

2 Easter (C)

April 19, 2020

Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today.
Exodus 14:13

Great epic stories have to start somewhere. Every people, every culture, every religion has gathered to itself a defining myth. Now myth should not be equated with falsehood. Myth, rather, is history writ large; it's history as seen through the lens of a nation's aspirations, in the eyes of a country's dreams. For ancient Israel this defining mythic moment was the triumph at the Red Sea.

Long, long before Cecile B. De Mille and Charlton Heston made the story popular for moviegoers, the account of Israel's victory over Pharaoh's army had etched its power and meaning into the Jewish nation's collective memory, into its soul a memory as still alive today, in the Passover celebration just concluded, as it ever was. And yet, at the same time, it's a story with universal appeal. It really has everything redemption, retribution, escape, pilgrimage, enemies crushed and righteous laws created, plus a beleaguered leader who for all his weaknesses and missteps is able to stare God in the face, and live, and so continue to lead his rebellious people. It was a movie waiting to be made!

Perhaps more than anything else, though, the Exodus has come down to us as the ultimate liberation story. So, it was a feature not lost on slaves seeking freedom in every age, including in our own nation's tragic history. Once plantation preachers let their captive pupils hear the story of the Red Sea, there was no stopping the 'Exodus' north in the years prior to the Civil War, even to the point of calling leaders like Harriet Tubman 'Moses.'

But this same story and its meaning was not lost on the earliest Christians either. For them Jesus was the new Moses and the long-awaited Messiah one who had led them out of the slavery of sin into the promised land of God's mercy and grace. For these first believers, the risen Christ became the power by which all are saved, in which all are washed, not in waves of destruction but in the healing waters of baptism. The journey in the desert thus became a pathway of quest and testing, yet always under the watchful eye of a saving God. "Guide me, O Thou great Redeemer," begins my favorite Welsh hymn; "pilgrim through this barren land. / I am weak, but Thou art mighty; hold me with Thy powerful hand... Strong Deliverer, strong Deliverer, be Thou still my strength and shield; / Be Thou still my strength and shield."

It may feel these days that we ourselves are living out our own Exodus story. Under the threat of illness and death, it may seem that we've escaped not into the desert of cloud and fire but into a wilderness of isolation and uncertainty. And yet we know too that for many battling on the front lines of this pandemic, it IS a desert of peril and pursuit, of hourly dangers and frequent death. And for those who can ill afford the luxuries that home and job still offer others, that pilgrims burden (which they never asked for) must be intolerable. When the final cost of this searing time is counted up, I fear it will not be measured by bodies alone (as beloved as each of these are), but also in terms of hopes and livelihoods, of broken promises and lost dreams.

Still, that's where we come in. For, still, it is Easter not a day or a season, not a date on the calendar, but a lifelong reality. And we are, what's more, an Easter people. We believe ourselves to have come by ways of grace through the wave and flame and struggle of earthly life into the presence of Christ's redeeming power. So, we hold in our own minds and memories

that one mythic moment, for us that decisive morning when what the world thought it knew about life and death, surrender and triumph, slavery and freedom was all turned on its head. "Christ is alive! Let Christians sing, / his cross stands empty to the sky. / Let streets and homes with praises ring. / His love in death shall never die."

We hold and we celebrate this epic story. But we also live it and proclaim it in body and soul. We take all the mercy and love that has been showered on us and pour it over the deserts of lives who have gone through the journey with us, yet who may need more OF us even now, as well as when the journey ends. There is so much we can do, even as we practice safely and seek wellness. There are neighbors still to feed, children still who are homeless, workers still at risk, refugees still trapped, incomes still shattered, families that will never be quite the same again. There are ways right now to reach them, or try to, programs of outreach and support in which this community and this church will take an active part.

The truth is, we may need to stay where we are, but not as we are; we cannot sit idle. For we ARE an Easter people. We ARE pilgrims through a barren land that only the power of Christ within us can replenish and restore. Indeed, I believe history and heaven will judge us not by how we survived this painful time, but rather by how we prevailed, by how well we used the gifts of deliverance those many and varied gifts of Christ's Resurrection and of the Spirits power to return hope where hope has been shattered, and to plant love again in lives from whom love has fled.

That will be our judgment before the throne. That will be our grace and our glory, given by God in Jesus. And, if we need it, that also will be the way out of any wilderness in which we may have found ourselves, any lost paths we may have followed, while on the way to a promised land that all the nations seek, and that every soul desires. Amen.

Many Blessings—and a Happy, Holy Eastertide!
Fr. Gordon +