

Sermon Given by

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Exodus 13:17-14:31 - "Into deep water..."

The most common theme of pop lyrics must be love but I reckon there's a fairly good chance that the next most popular theme would be that of freedom. Here's Joni Mitchell: "And the seasons they go round and round and the painted ponies go up and down; we're captives on a carousel of time."

Here's Leonard Cohen: "Like a bird on a wire, like a drunk in some midnight choir, I've tried in my way to be free."

And perhaps most famously of all, here's Freddie Mercury the lead singer of Queen – a multi millionaire, adored the world over but who died of AIDS a very lonely man in his mid-40s. He sang: "I want to break free."

And in many ways you could say that the 20th C has been the century of liberation – black liberation, women's liberation, gay liberation, animal liberation.

Of course we have seen wonderful moments of liberation: this last week we've celebrated the 20th anniversary since the Berlin Wall was toppled. Way before that universal suffrage was granted for women, the Nazis were defeated, Apartheid was dismantled – a lot of freedom for all sorts of people has been won but still the words of Jean Jacques Rousseau who died in 1778 ring true: "Man was born to be free yet everywhere is in chains."

There is a desire for some elusive freedom that we simply can't find in this world – we may find it for a period but then we find ourselves enchained by the very thing we hoped would set us free – money, career, sex, fame.

There lies in the hearts of many that sense that we're entrapped – enslaved to forces that we simply cannot conquer. And many still long for freedom, they sing with Freddie Mercury "I want to break free" and they long for someone to redeem them.

What we're unable to do for ourselves is find liberty – where will we find it? Well the passage in Exodus this morning is one of the great Bible passages about freedom – it's all about God the Liberator. And it's to God that everybody needs to look to find true freedom. As Jesus says in John 8:36 *"if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."*

Well let's take a closer look at this great passage about God the Liberator. The context for this liberation is given for us right at the start of our passage where we read how a major part of the rescue has already taken place – when we read the words 13:17 *"Pharaoh let the people go..."*

Now those words aren't the full story, they didn't come lightly. He had stubbornly refused to let the people go. The plagues hadn't made him budge but then after the last plague – the death of the firstborns, he had finally given way.

And so we see how in these opening verses 13:17 – 14:4 the emphasis is entirely on our main theme today – God the Deliverer and throughout these verses we are told that God was leading the people. Can you see that in v18: *“so God led the people around by the desert road towards the Red Sea.”* V21 *“By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way...”*

God's sovereign over the route they take – they don't take the direct route, the route called in v17 *“the road through the Philistine country”* – instead he tells them to do the most extraordinary thing. 14:1 *‘Then the Lord said to Moses, “Tell the Israelites to turn back and camp near Pi Hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea. They are to camp by the sea, directly opposite Baal Zephon.”*

Or put it another way God wanted them to camp with the sea in front of them, mountains on one side, sand dunes on the other and what would be behind them. God had decided what would be behind them and he explains himself in v4 – *“And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them. But I will gain glory for myself through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord.”*

God the Liberator has decided what will happen so he now works in Pharaoh's heart. Pharaoh asks himself middle of v5 *“What have we done? We have let the Israelites go and have lost their services!”*

So preparations are made and it's not long before Pharaoh and his army with 600 of their best chariots are bearing down on the Israelites. So imagine the scene – there are the Israelites literally caught between the devil and the deep blue sea and what's more Pharaoh and his men would have been incandescent with rage – masses of them would have just lost a son, a brother, a father, an uncle, a grandfather, a cousin – maybe several of the above. These men were fired up. How would the Israelites react? Do look down at v10 and here we have our first heading...**Israel's Fear**

V10 *“As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the Lord.”* They were understandably quaking with fear – chariots were the chief attack weapon of the day and 600 of the latest and best models were heading straight for them.

Their initial reaction is good though – they cried out to the Lord – they prayed. But then they have a shocker – v11 *‘They said to Moses, “was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn't we say to you in Egypt, “leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians”? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!’*

Actually they hadn't said that – their great cry in Egypt was for liberation. 2:23 *“The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God.”*

What's more some of them had in their hands the bones of Joseph. Joseph 3:19 *'had made the sons of Israel swear an oath. He had said, "God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up with you from this place."* So there they are grumbling and the bones of the man they're carrying had told them God would come to their aid and he had. The bones of a skeleton had more faith than they did.

And this lack of faith is despite the fact that God's mighty hand has been seen so dramatically through all the plagues. They've just seen God at work in a massive way but as they see the Egyptians bearing down on them they don't believe that God can help them.

If you were here last week you'll recall how they had been told to remember the Passover – this great rescue that God brought about – they were to remember it right through their history – but they've forgotten all about it within 48 hours. They've forgotten about their VE day – their Victory in Egypt day.

10 miraculous plagues in which God has shown his sovereign power over Pharaoh but under pressure they let their anchor points go. Under pressure they forget about what God had done in the past and what he promised to do in the future.

We all in life at some time or another have our Red Sea situations – you may not be having them at the moment but they come - those times when we feel absolute despair, when it feels like there's no way out and all we feel is panic.

