



DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL

The Reverend Canon Dr Samuel Wells

Dean of Chapel

The Kind of Thing God Would Do

Exodus 14 -15

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on September 11 2005 by
The Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

About three years ago I taught a class of third graders in an elementary school in a socially deprived part of England. I gathered the children in a circle, and rolled out a large sandy-colored piece of burlap, saying ‘This is the desert’. I took some little wooden figures out of a box and said these were the children. The children were so hungry that their parents took them a long way to find food. I moved the little wooden figures to the far corner of the burlap to represent the children crossing the desert and reaching Egypt. I told how the people found food, and how the children grew to be a great number of people, but that these people came to be the slaves of the Pharaohs who gave them food. I told how one night they escaped, and rushed to the Red Sea. I unfolded a piece of deep blue burlap to represent the sea. I told how their leader Moses raised his arm and prayed to God and how God made a way for them through the sea, and I moved the wooden figures through the sea, one by one. Then I showed them how Miriam led the dancing on the dry shore. (You can do a lot with wooden figures.) Then I said ‘I wonder where you are in this story’. They each took one of the figures and explained where they chose to put them. Some were dancing; some were just about to cross the sea; some were half way; some were still in slavery. But one said, ‘I know this isn’t true because I saw it on the TV’.

What might it mean to say that the story of the crossing of the Red Sea is true? That class of third graders discovered two contrasting notions of truth. Leaving aside the question of whether you can believe anything you see on the TV, especially when Disney gets its hands on it, they were discovering the way a scriptural story can come alive in your experience – when suddenly one of them introduced the question of historical fact. I want to explore with you why historical questions about this and other miracles are important but why getting stuck on such questions may restrict our openness to receive everything God has to give us in these stories.

The question ‘Did it happen?’ quickly stops being a historical enquiry, because the Old Testament is the only written source available and the

archaeological evidence is thin. Instead it tends to become a scientific question. We all know that large movements of water brought about by spontaneous strong winds are unknown – at least, we thought we knew that. Hardly a year goes by without a new book suggesting there might have been a volcanic eruption in the Mediterranean in the time of Moses which may have caused the Red Sea to part, or something similar. Such accounts seem to me to miss the point of the story, which is to emphasize the miraculous hand of God.

Seeing no inherent plausibility in the Exodus account, historical critics 120 years ago asked how the account came to be written. They speculated that it was in fact a blend of three accounts, one that talked about the wind blowing the sea away all night so the land was dry, a second that talked about the spontaneous parting of two walls of water, and a third that didn't mention water at all. This view has never achieved a scholarly consensus, but it has always seemed to me to beg the question of *why* these accounts came to be written. The people that wrote them saw them as the most momentous events in the history of the world. That at least means that any reader, believer or skeptic, should take them very seriously.

For many people the problem with miracles like the crossing of the Red Sea is not a historical one. They assume that if God had what it took to create the world he presumably had it in him to suspend his own laws for a few minutes now and again. More significant for these people are the philosophical or moral questions miracles leave unanswered. If God intervened to save the Israelites, why didn't he intervene to save the New Orleanites? If God saved the Hebrews from Pharaoh, why didn't he save them from Hitler? If God held back the waves of the Red Sea, why didn't he hold back the planes on 9/11?

I grew up in the Church of England, a church with a suitably confused response to such questions. When David Jenkins was consecrated bishop in York Minster in 1984, his appointment was highly controversial because he asked these questions in a particularly vivid way. A week after his consecration the south transept of the Minster was destroyed in a fire. Some more conservative Christians started saying that God had struck the Minster as a sign of his displeasure at the church consecrating a priest who had publicly questioned God's miracle-working activity. 'Was this fire an act of God?' one of the cathedral canons was asked. 'We no longer believe in an angry God who arbitrarily intervenes in such a way', he said soberly, and then added, briskly, 'But I will say that it's a miracle that the rest of the building was saved'. This is called having it both ways.

The moral problem with miracles is compounded on the occasions when they don't suit everybody. Pushing back the waves is quite a stunt, and doesn't seem to hurt anyone. But crashing those waves back down on the pursuing Egyptians isn't much fun for the Egyptians. It seems legitimate to ask whether a God who could deliver the Israelites from slavery could not have done so in a less bloodthirsty manner. Because of such concerns some religion scholars have come to calling the story of the crossing of the Red Sea a 'myth' – that is, a foundational story of a people, but one that is not subject to the historical or moral strictures expected of most formative stories.

