

In great fright they cried out to the Lord

Joe Feuerherd | Jul. 20, 2009 NCR Today



"In great fright they cried out to the Lord." Exodus 14:5-18

There is great danger in being put in a position from which there is no path of escape. In 1940, some 330,000 British and Allied troops were trapped by the advancing Germans in a pocket of beach called Dunkirk on the coast of France. With their backs to the sea, they would have been decimated had not every available boat come across the English Channel to ferry them to safety.

The lyric is found in many popular songs, "When our backs are against the wall," and it describes the same desperate predicament in which the protagonist must stand and fight to survive or count on being rescued.

Their backs to the sea, the people of Israel following Moses turned and saw the clouds of dust from the chariots of Egypt in hot pursuit. They cried out to the God they had barely known during centuries of enslavement in Egypt, the ancient God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God Moses claimed to have encountered in the burning bush at Midian, the God named "I AM," who told Moses he would rescue his people from Egypt.

The people complained to Moses. "Were there no burial places in Egypt that you had to bring us out here to die in the desert? Why did you do this? Why did you bring us out of Egypt?" Better to be slaves in Egypt, they argued, than to be dead in the desert. This whole idea of freedom was a trick, a disaster, and all Moses' fault.

We know the rest of the story. God tells Moses to hold his staff over the sea. The sea parts to allow the Israelites to pass safely to the other side, and then the waters swallow up the advancing army of pharaoh.

The God Moses has restored to their consciousness is the God who saves, the God who hears the cry of the poor and acts on their behalf.

Jesus believed in this God and, like Moses, led his disciples through the hour of their liberation, the new Passover consummated in his own passage through the waters of death to rebirth in resurrection. The gospel story is predicated on Exodus and our faith in Jesus is founded on the belief that our God is One who delivers. Our God is not just an idea, a projection of our highest aspiration that love ought to triumph over death or justice over oppression. God acts, in history and in our personal lives, or God, like impotent gods of Egypt conjured up by its priesthood of magic and intimidation, is no God at all.

How do we know this? We don't, unless our backs are against the wall. Only then, as suffering threatens to destroy us, do we really pray the kind of heart-wrenching prayers that God can hear because they are totally, absolutely, rock-bottom real.

In the Our Father, we pray to be spared the test, to be delivered from evil, and so we should pray. Who can be sure their small faith will hold if really pressured. But this final petition is itself assurance that even the worst cannot threaten us because ultimately we stand in relationship to God, who is faithful, who, when all is said and done, will act.

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