It could be all manner of things – persecution for our faith, the various trials of old age, or childlessness, or rebellious children or rebellious grandchildren, or ill health or an over-demanding job, or a job that is threatened or doesn't satisfy or financial ruin or some painful situation in the family which as Christmas approaches makes you despair or some temptation that feels overpoweringly strong – you feel helpless before it.

What we need to do, hard as it is, is take our eyes off the pressing problem and fix them on God, remembering who he is, what he's done in the past. We need to remember that as Alec Motyer has written "There's no such thing as an untested faith." We will be tested and we must not give up in the face of trouble – we must remember that we're precious in God's sight, we're his dearly loved children. We must remember that he's in control and he's with us by his Spirit.

The Israelites were humanly speaking in a terrifying situation but they should have remembered the past, they should have remembered the promises and the plagues, the Passover and the pillars of fire and cloud –those 4 ps from the past. They shouldn't have been afraid and neither should we in our Red Sea situations – remember who God is and what he has done and keep going.

So that's Israel's fear – let's move on to see Moses' faith – that's our 2nd heading – **Moses' Faith**

What's Moses going to say in this situation? Is he going to turn to the people and say, "You know what you're quite right, I'm so sorry for taking you out of your comfort zone even if it was slavery."

No, not quite v13 *'Moses answered the people, "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still."*

And the question that this poses is why Moses is so different from the Israelites? The difference is that Moses remembers the promises of God. He knows that God's word cannot be broken. He remembers how God had said back in chapter 6 that he would bring them to the Promised Land and Moses despite the close proximity of the 600 chariots believes God – he takes him at his word. He trusts God to finish what he's started. Rather than seeing the chariots he sees the promises of God. Under terrible pressure Moses had to walk by faith in God's word and not by sight. And he did.

Which begs the question of us as we face our Red Sea crises are we reading our Bibles – because that's the temptation isn't it that we put it aside because the pressure is so great it's irrelevant. That's when we most need it – it's then more than ever that we need to get it out and trust.

Bishop Michael Baughen once said this: "After 40 years of Christian ministry, 90 % of the pastoral problems I have encountered in those years of ministry have emerged because Christians have stopped reading their Bibles and praying each day." What a massive incentive to keep going with our daily Bible reading and prayer or maybe for someone here to get into that good habit for the first time.

Or listen to John Stott – he said this: "the Bible is indispensable to every Christian's growth. Christians who neglect the Bible simply do not grow."

So we've had Israel's fear, Moses faith and now lastly...**God's Final Act** and that's in v15-31. And here God the Liberator takes centre stage. God protects them with the pillar of cloud v19-20 and then he sends the wind to part the waters. Can you see that 21 *"all that night the Lord drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided."*

There's been plenty of dispute over this miraculous – this supernatural crossing of the Red Sea as there has the other miracles in Scripture. I love the story of the university theologian who was very liberal in his reading of scripture.

He'd been asked to preach in a local church on our passage today and at the end of the Bible reading before he got up to preach, an enthusiastic voice from the congregation called out, "Praise God for leading His people safely through the raging waters of the Red Sea!"

The academic theologian was slightly miffed by this over-zealous participation and he began his sermon by saying, "Of course, modern scholarship has shown us that this so-called sea crossing was really no more than a passage through a reedy marsh with the water only two or three inches deep at the most."

Whereupon the voice interrupted again: "Praise God, Who in water only two inches deep, drowned all Pharaoh's chariots - Hallelujah!"

What we have here in Exodus 14 is the miraculous and what a miracle it was. The Lord pulls back the waters and his people can go through on dry ground. The Egyptians come in hot pursuit but it's as Moses had said in v14, the Lord fights for them. So v25 "*he made the wheels of their chariots come off, so that they had difficulty driving.*" The Israelites get through safely and then God unleashes an extraordinary judgement on the Egyptians.

Can we see that v28 "*The water flowed back and covered the chariots and horsemen – the entire army of pharaoh that had followed the Israelites into the sea. Not one of them survived. But the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left. That day the Lord saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the shore. And when the Israelites saw the great power of the Lord displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant.*"

God the Liberator had saved his people – with his mighty hand he had brought them out of their slavery – he had delivered them.

As we turn to share in Communion shortly let's remember this – let's remember that like in Exodus 14, on the Cross there was salvation and judgement. Jesus was judged – he was treated like the Egyptians so that anyone who trusts in him need not fear God's judgement but can walk through the waters on dry ground.

Let's remember too that as the Israelites could look back and see the Egyptians – their enemies, lying dead on the shore, so we can look back to the Cross and know that our great foe, the devil has been dealt a mortal blow. Yes, he's still a fierce enemy but he's doomed. Christ has conquered.

And for those people who are singing with Freddie Mercury "I want to break free" it is to God the Liberator that we should ultimately point them for rescue. Not the rescue brought about through his servant Moses but through his Son Jesus Christ – the rescue that is available to all people, no matter what they've done, no matter how far they have fallen.

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)