While I find these moral and historical questions interesting, I have to say they lack two elements that I'm going to suggest are the key to reading stories of this kind. Whenever we read the more historically and morally challenging parts of the Bible, I propose we keep the following two guidelines in mind.

The first is that these stories really matter. Working out where we are in them, as the third graders discovered in the classroom, isn't just an intellectual exercise. It is about the social, economic, emotional, political, and cultural heart of our lives. This is a story about people in slavery, and it's bound to be hard to read if nothing in one's life remotely corresponds to slavery. I grew up in Bristol, a city that grew rich on the profits of the slave trade. So when I read this story I have to engage with the reality that I am one of the Egyptians. Slavery doesn't just weigh heavy on America's conscience, you see. But my maternal grandparents were Jews, and they and my mother were also refugees, who, like people from the Gulf Coast, and like the Hebrews, ran for their lives and had to leave everything behind. So a part of me engages with the Israelites in this story. And yet I have spent a while living in both Israel and the West Bank, and have talked with conscientious Israeli Jews and equally conscientious Palestinian Christians. Both think this is *their* story, their story of liberation. Both think *they* are the slaves in this story, and both from time to time fall into thinking that if liberation comes then, as in this story, there are bound to be casualties.

So for lots of reasons this story *matters* to me, and when the third graders asked me where I would put *my* wooden figure – in slavery, in the sea, or on safe dry land – I was totally absorbed in this story, and the answer seemed to tell the truth about my life. That's how we should read this story – as a story that exposes the truth about our lives.

The second guideline to remember in reading the historically and morally challenging stories in the Bible is simply this: the Bible is about Jesus. It wasn't that Jesus was God's last resort when things had got to a pretty pass: Jesus was God's plan all along. And the central event that focuses all God's plans for Jesus and all his plans for us is Jesus' resurrection. A miracle. *The* miracle. The definitive miracle by which all other miracles are to be judged and in relation to which all other miracles are to be understood. Here is the defeat of death, the exposure of the folly of sin, the dismantling of the power of evil. And the reason the crossing of the Red Sea matters so much is that when the early Christians came to terms with the enormity of what had happened in Christ, they looked back to the Exodus. They saw sin and death and evil as slavery, they saw the cross as the raging waters of the Red Sea and they saw the dry land as Jesus' resurrection. They saw the whole event as a story about Jesus. And because it was a story about Jesus, they realized it was *the kind of thing God would do*.

And quickly they set about embodying the story of the crossing of the Red Sea as the story that sums up God's purposes for saving us. The way they did that was in baptism. They began the baptism ceremony with a recognition that our lives are in slavery and God longs to set us free. They then plunged the candidates into water, echoing the danger and the drowning of the Red Sea experience. Then they clothed the new Christians with resurrection robes, safe on dry land.

So just like the earliest Christians, when we read stories of miracles in the Bible, or when we hear stories of miracles today, we ask ourselves, 'Is this a story about Jesus? Is it about God laying down his life and overcoming evil because he longs to set us free and restore us to friendship with him?' In other words, 'Is it the kind of thing God would do?' And then we seek to order our life so as to create the kind of spaces where God does such things. Christians have long been associated with hospitals and classrooms because these are places where over the centuries God has countless times laid down his life and set people free. They have put huge efforts into worship, pastoral care, personal prayer and small group nurture for the same reason. These are places where, over and over again, God acts in ways like the way he acted in Jesus.

'Did the crossing of the Red Sea happen?' is an interesting question. 'Is it fair?' is an important question. But more significant, I suggest, is to explore where *we* are in this story, and what God may be saying to us through it about slavery and power in our lives and in the world today. More significant still is to explore where *Jesus* is in this story, to realize that he

faced the horror of the crashing waves so that we might reach the safety of the dry land, and to explore how we can shape our lives in response to meeting Jesus in this story.

Then, and perhaps only then, we can come back to our original questions. Then, and only then, can we say, with humble yet confident gaze, 'This is the kind of thing God would do. Yes. This is the kind of thing God would do'.

