

Exodus 14: 5 – end; Matthew 6: 1 – 18

‘Us versus them’

The parting of the Red Sea. Such an iconic moment in the Bible. It’s so iconic, that if you were to mention it, to make a reference to it in conversation, people everywhere would know what you meant. It’s one of those stories from the Bible that has become part of common culture, that people who have never been to church will probably know what you mean.

But that can come with its own problems, can’t it? We’re so used to this story, we know how it goes, we know the beginning, the middle, and the end, that it can just wash over us when we hear it in church. There’s not too much need to pay attention, because we all know this story.

This is very understandable – but there is a danger to this. When we get so comfortable with the great stories of the Bible, like the parting of the Red Sea, or perhaps Noah’s Ark, or perhaps the Tower of Babel, we can accidentally start separating them off.

These stories become stories in their own right, we’ve carved them out of where they came from. And the problem with that, is it can become very easy to forget they aren’t just part of a story book, but that they are part of the Bible. They are part of Scripture.

This Scripture, we are told, is God-breathed, inspired by God, and as we are told in Second Timothy – ***‘All scripture...is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that...[we] may be...equipped for every good work’***

So what does it mean to look at the parting of the Red Sea, not as some story we tell kiddies, but as Scripture?

In short, we are told of a very powerful God. We are told of a God who has total control over the elements in his creation. We are told of a God who will go to any lengths to protect his people, to liberate them from slavery and fear and oppression. Who will shepherd his people through the desert, but also will not shy from punishing and correcting his people when he needs to.

But, I think our story from Exodus tells us something else, as well. I think it reveals, perhaps more than they meant to, the humans who wrote down these great stories into written form, so that these feats of God would never be forgotten. These humans, and how they thought.

Because, if we look at how this has been written, I think it’s fair to say that it has been written in a very ‘us versus them’ style. It’s been written by the Israelites, the ‘us’, about the Egyptians, turning the Egyptians into ‘them’.

Don’t get me wrong, I’m not saying that this enmity between the Egyptians and the Israelites didn’t happen, or that God didn’t favour the Israelites... but how it’s been reported back, how it’s been written down for us future generations to read, it’s almost too-simplified isn’t it? The Israelites are the good guys, the ones who God is looking out for. The Egyptians are the baddies, the ones who deserve to die.

While the Israelites in the story gets names, and feelings, and speaking lines, the Egyptians are these dumb chasers, their only role in the story is to be the bumbling bad-guys who are killed off by God. It’s kind of like in a James Bond film, where you have a scene with a load of henchmen, who are only there just to be beaten up and killed.

Of course what we shouldn’t forget, is that the Egyptians were people too. As people, they were made in God’s image, too. After their deaths they would have had widows and children who would have mourned them. Who would have wished they could have buried them, instead of their husbands and fathers being washed away.

So, while the way this story has been written, this ‘us versus them’ mindset, is understandable, because those who experienced the parting of the Red Sea, those who wrote the story down into Exodus, were living in a tribal society, who were used to warfare, who were used to this ‘us versus them’ because it meant survival, does it truly reflect how God felt in the moment? Was God really that callous with the lives of those he created, or has

it been distorted in the way it's been written down?

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History, after all, is written by the victors. But, while it may be written by the victors, all Scripture is God-breathed, so what do we do with this story?

Well, I want us to take this thinking, and use it on the New Testament lesson.

Let's think about our gospel reading tonight. We are told, in the New Testament lesson, to do several things...

One, don't make a show whenever you donate to the needy.

Two, don't make a big show whenever you pray.

Three, make sure you forgive people.

Four, don't make a show whenever you fast.

Jesus is saying don't do those things, because you know who does do that? Hypocrites. And what effect does it have when the hypocrites make a huge show about giving to the needy, or showing off that they're praying, or making a big deal about the fact they're fasting?

Well, it doesn't curry them any favour with God, we're told that.

But it also turns the good deeds they're doing into a hollow show... because are they really donating, and praying, and fasting for the right reasons? No. They're doing it to get attention. They're doing it so people are looking at them, and getting those people to think 'gosh aren't they something else?'

And, we could also say, they're doing it to turn what should be good deeds that spread love and faith, into a time of 'us versus them'.

By announcing that they're giving money to the poor, it's turning the situation of charity into an 'us versus them' – 'us, who have the money and are giving it away', to the 'them, those poor people who are receiving the money'.

By making a huge show of praying, it's turning prayer into a situation of 'us versus them' – 'us, and aren't we so pious and faithful and good and we'll pray in public places so everyone can see', against the 'them, those unholy people, those outsiders who aren't praying to our God'.

When they make a huge deal of fasting, again it's 'us versus them' – 'us, so hungry, with such little energy, but aren't we good and righteous and brave for doing this', against them, 'those who only care about themselves and don't even worship God like we do'.

We are being warned that to take good deeds, to take deeds that spread love between us and our neighbour, and us and our God, and to sully them by turning them into tribal hostilities, is not what God wants.

Our good deeds should be just that – good deeds. I'm afraid that's with no round of applause, no special stickers, no fawning audience, because when you want that, you're not doing the good deed for the reason you should.

It should be to show love to your neighbour, and to your God. That's what being the kingdom people is all about – allowing God's kingdom to shine through, because we put all the petty stuff like pride and hypocrisy and 'us versus them' aside.

God's kingdom, and how we should act to help it shine through, is all about trusting God to do the things he needs to do, even if it does seem a bit brutal at times. God's kingdom is about us, serving each other, praying for each other, and forgiving each other. God's kingdom is the fact that everyone is invited to the feast, and we should never turn it into an 'us versus them'. Amen.