

21st January 2024 – Isaiah 40-55 (2) – Isaiah 43:1-19 ‘A new way – “because I love you...”’

In 1978, amateur archaeologist Ron Wyatt chartered a small plane for a flight over the Red Sea. Landing at Neweiba Beach – now a resort area in Egypt – he discovered a stone column lying in the water. Aware of the tradition that King Solomon had erected columns to commemorate the crossing of the Red Sea, he looked on the opposite side, and discovered an identical column inscribed with Hebrew text giving glory to the God of Israel who delivered His people through the Red Sea.

Excited by these extraordinary finds, he reasoned that if this was indeed the site of the crossing, there would be evidence of Egyptian chariots in the water; sure enough, one of the first things he found was a beautiful gold-plated chariot wheel, very fragile but clearly visible in the clear waters. Later, Wyatt and his sons found numerous other man-made artifacts and chariot wheels, including those with four, six and eight spokes, typical of the wheels used in the 18th Dynasty at the time of Moses – all intact, because coral had attached to the wood, preserving it for over 3,000 years!

If you go onto Youtube, you’ll find numerous videos of Red Sea dives showing the wheels, axles and other items on the sea bed, so you can see the evidence for yourself. Some have tried to present alternative reasons as to why this is not irrefutable proof – but, you have to ask, why else would there be chariot wheels dated to the second millennium BC in the middle of the Red Sea, unless the story of the Exodus was true?

Why does this matter? After all, we live by faith and trust in God promises. It doesn’t hurt, though, does it, to find out that ancient biblical stories are likely to have actually happened? And it’s a great way of introducing today, because **Isaiah 43 references the crossing of the Red Sea twice, an event which runs deep in the collective memory of God’s people** – and in both cases, it’s a wonderful encouragement to them, and to us.

If you’ll allow me, I’ll tackle them the wrong way round. We’ll begin near the end of the text. Let’s remember from last week that the context of this prophecy is that God’s people have been conquered and are now subservient to the Babylonian Empire. They are weak, powerless and in despair. Today, though, the prophet twice references the Exodus story, and especially the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea, to remind them of two great truths.

First, God’s enemies never prevail forever. Look at the armies of Pharaoh, as the Israelites fled Egypt: the waters, which rescued God’s people, judged their enemies, too. Verses 16-17: ‘he who made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters, drew out the chariots and horses, the army and reinforcements together, and they lay there, never to rise again.’ In what looked like a hopeless situation, the Lord came through for his people, in remarkable ways.

What happened then, the Lord says, will happen again. The Babylonians might look invincible now; but every empire falls, and the Lord will one day judge the Babylonians as he once did the Egyptians. Why? For the sake of his people: (v14) ‘For your sake, I will... bring down as fugitives all the Babylonians, in the ships in which they took pride.’ And, again, this actually happened. Next week we skip to Isaiah 49, but in-between, in chapter 45, the Lord introduces King Cyrus of Persia as his agent of judgement on the Babylonians. And, sure enough, in 539BC, Cyrus conquered Babylon. Shortly after, he gave permission to the first Jews to resettle in Israel. **A new wind was blowing, a new way would emerge – and the Lord would do it for the sake of his people.**

The Lord is still in control. He alone is ruler of the universe (v10); he only saves (v11). We are safe in this mighty God's hands (v13) – no power of hell, no scheme or plan, can ever pluck us from his hand. What great news for God's people then. And what comfort, what encouragement, for us now! We are safe in God's hands.

For our second reference to the crossing of the Red Sea, we head back to the beginning of the passage, and one of many people's favourite verses: (v2) 'When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.'

For the original readers, the waters would have reminded every Israelite of the great story of the Exodus, and the crossing of the Red Sea. The fire would have reminded people of Moses, and the bush that didn't burn. Subsequent generations would also have thought of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace – although that story hadn't happened yet, at the time of writing.

But it's not just a memory, the Lord says – it is a present reality. What happened then is my promise to you *now*. **Life is often overwhelming, but I am still the Lord who brings you through these trials.** And notice that it's not 'if' but when – *when* you pass... *when* you pass... *when* you walk. Trials are a part of life in this fallen world. What we need to know is not that, somehow, we can ensure they won't happen – but rather, that in the midst of them we have Someone to rely on. We are not alone. We will overcome. This is the great promise of this text, and why it is treasured by so many people.

But there's more. Why can we trust the Lord to come through for us? Because He loves us! It's that simple: (4): 'Since you are precious and honoured in my sight, and because I love you, I will give people in exchange for you, nations in exchange for your life.'

Our God does not uphold us grudgingly; it is the freely-given loving care of a divine parent, to whom we are precious (v4) and for whom we are created (v7). This is the foundation of the wonderful verse (2), that has sustained and blessed so many people. My prayer is that it likewise touches our hearts today. You may feel the waters rising round your neck. You may feel the heat turning up. Do not be afraid, the Lord is with you.

I'll leave the last word to the great David Wilkerson, in his commentary on this text:

'It is absolutely imperative that we believe -- quickly, firmly, today -- that God loves us and delights in us... Dear saint, don't look at your mounting bills. And don't try looking into an uncertain future. Your part is to trust in your loving Father's covenant promises, and to lean on his great love for you. You're going to come out victorious, because he's holding you in his loving arms.' Amen.