

THE BIG PICTURE
GOD DELIVERS

Defining moments: these are events in the history of the world that have changed things forever; we probably only see them by looking back; time will tell whether events of this week are defining moments in history of world, with the death of Osama Bin Laden or the election results for the Scottish Parliament. Bringing down the Berlin Wall in 1989 was surely a defining moment in the history of Europe; Martin Luther King's speech in Washington DC in 1963 was surely another in the history of the USA; the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was a defining moment in the history of World War 2, but also in other ways for the world. The history of the world is littered with these defining moments; a nation's history on a smaller scale is the same and we can do the same kind of exercise for the UK itself, or for Scotland, or for the city of Edinburgh and its past. There are probably moments in our individual lives that we would identify as moments that were key to make us the people we are or to set the pattern of our lives; at the moment, they may have been simple choices, but the consequences may have been huge and life-shaping. Take the story from the radio this morning, of a child at Auschwitz and just as she was being put in the queue for the gas chambers Dr Mengele dropped his pen; she jumped to the other queue and survived!

Today, we consider a Bible moment that was clearly history-making and life-defining for the people involved, a moment which shaped much of what was to follow and indeed shaped something of the ministry and mission of Jesus hundreds of years later. We set out last week to cover the whole big picture of the Bible story in 8 weeks; the story so far – God created the world and everything in it; He created human beings and gave us life and made us in His own image, to love and be loved and God saw that world He made was very good. But it went bad and sin entered into the world by the choices of Adam and Eve and ever since we've been living in the tension of this "good world, bad world" of which we are a part. The stories of the people in book of Gen reflect that 'good world, bad world' by doing some great deeds of faith and love, but also some awful things to one another. We left that family as they became refugees in Egypt looking for food there when the harvests had failed at home; Joseph is in charge.

By the time we pick up the story again that refuge has become a prison, even a slave-camp. Pharaoh, king of Egypt, has decided to turn this growing family of Israel into his slaves and it would seem that these slaves were involved in building some of the great monuments of Egypt, perhaps the pyramids, or some others. It was an awful place, in awful circumstances; they want to escape but can't. But God has a plan and it involves Moses. Famously, in the story that has become part of our Church badge, Moses sees a bush on fire but not turning black, so he goes to investigate and out of the bush God speaks to him and calls him to go back to Egypt where he's been brought up, but to go back as the leader of Israel and set the people free. He is full of doubts and objections, but God prevails and Moses goes back. Then begins the process of trying to persuade Pharaoh to let them go.

Exodus 14 is the high point of that story. The people are set free and have begun their journey out of Egypt towards the Promised Land, but Pharaoh changes his mind and chases them to bring them back. The people are terrified: "*Didn't we...*" (14:12) Actually no, not in so many words; their cries in Egypt were for freedom and God has answered their prayers, has set them free and will finish the job. On the one side, there is the sea – a great barrier and they can't imagine how to cross it; on the other side, the Egyptian army – they can see the dust of the chariots on the horizon; what are they to do? They are trapped! Moses sounds more confident than perhaps he

felt: “*Do not...*” (14:13) God said to Moses “*Raise your...*” (14:16) “*Then Moses...*” (14:21f) The people walked through the sea safely and escaped from their slavery and oppression in Egypt. This is the moment of their deliverance from all that had pained them; this is the beginning of their journey to become the new people of God.

The whole tenor of the story is that God delivers His people. This is not Moses' doing; it is not the people's doing, but this is something God has done for them. When they stood on the beach looking out over the sea wondering when the ferry would arrive to take them away and would their enemies get there before the boat – at that moment, when God said to Moses to stretch out his staff and they would walk across on dry ground, two things happened. First of all, God did it; just as He said, the waters parted and there was dry ground for them to walk across and for generations this was celebrated as a great demonstration of the power of God to save His people; no longer are they slaves but now they are free! All of this was down to the power of their great God; God delivered them. Secondly, they learned to trust God; stepping out into the sea was a huge act of faith; they trusted God, they trusted Moses and their faith was vindicated; they trusted God and He did what He said; by their faith, they received their deliverance from God.

