

Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity

Exodus 14: 9-31 Psalm 114

‘When Israel came out of Egypt’

Good morning everyone. Today we have.....

The Tale of the Incident at the Sea of Reeds

Evenings were still warm enough for sitting out. Although it was almost past their bedtime, the two sisters had been allowed to listen to grandfather telling the story which was a hallowed tale handed down through the generations. Pausing occasionally for breath, ever so often stroking his grey beard, the old man proceeded to the dramatic conclusion of his recital of the momentous events.

‘**T**he young officer urged his horse up the hill to where the commander of the charioteers stood awaiting his report. “This is not going to be easy”, he muttered to himself. He quickly dismounted, strode over to face the commander and saluted.

“Your honour”, he began, “The scouts have just reported. The Israelites are camped some two miles ahead. They appear to be resting from the sun.”

“Excellent”, replied the commander, “We shall do the same”, and turning to one of the subordinates surrounding him he snapped out orders, “Rest the horses out of the heat. Prepare for attack in two hours. We will easily catch up with these peasants. The slight breeze which has just sprung up will suit us fine. Dismissed, lieutenant.”

But the lieutenant stood his ground, at which the commander’s face began to assume its familiar scowl. “Did you not hear me, go!”

“Begging your pardon, commander, but there is something else which I feel duty bound to mention. One of the scouts, who is a local man, has warned us that the crossing and the tides ahead can be treacherous. He advises that it would be very risky to use the chariots.”

“He does, does he? Local man, you say? Probably another peasant in league with these Israelites. Ignore him!”, and turning to his servant he said, “Prepare my armour and battle dress at once.” The lieutenant went down on one knee, “I beg you sir, please reconsider.” The commander’s face was grim. “I recognise you. This isn’t your first act of insubordination. Very well, you can stay here with the camp guard. That should just about suit you. No campaign medals for you, my lad!”

Many hours later carried by the strengthening breeze came cries of men and screams of horses but it was almost daybreak before the few survivors made it back to camp. Various exhausted comments were made: “the chariots just sank”; “the water swept over us”.

The lieutenant did what he could to comfort the demoralised men. Suddenly one of them turned to look at him more closely and said, “I recognise you. You should have been up at the front with the commander. Wangled your way out of it, did you? Coward!” Another of the survivors joined in, “I saw you talking to the scouts for ages. What were you up to”. The only man left from the commander’s retinue added, “You were trying to persuade the commander not to attack”, and looking round he shouted out, “He’s a spy, get him!”

“**G**randpa, grandpa”, interrupted the elder girl, “Why do you keep calling him ‘the lieutenant’. What was his name?” “Yes, yes,” added her sister, “It isn’t fair. You can’t have a proper story without names”.

“Well then, granddaughter”, was the response. “In that case the story of our people in the wilderness isn’t a proper story. We know hardly any of their names”.

Fearing that the children were becoming over-excited and would never get to sleep that night, their mother intervened, “Now girls, you can hear the rest tomorrow. Time for bed.” The gentle tones of the head of the family interrupted the agitated pleas from the two sisters. “Dear daughter, let me continue now. After all this is a special visit of mine.” Taking the hint, mother relented, “Very well, but girls do try to calm down.”

“In fact”, smiled grandfather, “The rest of the story is quickly told. The exhausted survivors were no match for the rested lieutenant. Breaking away from their clutches, he ran over to the picket lines, jumped on a horse and galloped away. After riding hard for a while, he reined in, saw no pursuers and rested. ‘What should I do’, he wondered, ‘Nobody in camp believes I’m innocent. If I go back to headquarters, there’ll be a court-martial and I won’t stand a chance. Only one thing for it’, and he kept on towards the sea.”

“There we are children, I’m tired now after all that talking. I need to rest before the ceremony tomorrow”, and he got up and wished everyone a good evening.

With one voice the girls turned to their mother insisting that the story couldn’t possibly end there and demanding to know what happened next.

“Can’t you guess, children, how we are able to tell the story?”

“Well, he must have survived but how.....unless, yes, that must be it, he was rescued by our ancestors and then wandered with them in the desert.” “But why would they help him, he was an Egyptian, he was the enemy.”

“He was saved, my dears, because when our people saw him staggering towards them, with no horse and almost dead of thirst, they remembered the spirit of one of our laws which says: ‘*You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt¹.*’ They treated the officer as an alien and he became resident among them.”

And as understanding dawned on the faces of her girls, she added, “Yes, I see you’ve guessed it. We tell this story in our family because without this rescued alien, we would not be here, for he was our direct ancestor. Oh look, the preparations must be complete; here’s your father in time to kiss you goodnight.”

Bringing his visit to a glorious conclusion, next morning grandfather led the family in the procession to stand before the priest, and offering a basket of fruit he recited these words:

- *A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he² went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous.*
- *When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labour on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression.*
- *The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.*
- *So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me.*
(Deuteronomy 26: 5-10).

¹Exodus 23:9 ²refers to Jacob/Israel