is on the side of the marginalised and oppressed.

The story that begins with the Passover – the Israelites putting a sign on their doors in lamb's blood so that the angel of the Lord would pass over their homes as he killed the first born sons of the Egyptians.

The story that continues with the crossing of the Red Sea. The motley crew of Israelites leaving Egypt with the Egyptian army on their tails. Ahead of them was the Red Sea – a seemingly impenetrable barrier. And yet God parts the waters to allow the people through on dry land. The pursuing Egyptians follow them, but then the waters close in and the army are drowned.

The story then moves to the wilderness wanderings. The people of Israel slowly being moulded by God into a nation – a nation that would trust in him through good times and bad; a nation that would worship him and witness to him. Culminating perhaps in the moment Moses received the commandments from God, commandments which became the foundation of life in the community.

And the Exodus story concludes with what we will hear next week as the people enter the promised land. Not under Moses but under his successor Joshua. Moses' task was now complete – we do not always see things through to their conclusion – we just have to play our part whatever that may be.

But I just want to highlight some connections between this story of the Exodus with the New Testament and with our own faith as Christians today.

The first – and perhaps the one that would immediately spring to mind – is the connection between Passover and the Communion service or Eucharist. Today's service is not a communion, but at a communion service we remember how Jesus reinterpreted the Passover festival in terms of his own impending death.

Just as through the blood of the lamb daubed on their door posts the Israelites were effectively saved from slavery into freedom, so through the death of Jesus and the spilling of his blood on the cross we are saved from our slavery to sin to being free to live in the presence of God for evermore. Sins are forgiven, new life is possible, the past is behind, the future is to live for.

The communion acts as a commemoration of what Jesus achieved on the cross, just as the Jewish Passover festival reminds Jews about the mighty power of God at work in the Exodus.

But there is also a link between the crossing of the Red Sea and baptism. For the people of Israel it was the crossing of the Sea that marked their freedom from Egypt. Not only was the Egyptian army drowned, but there was now a barrier between Egypt and themselves. They had witnessed God at work. As the waters of the Red Sea closed in it was as if all the troubles and hurt and pain of the years of oppression and slavery were left behind.

For us the water of baptism is a sign that we are no longer ruled by the things of this world. All the desires and regrets that hold us back and stop us from being the person God wants us to be are effectively drowned in the waters of baptism. We begin a new life with Christ. And its in faith that we baptise Oliver today – that he might know the truth that God will always want him to look to the future and not be held back by the past.

I spoke a few moments ago about the wilderness wanderings shaping the people of Israel into those who would trust in God. It was in the desert that they learned the hard lessons of trust. When the water ran out; when they were hungry; when all seemed lost. They learned the difference between mere belief and a real trust in God.

In our reading from the New Testament we heard Peter the apostle talk about Christians, like the people of Israel, being a chosen people.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

*Once you were not a people,
but now you are God's people;
once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy.*

It is into this people that we baptise Oliver today. In faith that he will grow up to believe and trust in God, to shine in the world with the light of Christ and to know and proclaim the mighty acts of God. All of which will be possible because of the mercy of God shown through what Jesus did on the cross.

The story of Moses then is, on one level, a wonderful tale of a nation gaining their freedom from oppressors. But on another it's a picture of how God can lead each one of us from the shackles that bind us and keep us in the past to the freedom that life with him offers – both now and into eternity. And its into this freedom that we baptise Oliver this morning.