

May I speak in the name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

If you've been in church over the last few weeks you'll know that our sermons are picking up the readings from Exodus and we're hearing about the story of Moses in this season and it's been a roller coaster ride. He's born into a difficult situation and then he's rescued, brought up in the royal palace, but as a young man he murders an Egyptian. He flees into the wilderness and he's there for decades until he has this amazing encounter with God in a blazing bush and God sends him back to Egypt. He then leads the people to freedom and that's where the story that we've heard this morning picks up.

We might say that this is actually the high point of Moses' story as he leads his people to freedom and finally frees them from bondage to the Egyptians and their fearful army. This is Moses' finest hour and if you just ... It's a bit before we picked up this morning in the reading, we'll see that the Egyptian army chased the Israelites out of Egypt and it seemed to have them pinned because the army was on one side and the sea was on another. It looked pretty grim for the people of Israel. It looks as if there was nowhere for them to go.

Then Moses as we hear stretches out his arm and the waters part and the people of Israel are able to walk across on dry land and they come out to the other side. Then Moses stretches his arm out again and the waters come back and the Egyptian army is swamped. This story came up in seminary when I was there. It was taught by a very liberal professor. I remember it well because I was sitting next to a very conservative friend of mine called Brian. The two didn't really get on, Brian and this lecturer.

So the lecture started and he began by debunking all that he saw as the mythological elements in this story of the Exodus. He took great delight in saying that it wasn't actually the Red Sea that the people of Israel went across as is commonly assumed, but the Reed Sea. He went on to say that the Reed Sea was a very shallow patch of damp ground that the people of Israel would have had no problem walking across. As he got towards the end of his lecture, he glanced across at my friend Brian and

he was surprised to see that Brian was smiling broadly.

He turned away, but he turned back when Brian let out a rather loud "Hallelujah, praise the Lord." He stopped in his track and he said, "Brian for goodness sake. What are you smirking about?" Brian said, "Well I'm just praising God that he managed to drown the whole Egyptian army in two inches of water."

I've always found this story of the Exodus challenging not so much because of the miraculous element – more because of the fate of the Egyptians because the very moment of triumph for Moses and the people of Israel is a devastating moment for the Egyptians and their army. As a great example of what Rebecca was talking about last week about how ... Well she might have been talking about it last night as well, but last week she preached a very good sermon about how grace and suffering can often go together and in moments of terrible suffering there can be those moments of grace and deliverance. If you want to know more about that theme I'd refer you to the internet to listen to that great sermon.

For whatever reason though the Exodus story in the west I would suggest hasn't received the attention it deserves which isn't the case for South America and lots of parts of the world that have been influenced by what's known as liberation theology. In that theological tradition the story that we've just heard this morning is right at the heart of the faith. This story of God winning His people's freedom and liberation is seen to be at the center of everything and at the heart of the Biblical story. It's seen as the key to interpreting the whole Biblical text.

Maybe one of the reasons in America we don't quite have that emphasis is that we take our freedom for granted. We don't see the significance of what's happening in this story as a people are liberated. I once heard a story of a boy in the South. He caught a mockingbird. He brought it home and put it in a cage. Later that day the bird's mother flew by and delivered the chick some berries. The next morning the boy found the bird

dead in the cage because its mother had fed it poisonous berries. She'd reckoned that it was better to die, to lose one's life than to lose one's freedom.

Now this language of slavery and freedom which is at the heart of the Exodus story is picked up and developed in the New Testament. Jesus says, "Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin, but if the Son makes you free you will be free indeed." So this theme is clearly an important one in the Bible. So I want to go and use the rest of my time this morning to say something about this important theme of freedom. Actually it's a great theme to be thinking about on this Rally Sunday.

Nelson Mandela once said, "Where there is poverty there is no freedom." I'm sure there's truth in that, but I don't think we could turn it round and say that where there is material wealth there is freedom because there's more to freedom than material comfort or even political freedom. We don't become freer as we become richer.

In the 19th Century in London the publishers Harper & Row had a horse called Dobbin that they kept in their factory and Dobbin's job was to go ... He was tied to a pole and he went round and round the printing press to keep the presses, pressing them down. He did this for years and years and in the end people felt sorry for poor old Dobbin and they thought that he'd earned his freedom. So he was uncoupled from the pole and let out to a lovely field in the countryside. But sadly, Dobbin's health deteriorated. He didn't eat. He didn't move. People didn't know what to do with him until somebody had the bright idea of putting a pole in the middle of the field and tying Dobbin to the pole. Sure enough he started to move as he went round and round the pole and eating again.

He regained his health but freedom for Dobbin had come too late because when it came to him, he didn't know what to do with it. Dobbin was released from bondage to work, but he was not really free. There's more to freedom than simply being able to do what we want. The key question is what we choose to do with our freedom and here we come to something of a paradox.

To be free is to be free to choose who or what we are to obey. St. Paul puts it like this. "Whoever is free is a slave to Christ." P.T. Forsyth the great Anglican theologian says this. "The first duty of every soul is to find not its freedom, but its master." Frederick Buechner a contemporary writer, he says what this looks like in practice. It's a long quote what I'm about to read, but bear with me. I think there's something in here worth hearing.

Buechner writes this. "We have freedom to the degree that the master whom we obey grants it to us in return for our obedience. We do well to choose a master in terms of how much freedom we get for how much obedience.

"To obey the law of the land leaves us our constitutional freedom, but not the freedom to follow our conscience wherever it may lead.

"To obey the dictates of our own conscience leaves us freedom from the sense of moral guilt, but not the freedom to gratify our own strongest appetites.

"To obey our strongest appetites for drink, sex, power, revenge, or whatever leaves us the freedom of an animal to take what we want when we want it, but not the freedom of a human being to be human.

"The old prayer speaks of God in whose service is perfect freedom. The paradox is not as opaque as it sounds. It means that to obey Love itself, which above all else wishes us well, leaves us the freedom to be the best and gladdest that we have it in us to become. The only freedom Love denies us is the freedom to destroy ourselves."

The key question about freedom isn't freedom from whatever. It's not freedom from. It's freedom to. What are we freed to do? Hear what St. Paul says in Galatians, this reading that we heard. "For you were called to freedom, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another."

When we choose Christ as our master we are freed from sin and free to serve. This liberty gives us purpose not license, which brings us to Rally Sunday. Today is the day in the church year when we're considering how it is this year we're called to serve one another. St. James like all churches depends on its volunteers, people who are prepared to serve the needs of the congregation. You'll see after the service on the patio you'll have noticed on the way in lots of tables set up and behind each table is a representative of a part of church life, and we all need to make a contribution if that vitality of that life is to continue.

So I encourage you over coffee and over lunch to walk around the tables. Look at who's there. See where you might be able to make a contribution and this year we have a special emphasis on serving the needs of the people outside of our church community. We have a fantastic outreach committee which was formerly known as the Church and the World Committee and they've identified three areas for us to focus on this year and over the summer you might have seen this brochure they've produced which lists the three areas and all the ministries which we have a link with.

Our hope is over this coming year to develop ongoing links with various outreach organizations in our neighborhood so we don't just write them checks which is obviously important, but that we back that up by being involved and we have a lively relationship with these organizations. So I encourage you to look at that. There's plenty outside, and by focusing on certain things that that committee has identified we can ensure that our efforts have the biggest impact.

So look at that table and all the other tables out there after the service. Let's all choose to use our freedom to serve. Amen.