

“We shall overcome”, a sermon based on Exodus 1:8-2:10 and Psalm 124, preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church, Dunedin, New Zealand on 27 August 2017.

I am indebted to Professor Maurice Andrew for his comments about Exodus, a common motif in Aotearoa. (*The Old Testament in Aotearoa New Zealand M.E.Andrew Deft 1999*)

Allan Davidson writes – “In the experience of the Israelites of slavery in Egypt, exodus and entry into the promised land, Te Whiti found potent images to describe his people’s conditions and hopes. For example, Te Whiti said that legislation had made them like the children of Israel, but while the Israelites had only to make bricks without straw, the Maori had to live without the means, the soil itself.”

The first book of the Bible translated into Maori was Exodus. For 150 years, in some way, Maori have wanted to be liberated from Pakeha.

In one of Pat Heretaunga Baker’s novels, a character says, “But Jehovah remembered the Jews and brought them out of bondage in Egypt ... so may Jehovah remember us, his lost and forgotten people and deliver us from those who would oppress us.”

Bronwyn Elsmore reports that Te Kooti’s voyage from the Chathams was a re-enactment of the crossing of the sea to escape their pursuers.

Bishop Whakahuihui Vercoe spoke at Waitangi and he wrote this:

“This is what it meant to me to go back to Waitangi ... maybe this is part of the Moses story again ... leading the people of God out of their slavery into a more righteous and just society.”

The beginning of Exodus seems largely uninterested in the details of the history of Exodus. But we have this story of Moses in the Bulrushes. It is the story of the birth of a hero, the threat of death in infancy, and rescue by extraordinary circumstances.

It has parallels to other folk tales, one of the closest being the legend of Sargon of Akkad, founder of the Assyrian empire, which relates that his mother bore him in secret and set him in a basket of rushes, sealing the lid with bitumen. A certain Akki lifted the infant out and reared him as his son. There are significant differences with the Maori hero Maui but he too is put into the sea by his mother, but breezes cast him ashore on a clump of seaweed.

The point of these stories is that, through the danger, the hero is brought into circumstances where he can do great deeds. The exodus story has its own characteristics. Most important is the role played by women in preserving the person who is later to be liberator. The midwives deceive Pharaoh.

As one writer says, “The women of Exodus provide unauthorised leadership ... through acts of intervention. The refusal of the midwives Shiphrah and Puah to carry out Pharaoh’s order prevents the murder of Israelite boys ... They are the only women in

Exodus to act in an overtly political sphere ... As those who aid birth, they are the first to assist in the birth of the Israelite nation."

Birth and water, both associated with women in the beginning of Exodus are images of liberation.

Bishop Penny Jamieson picked up the image of exodus ...

"It has found its way into the explorations of women seeking to understand and authenticate their own relationship with the Christian story. Kate Sheppard spoke of the quest for the vote in terms resonant of the biblical quest for freedom."

So we are not presented here with a sober historical account in the modern sense. What we are presented with are the circumstances of and the struggle with oppression. In Moses the midwives' small saving act was magnified by God's mighty hand. The rest of the tale we know. Moses stuttered God's truth to Pharaoh's power.

On December 1, 1955, after working all day as a seamstress at a department store, Rosa Parks boarded a bus to go home. She paid her fare and sat down in the first row of seats that were reserved for blacks. When the front of the bus reserved for white people filled up, the bus driver moved the "coloured" sign behind Parks, then told her and three other blacks to move to the back to accommodate the white passengers. Her three seat mates moved; Rosa Parks did not.

"When that white driver stepped back toward us," she later recalled, "when he waved his hand and ordered us up and out of our seats, I felt a determination cover my body like a quilt on a winter night."

"When he saw me still sitting, he asked if I was going to stand up, and I said, 'No, I'm not.' And he said, 'Well, if you don't stand up, I'm going to have to call the police and have you arrested.' I said, 'You may do that.'"

The bus driver called the police, who arrested Parks for violating Montgomery's segregation laws. She was also fired from her job. But her quiet act of civil disobedience jump started the Montgomery Bus Boycott three days later on December 4. The non-violent protest lasted 381 days, until the Supreme Court ruled in *Browder v. Gayle* (1956) that bus segregation was illegal.

Rosa Parks' political activism and civil disobedience were rooted in the gospel. In her biography *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* (2013), Jean Theoharis describes Parks as "a staunch and active Christian." She always carried her Bible with her, and was a lifelong member of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. "That's sort of in my family background, too," said Parks, "the Lord's power within me to do what I have done."

She led a life of "rich and active worship" in both Montgomery and Detroit (where she was a deaconess). Her Christian faith nourished her beliefs in human dignity, equality, the long struggle against racism, and the "Christian responsibility to act." She responded

to death threats with a prolonged period of prayer in church, after which, writes Theoharis, "an intense calm swept over her."

"From my upbringing and the Bible," Parks wrote in her autobiography, *My Story*, "I learned people should stand up for rights just as the children of Israel stood up to the Pharaoh."

Cynthia Jarvis says:

"We are to bear witness, to receive Christ as midwives receive a life long-awaited. We receive him not for ourselves alone, but so that another might be given life. Our part is to act as those summoned by God's grace to confess him as the Christ of God."

Jan Richardson - Fierce Blessing

Believe me when I say
there is nothing
this blessing would not do
to protect you
to save you
to encompass you.

This blessing
would stand between you
and every danger,
every evil,
every harm
and hurt.

This blessing
would dare
to wade with you
into the waters that come
bearing life.

It would make
a way for you
through the waters that come
threatening death.

I cannot explain
how fierce
this blessing feels
about you
but I can tell you
it has more than pledged

itself to you;
it would lay down
its life for you
and not once
look back in regret
nor go in sorrow
for what it has chosen
to give.

And you —
so deeply blessed,
so utterly encompassed —
what will you save
in turn?

Not because
it is owed
but because
you cannot imagine
failing to pass along
this grace
that casts its circle
so wide,
this love
that flows
so deep
through this perilous
and precious life.



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