

“Big Question 7: Does God really love us?”

Sunday 22 February 2009

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Readings:

Exodus 5:22-6:12

Psalm 68:1-4

John 3:1-18

Sermon

If you were here last Sunday morning, and shared in the struggle to make bricks with inadequate resources, then you won't have forgotten the sufferings of the Israelites in Egypt. After many years of slavery, God gave them cause to hope for a better future. He sent Moses, reluctant as he was, to intervene with Pharaoh on their behalf.

So Moses demanded, on the Lord's instructions, that Pharaoh should let his people go. In fact the substance of his demand was this:

“This is what the Lord, the God of Israel says: ‘Let my people go, so that they may hold a festival to me in the desert.’” (Exodus 5:1b)

But Pharaoh did not acknowledge the Lord, and he would not let the Israelites go.

The upshot of all this was that Pharaoh instructed the slave drivers to increase the workload of the Israelites, by forcing them to gather their own straw, without decreasing the number of bricks they made for the building work which they were forced to do ... so instead of getting better, life got tougher for them.

Since it is always the messenger that gets the blame, the leaders of the Israelites turned against Moses and his brother Aaron with bitter recriminations:

“May the Lord look upon you and judge you! You have made us a stench to Pharaoh and his officials and have put a sword in their hand to kill us.” (Exodus 5:21)

They had been told that God was on their side ... that he was concerned about their suffering. They had believed that God was going to rescue them. Of course they were angry ... and who else were they going to have a go at?

Experience suggests that whenever things in our lives get tough, we have a tendency to look for someone to blame, and on this occasion Moses and Aaron were the obvious targets ... but you can hear the unspoken question behind their outburst:

“Does God really love us?”

So what was Moses to think now?

He never wanted this job in the first place! ... he had argued with God about sending someone else ... he didn't think he had the right experience or the right qualities.

- Why had God chosen him and called him and sent him on this hopeless errand, which had caused nothing but grief and further suffering to the Israelite slaves?

- Weren't they supposed to be the Chosen People ... the ones who were specially loved by God ... the ones with whom God had made a covenant through Abraham?

"Does God really love us?" isn't that how we tend to think when things go wrong?

Lots of things which happen to us in life ... lots of circumstances we can find ourselves in ... lots of troubles which are not our fault ... can lead us to doubt God's love.

- A Christian father works hard to earn enough to provide for his family and pay his way, and then he gets made redundant ... "Does God really love us?"
- A married couple are pillars of the Church, lead a home group, serve on the PCC and never fail to turn up for a Work Day, and then the wife is struck down with cancer ... "Does God really love us?"
- A widowed mother struggles alone to bring her children up to know Jesus, and then one of them turns to drugs and wrecks their life ... "Does God really love us?"

Probably all of us could think of someone we know who seems to have done everything right, and has lived a truly Christian life ... but life has dealt them a really bitter blow. Maybe you have had that sort of experience? ... and it is not entirely surprising under those circumstance that our belief in God's love for us takes something of a knock.

The truth is, of course, that if we have never had cause to doubt, then we have never really had need to have faith. Faith is not about trusting in God's goodness when life is easy and nothing is troubling us ... faith is about trusting God when life is tough, and when things seem to go wrong. It is about experiencing his faithfulness, his mercy and his grace in the middle of the mess.

- Think of someone like Corrie Ten boom, whose experience of God's love blossomed and flourished in the deprivation and horror of Auschwitz Concentration Camp, as she prayed for other inmates and led them to trust in Jesus ...
- or think of Jenny Rees-Larcombe, confined to a wheelchair by disease and then miraculously healed, but then finding God's love in greater measure when her husband walked out and left her ...
- or think of the parents of Cassie Bernall, the Colorado teenager who was saved by Jesus from a life of witchcraft and drugs, only to be shot in the 1999 Denver school massacre, because she admitted to believing in God.

Thankfully few of us have it quite so tough ... but in many lesser ways we often learn to experience the height and depth and width of God's love in the hardest times - when we are anxious about a loved-one ... when we go thorough times of ill-health ... when we are financially stretched or facing unwelcome change - then God reveals himself as we put our trust in his love, and wait patiently for his answers.

The Israelites still needed to discover this. They were suffering, they were frightened, and they were angry ... and God did not seem to be helping. They were doubting his love.

So Moses returned to the Lord and poured out his woes:

"O Lord, why have you brought this trouble upon this people? Is this why you sent me? Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has brought trouble upon this people, and you have not rescued your people at all."

Does this sound a bit shocking to us? ... Moses having a go at God?

Wasn't Moses stepping over the line?

Well .. there were no thunderbolts from heaven to strike Moses down ... and nothing in the Lord's response to suggest he was angry with Moses. I think sometimes we imagine God is over-sensitive and fragile – but over and over again in Scripture God engages in what we might call 'robust debate' with those he is closest to. God doesn't criticise Moses for his complaint, or deny him the right to question.

It seems that God would rather we say what we honestly think, than that we try to dress up our feelings in polite euphemisms or 'religious language'. After all, he is, as we so often sing, the one "to whom all hearts are open, every desire known, and from whom no secrets are hidden" ... so he knows what we think and how we feel anyway.

The Lord God had a plan. It was a plan born out of his passionate love for his people. It was a plan to rescue them from slavery, and to make them into a people of his own. But for that to happen, they needed to learn to trust him. There were to be no quick fixes.

