

17th March 2024, Matins

Exodus 7:8-24

Fr Timothy Carroll

In all my time growing up in Ireland I never once saw a snake. As you may be aware the legend of St Patrick, who is commemorated today, drove them out of Ireland from the foot a mountain, after he had been fasting for 40 days. Our exodus reading today also begins with tales of snakes appearing. From the staff of Aaron and Egyptian magicians before we hear of the first plague of the water of the Nile turning to blood. What are we to make of such stories?

Science tells us that while it's true that Ireland has no snakes, this is because Ireland has been by water since the end of the last glacial period, preventing snakes from slithering over; before that, it was blanketed in ice and too chilly for the cold-blooded creatures. What about our Exodus miraculous events? You can read lots of scientific accounts attempting to explain such a phenomena. Rising temperatures had led the Nile to slow and shrink making it hospitable to freshwater algae, perhaps Burgundy Blood algae which multiplies drastically in slow moving water and then dying and leaving red stained water. Please don't quiz me after the service for more details!

There will be some that love the debunking of a myth, some who would be offended that the period of enlightenment seeks to rationally dry out all events with empirical knowledge. There are those within the Christian faith and those who are not particularly religious who wish would gravitate towards the supernatural explanation and those who like the scientific.

I remember chatting to non-religious friends of mine about the miracles of Jesus and perhaps not wanting to sound too extreme in my beliefs I offered some cultural symbolic insights into what the text was getting at, thinking they would find it interesting on a intellectual level. However I think they were left a little disappointed at my attempt to explain away a transcendental intervention and reduce it down to a over earnest undergrad insight because they didn't want to sound weird. Although to say that we should ignore cultural insight and scientific reason when reading such Biblical stories would limit our full grasp of what is going on in the literary text.

Because it does us good to consider in the story of the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt it could be a literary assault on the entire Egyptian cosmology, a '*judgment of the gods of Egypt*' (Ex 12:12)... *The frog, sun, cobra, cow and the Nile are all deities in the Egyptian pantheon, yet each is distorted or defeated by the superior power of YHWH*". The writer of the book is up to something, there is a larger point being made about the supremacy of this God. Even the myth of St Patrick driving the snakes from Ireland is said to be an allegory of the eradication of pagan ideology. We don't know that much about St Patrick although we do know that he was probably the first Bishop Ireland, it's debatable that he brought Christianity to Ireland, that probably came, like in England traders and slaves. Patrick was himself a slave, probably from the west coast of England or Wales, who himself was taken as slave, who escaped and returned to Ireland after being ordained in modern day France. In some ways Patrick's life is maybe not as razzmatazz as we might like to make out, he was very much about order, he wishes to establish and sort out a class of priests in Ireland. He would have been marked by zeal but also great organisation.

The story of driving snakes from Ireland as an allegory of the eradication of pagan ideology is an interesting one. Because it wasn't that Patrick would have come in and said like an enlightened scientist that all this druid and pagan stuff is all nonsense. He would have actually appealed to the supernatural in his conversations with the pagans, he probably would have appealed to their sense of the supernatural. He would probably have said your spirituality is real but is dodgy and comes from a dark place. He wouldn't have dampened down his own faith with rational arguments, as I did with my friend, although I do think what I said was true. Patrick would have used the ritual of baptism and the distinctiveness of the Eucharist as a way of introducing the mystery and spirituality of Christianity to these people who would have had a strong sense of spirituality in their life. It speaks to us today to not become too concerned about not coming across as merely secularised sober believers but to embrace the deep spirituality and distinctiveness of Christianity while at the same time making it as inclusive as possible to those who do not are unfamiliar.

But at the root of all these stories is not who has the best magic who is able to do the best tricks to win an argument. Because we read that although there are many miracles that happen throughout Exodus. Pharaoh's heart remained hard. While it can be tempting to want to get wrapped up in stories of the supernatural or look for cultural or scientific insights into passages. When we read of this incredible story we are hearing a foundational understanding of salvation that permeates the whole Bible. The liberation of the whole person, the soul, the body, the community, is all under the rule of a free a sovereign God who isn't just another God, or other rules being in the world, but is the only God and is the source of all being. That our hearts are to be turned to this God. For our hearts to not remain hard like Pharaohs.

It isn't through out of the ordinary events or academic insights that sustain us, this doesn't sustain faith. But it is having the humility and vulnerability for our hearts to softened by this sovereign God. A God who must be acknowledged for God is - this source of being who is concerned with those who are considered the least.

Furthermore, that our Biblical stories are not merely to highlight this truth, but they are to stimulate repentance. Repentance for those who oversee the enslavement and oppression of others. This Lenten season for us to examine our own hearts to not be like Pharaoh and to remain hardened to the world – maybe not actively oppressing others but growing hard through the seeming never ending cycle of stories of oppression. We ask this lent season to humble ourselves and ask for our hearts to be softened. To join the ancient call of Moses to *'let my people go'*.

To not stand with the Pharaoh's of this world but with the poor and the marginalised who are most effected by poverty war and the plague of climate change. May we moved by these stores of liberation to love God more deeply, because he first loved us, for our hearts and communities to be caught up in God's dream of freedom.

Amen