**“That all may be free”[[1]](#footnote-1)**

*‘I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea. The Lord is my strength and my might, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father’s God, and I will exalt him*. (Exodus 15:1-3)

This snippet from the Song of the Sea gives us a glimpse of the celebration of the Hebrew slaves when they realised that they were really and truly free. Escaping captivity, they had been trapped with water on one side and the approaching army of their oppressor on the other, and God had rescued them. We hear their awe and amazement, joy and relief, as they stand on the far shore of chaos. No more abuse and exploitation at the hands of the Pharaoh, who in the tradition comes to symbolise all the dehumanising oppressive systems into which those with power keep trying to organise our world. The raggle-taggle group of runaways are loved and saved by a mighty God who has brought them out of fear and darkness into the light. Of course they sing and dance, and whoop and laugh, they cannot help it. They are free!

But this is only the beginning of the journey of the people of God. They have been set free *from* bondage, yes, but also set free *for* something: to be the people that God has created them to be, a community of people with value and dignity. The hand of God that leads them out of Egypt leads them to the holy mountain in the desert where God will covenant with them. Here they receive instructions for living in freedom. These are the descendants of Abraham, whom God called in order to be a blessing to the whole world (Genesis 12:3). At Sinai they will be reminded that, because they had experienced oppression and been set free, they were never to oppress the stranger or the weak; they were to care for the most vulnerable in their midst; they were to open their hearts and hands to those in need, and never recreate the oppressive system of Pharaoh in their own community. God, the God “who brought [them] out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Exodus 20:2), always listens to the cries of the oppressed. This God opposes all that dehumanizes and violates the dignity of human beings created in God’s image. Do you remember the words in the middle of Mary’s song?

*He has shown the strength of his arm,*

*he has scattered the proud in their conceit.*

*He has cast down the mighty from their thrones,*

*and has lifted up the lowly.*

*He has filled the hungry with good things,*

*and the rich he has sent away empty.* (Luke 1:51-53)

The story of the Exodus, celebrated in the Song of the Sea, is the story that shaped Jesus. It is the story of the God who hears the cries of the oppressed, and who reaches out to save them. It is the story by which story Jesus lived - and died. Do you remember his words in the synagogue in Nazareth at the start of his ministry?:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.* (Luke 4:18-19).

It is easy to misinterpret the Exodus story. We can reduce it to a story of us versus them, believing that God saves us because God is *ours*, and destroys our opponents because they are ‘*them’.* Terrifying things are being said in Europe and in the United States, suggesting that our Christian heritage is only protected when we exclude the other, as if God loves us and not them. There is so much rhetoric about ‘walls.’ But when we build a wall against the vulnerable we will discover that it is God we have shut out.

We also misunderstand the story when we replicate the oppressive system of Pharaoh, where the wealth and security of the few is secured at the cost of the more vulnerable, and yet still believe that God is on our side. But God has warned us: “when the poor cry out to me, I will hear them, and I will work to destroy the system that robs them of their humanity.” (cf Exodus 22:21-23). The question is not: ‘is God on my side?’ but “am I on God’s?”

St Paul tells us that all those who are led by the Spirit are God’s children (Romans 8:14). And where is the Spirit leading us? Everywhere that we see seeds of hope and love, the Spirit of God is at work to heal and to make whole. The Spirit of God is at work wherever systems and forces that dehumanise and violate the dignity of God’s creation are opposed and dismantled. This cannot happen through hate and violence - because those who fight the dragon that way become the dragon - but only through love.

What does this all have to do with Christian unity? When as communities we are turned in on ourselves and caught up in our own agendas, then we become obsessed by the different accents with which we speak the language of our common faith. When we take our eyes off where God is at work in the world and become consumed by our own comfort, or power, or influence, then the mosaic that is God’s people in the world, the wondrous unity in diversity that God is fashioning, begins to fall apart. It is when we reach out beyond our comfort zone, when we work side by side, joining in *God’s* work in the world, that we are drawn closer together. When we try to encounter God in our worship but close our hearts to those to whom God’s ear is attuned and for whom God’s heart bleeds, we will end up praying to ourselves. But when we reach out, we will encounter God. And when we reach out together, we will encounter God together. And when we encounter God together we encounter each other as brothers and sisters in Christ, as beloved family.

Our hearts will never really sing until we encounter Jesus. The woman who snuck up behind Jesus on the road (Mark 5:24-34), hoping to touch the edge of his garment, was aware of her need, and she was sure that Jesus could heal her. And he did. The energy that emanated from him was love, and it so brought healing and wholeness. But Jesus was not content for it to be simply an impersonal transaction, a “transfer of grace.” He looks around, asking insistently, “Who touched me?” It may sound like Jesus is putting the woman on the spot, but do you see what he is doing? He is looking for her. He wants to meet her, person to person. And when they meet face to face he affirms her: “Daughter, your faith has made you well.” She may have thought that she was secretly stealing a bit of healing power. But Jesus wants her to know that it is a gift freely and generously given to her. The touch healed her. In the meeting with Jesus, she was transformed.

Don’t ever be willing to settle for religious practice that feels like you are plugging yourself occasionally into a source of spiritual healing without also encountering Jesus. You will meet the Risen Jesus in worship when you meet him in life, on the road. Jesus himself has told us that we will meet him incognito in the hungry whom we feed, in the naked whom we clothe; we will be overlooking *him* in the homeless that we ignore and in the prisoners that we do not visit. (cf Matt 25:35-45) And we will meet him in our brothers and sisters of different traditions when we welcome the stranger and work to free the oppressed - together.

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1. This is a transcript of the homily given at the Inaugural Service for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2018 at the Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel, Johnstown/Killiney, on 18 January 2018. The Scripture readings were Exodus 15:1-3, 11-17; Romans 8:12-17, 26-27; and Mark 5:24-34. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)