So God renewed his promise to Moses:

"Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh: Because of my mighty hand he will let them go; because of my mighty hand he will drive them out of his country." (Exodus 6:1)

God's plan was not merely to release the Israelites from captivity, but to ensure that Pharaoh would know that God was with them, that the nations around would get to hear that God was on their side, and that they would leave Egypt laden with wealth, well resourced for the journey, and also for the years ahead.

But they needed to be patient.

"Did God really love them?" ... of course he did. The Lord remembered the relationship he has with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob ... he remembered the covenant he had made with Abraham, to give to his descendants the land of Canaan, a land of their own. His love for his people was a covenant established for ever – God does not change!

The Lord said:

"I have heard the groaning of the Israelites, whom the Egyptians are enslaving, and I have remembered my covenant."

God does not forget ... and God's love does not fade away. His faithfulness is forever.

So look at the wonderful promises which God makes through Moses to those he loves ... to the Israelites, of course, but by implication to his children for all time:

- "I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians" (v6) [**OHT: FREEDOM**]
- The Israelites had got into their situation through a long history of not choosing to do things God's way. When Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt because of their jealousy and hatred, they set the pattern for what was to follow.
- The irony was that Joseph's brothers came to Egypt to be saved from famine by the brother they had rejected and sold. When they came and knelt before

him, begging for help and not knowing who he was, they set in motion the events which led to the eventual enslavement of their descendants.

- But the Lord never ceased to love them. He waited patiently until the time was ripe to rescue them ... when they were ready to put their trust in him, and to become at last a nation of free men instead of a nation of slaves .. and so return to Canaan to occupy the promised land.
- Slavery is not the destiny of the people of God. He calls us into freedom ... freedom from oppression, freedom from abuse, freedom from addictions, freedom from hatred, freedom from sickness and disease ... and freedom from sin and its consequences. Our destiny is to be free from everything except our commitment to serve God, 'whose service is perfect freedom'.
- "I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgement" (v6) **[OHT: REDEMPTION]**
- The idea of redemption is to buy something back ... like an article that has been pawned being bought back and restored to its owner. As God's people, the Israelites belonged to him, but they had allowed themselves to be enslaved to the Egyptians. Because he loved them, God wanted them back ... to bring them back to himself.
- To bring the Israelites home, the Lord would engage in a kind of 'contest' with Pharaoh and his officials. He *could* have simply overwhelmed them, but God's purpose was to reveal his power to the Egyptians and the Israelites alike ... so that the Egyptians would fear him, and the Israelites would trust him.
- As Christians we have been saved by the ultimate act of redemption. Lost as we were to selfishness and sin, God has bought us back and made us his own. He has done this by paying the highest price imaginable ... through the death of his only Son. Jesus died in order that we can be redeemed ... brought back into a right relationship with the Father through the price of Christ's suffering and death.
- "I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God." (7) **[OHT: ADOPTION]**
- As slaves, the Israelites were valued only for their muscle power. They were disposable 'nobodies'. There is no dignity in slavery. For the Lord to 'take them as his own' would be a powerful demonstration of his love.
- If you have ever suffered from low self-esteem ... if you have ever felt that you don't count for much ... then imagine what this meant for them. They had been nothing ... but now God was choosing to make them something ... and not just *something*, but people with the highest status imaginable ... they were to be God's own people.
- As Christians, we are in the same situation ... only more so. The Lord has called us to himself and made us his own children by adoption. We are loved so much that he has brought us into the family and given us an honoured place as sons and daughters of the king of kings.
- In 1 Peter 2:9 7 10 we read this:

"You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."

- "I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. I will give it to you as a possession." (v8) **[OHT: RESTORATION]**

- As slaves the Israelites had owned nothing .. now the Lord was promising them a land of their own. But not just any land ... this was the Promised Land ... the land 'flowing with milk and honey' which was God's plan for Abraham and his descendants.
- So what God was promising them was a restoration ... that what was always meant to be, but which they thought was lost, would be restored to them after all. This would be the ultimate proof that God really did love them ... because he was putting right the years of wrong ... restoring everything to how it was meant to be. It meant that God was willing to forgive their many past mistakes and give them a new beginning.
- This also had a New Testament echo for us as the people of God. When Jesus spoke with Nicodemus that night in Jerusalem, he talked of being 'born again' ... of having a completely new start with God. And how does this come about? ... through belief in Jesus as the son of God, and putting our faith in him.
- Jesus came in order that we might be saved ... because:

"God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16)

- If we believe in Jesus ... not just *believe that he existed*, and that he was who he said he was, but *believe in him* in the sense that we *put our trust in him and seek to follow him* as true disciples ... then we have indeed been saved.
- All this is evidence of the truth that God loves us. As he did with the Israelites, but more so, God has forgiven our past mistakes and given us a new beginning. The difference is that this is a new beginning which will last for eternity, because everyone who believes in Jesus and accepts him as their Lord and Saviour will have eternal life.

Having heard God, Moses went back to the Israelites to tell them what God had promised, but they did not listen to him. They were too caught up in their discouragement and suffering to hear what God had in store for them. Their lack of faith left them without hope.

What about us? Are we believing in the promises of God and living in the hope of all he has in store for us ... or are we too caught up in the things of this life to give him our attention. God really does love us ... and he is coming to save us!