So began their journey, a journey, not without its ups and downs. The people complained they were hungry and God provided them with food; they complained they were thirsty and God gave them water to drink. God began to shape them into the kind of people He wanted them to be and gave them 10 Commandments as *the* way of showing them how to live in relationship with God and in relationship with one another. These great principles of living were then spelled out in all kinds of detailed rules and regulations: there are rules about worship and community life; there are rules about looking after the land and poor people and Israel was expected to keep these rules, to obey God. At some times they did that better than at others, but this was God shaping them into a community of faith, a people who would learn to love Him and be His people. There were days when their faith was strong; days when their faith was tested; days when their faith was weak; God was with them every step of way.

This was a journey with an end in sight – the promised land. God had promised them that they would have a land flowing with milk and honey, and it would be theirs. So the whole of story of Exodus and Deuteronomy is the journey towards this land. Joshua is man who will lead them into this land; his is a story of battles and conquest; and there are some rather uncomfortable stories of war and bloodshed that don't sit easily with our Christian view of world at times. Remember the world was very different place in Joshua's day and his story is very like many of the stories of the heroes of the day in other cultures, winning battles and defeating enemies and the Old Testament has no difficulty with saying that these are the deeds of faithful men, helped and strengthened by God. So Jericho is defeated; the land is settled and divided and the people begin to live as people of God. The whole notion of the land remains a contentious issue in modern political Israel, as many Israelis see it as their mission to recover the biblical promised land for the modern state and so they increase borders and erect walls. Whether they are right or not is a matter of opinion, but here is where that desire originates.

1. Events – this is what God has done! The Bible is full of events; the crossing of the Red Sea; Joshua crossing the Jordan; Jesus' coming into the world; then His death and resurrection; Pentecost and the coming of the Spirit. We remember these events: the escape from Egypt is remembered ever since in the Passover meal; Christmas and Easter are celebrations in the life of the Church; the Lord's Supper reminds us in another way of Jesus' death and resurrection. Events are so important

in Christian faith because these are the things that God has done; we see the power and love of God at work in our world in these events and in others; we rejoice and celebrate these events because they tell us of what God has done for us and for our world. Faith is not based on our feelings or impressions; Christian faith is based on verifiable historical events to which we can point and say “God has done this” and we see His power and love and so we believe.

2. The Journey of faith and life – do you watch *The X factor* or *Britain’s Got talent*? Is everyone still on a journey? They used to be and it became a bit of a joke; whenever you heard someone talk about their life and their achievements, they were always on a journey! For all that, it is still a fairly good picture of Christian faith and life as disciples of Jesus. Faith is not a static thing, but there is always something new to learn; there are days when faith is good and easy; there are days when faith is tested and days when faith is hard. Sometimes it feels as if you’re going round in circles and there may even be times when we feel as if we’ve just bumped into a tree! For all that Moses’ journey was a real one, it can also be a picture of the life we live and how we live and believe; we should not expect life to be wonderful all of the time, but know that there are days that are good and others that are not. There is a hope of journey’s end for the Christian and the hope of heaven is real, sure and certain hope to inspire and encourage us along way.

3. God is with us – The pillar of cloud by day, the pillar of fire by night; the Tabernacle – the tent which God had the people make, the portable place of worship; the ark – the gold-covered wooden box which went inside the Tabernacle. All of these are symbols of God’s presence. All of these are ways of people seeing and knowing that God was there, God with His people wherever they went. Every step of the way God was there; every step of the way, God helped them, loved them, and provided for them what they needed. This Church building is a permanent reminder to us and our community that God is present with us in our daily life. As we pray each day, we remind ourselves that God is with us. There are other ways to help us remember, and the truth remains – God is with us wherever we go.

Step out in faith: standing on the beach, Moses has a choice; God has said go, but will He keep His promise? 40 years later, Joshua is standing on the river bank, with the river in spate and God has said “put your foot in and the water will stop.” Joshua has a choice – to believe God’s promise or not. Both men stepped out in faith; both men believed God’s promises and these events and their stories are remembered. These stories celebrate God and what God has done and there are other events and stories that we can add – we remember these events and we celebrate what God has done. Events and stories inspire us to faith – these men stepped out in faith, so can we; God did this for them, He will do it for us; God was with His people then, He will be with His people now! The challenge for us is to step out in faith, to trust God. There are all kinds of things in life that we have to deal with, choices to make, difficult things to face, a future to shape – step out in faith, even if can’t see what tomorrow brings. God, who delivered His people, went every step of the way with them; God who has saved us in Jesus is with us too. So step out in faith!