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## SUNDAY SERMON

*Erik Koren*

Dear friends of the Bible Week,

There is a Frisian legend about a meeting of the Anglo-Saxon missionary Willibrord, the first archbishop of Utrecht, and of the Frisian king, Redbad, somewhere around 700 AD. The story tells us that Willibrord nearly succeeded in converting the king to Christianity. However, at the last moment, the king had one final question: Where, according to the archbishop, would his forefathers be after he was baptised? The archbishop answered that because they weren't baptised themselves, they would still be in hell. Then, it is said, the king withdrew his foot from the font, remarking that he'd rather be in hell with his forefathers than alone in heaven.

Willibrord and Redbad both came from the same culture of Germanic peoples living along the coasts of the North Sea. They will have had a little trouble understanding each other's language. But because one was a Christian and the other a tribesman, they also had their differences. The archbishop argued, probably on the basis of Paul's letter to the Romans, that individual people who weren't baptised do not go to heaven, but to hell. There was nothing the king could do about that. For the king there was no salvation in this kind of individualism. Instead he honoured his parents and chose not to run off with a foreign god, whom his fathers did not know, or rather, who didn't want to know his fathers.

Let us go back to today's readings.

The reading from Deuteronomy not only contains an expression of God's love for Israel, but also a threat to *those who hate him to his face*. They are linked by the statement that God is trustworthy and loyal to those who love him and keep his commandments. Now, I am not exactly sure what the author of Deuteronomy means by "love", but it sounds conditional and not quite like what we find in the Song of Songs. The message being that God loves you, and that if someone does not love God enough in return and does not do as God commands, God will repay him or her with destruction. The reading also reminds the chosen people of the exodus.

I think the story of the exodus provides us with a key to understanding all three of today's readings. All three communities for which they were written knew the hardships of life, whether through exile or through persecution. They needed encouragement and support, but more than that they needed a way to fight for the emancipation of their communities.

And so Deuteronomy reminds the Jews in exile that they are God's own chosen people. Because God loves them, he has liberated them with a strong hand from slavery, from the king of Egypt.

Baptism, as Paul explains, is an image of Christ's death and resurrection, liberating us from sin and death. For Christians baptism has also long since been an image of the exodus, more specifically, of Israel's passing through the Sea of Reeds. It is a sign and a seal of God's liberating action.

The story of the passing through the Sea of Reeds is read in the Easter Vigil as the third of seven readings from the Hebrew Scriptures commemorating God's mighty deeds of old. These readings, each with a responsive chant, form the first part of the Easter Vigil, in which the Church celebrates the resurrection of Christ from the dead. In the third part, the Eucharist, our second reading about baptism is read in full as first reading, just before the triple Hallelujah and the Gospel of the resurrection. These two elements, exodus and baptism, come together in the middle part of the Easter Vigil, which consists of the blessing of the water, baptism, and the renewal of the promises we as a community made to God at our own baptism. In the Old-Catholic tradition the story of the exodus, Paul's explanation of baptism and our Gospel reading of today are all referred to or quoted in this part.

The Easter Vigil is the celebratory heart of the Christian liturgical calendar. This is the night in which we re-tell the Salvation History in full; the night, in which baptism plays a central role, because it is a re-enactment of the exodus of Israel from Egypt and of the death and resurrection of Christ. This is the night in which Israel is liberated from slavery and oppression, and the church from sin and death, leading both of them to new life together with God. This is what makes the Easter Vigil, and especially the baptism part of it, the liturgical equivalent of the enclosed garden of the Song of Songs, an image of paradise: richly flowing with water and filled with the winds of God's spirit.

The whole ritual of Easter Night is meant to show us that the movement God started with the exodus is still going on. God wants us to be free people, whether we are Egyptians, or Libyans, or Syrians, whether we are Jews, or Christians, or atheists. But in order for a liberated people to stay free, one needs rules. Deuteronomy, and Paul, and Matthew all agree on that. That is why the Egyptians, who fought for freedom last spring, now face the struggle for a just and democratic constitution. And when they have this constitution they will have to take care that everyone keeps playing according to the rules. Only by upholding the law will new dictators stand no chance. Only by keeping the law will the people stay free.

But then again the law itself may be(come) an instrument of oppression, when rules are used to force people into obedience, when they make excessive demands, when they forbid us to be as we are, or to practise what we believe. When the law itself becomes the stick with which we are beaten into loving our rulers, into loving God, then we need to be liberated from the yoke of the law itself, whether that is the laws of our country, or the rules of our church. Then we need to be reminded of what keeping the commandments is all about: that we can live our lives in freedom before God. That in the end all laws and commandments should come down to this, that we love God with all our brains, with all our passions and with all our energy, and that we love our neighbours and ourselves alike.

So maybe this is why Jesus sent us to all the nations of the world, to baptise them and teach them to keep his commandments: that all peoples undergo their own proper exodus and gain their freedom before God. Yet, however much being a baptised follower of Jesus means to me, I often wonder if what we offer other people is always as liberating as we believe it should be. The church, our mission, can get in the way of liberating people. Missionary activity never comes free. It will always be hampered by our cultural and religious prejudices, our political animosities and racial biases, our doctrinal truths and the claims of our churches.

Archbishop Willibrord's mission was not unconnected with the political support of king Redbad's Frankish enemies. Becoming a Christian would for the Frisians be like accepting Frankish overlordship. They did not need to be liberated, they were free. And it was the king's choice to defend

this real and present freedom, instead of bargaining for an abstract freedom from sin and the promise of a future in heaven with the god of his enemies.

I suppose God would have agreed with the king. The Exodus shows that God wants his people to be free right now and not in some faraway, or even posthumous future. The Israel of Deuteronomy is not free, they're in exile and that is why Moses assigns them the task of keeping God's commandments, starting today. The people are invited to start fighting their way back to freedom immediately. The same can be said about baptism. It means that God wants us to be free from sin and the threat of punishment now, so we can live our lives without fear and in peace of mind. So we can go on in a new life, from now on.

Freedom and love are at their most valuable, not when they are dangling in front of us, like carrots, but when they fill our lives, when they fill our misery. Rather the pain of love and the struggles of freedom, than the life of the dead. And God will be with us, always.