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The Exodus and the Christian Life

Lawrence E. Frizzell, *Seton Hall University*



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The Exodus and the Christian Life

**Reverend Lawrence E. Frizzell
Institute of Judaeo-Christian Studies
Seton Hall University
South Orange, NJ**

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Fifth Sunday of Lent

March 17, 2013 Sunday Readings for Cycle C:

Is 43:16-21; Ps 126; Phil 3:8-14; Jn 8:1-11

THE EXODUS AND THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

Lawrence E. Frizzell

The structure of Jewish and Christian liturgy includes the dimension of history at the core of every celebration. Only by understanding our roots in the past manifestations of God to his people can we express trust that divine goodness shapes our lives now. Only in knowing the pattern of divine action in the past can we hope for the triumph of God over evil now and in the future.

The teachers of the remnant who survived the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. knew that the people were devastated by their experience. They sought to rebuild the faith of Israel by assuring them that the Creator of the universe was the Lord who could redeem them from misery and slavery. The Lord himself declared: "I am the Lord, your holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King" (Is 43:15). At this time Israel lived among the Babylonians, who believed that creation resulted from the victory of their chief god, Marduk, over an evil dragon. Belief that creation was constituted from the tainted body of this dragon led to conclusions unacceptable to Israel. However, the myths of neighboring cultures had a powerful appeal! Thus, the prophets boldly adapted that story to the historical order, so that their symbolism and power over the imagination could be utilized.

The Exodus was such a momentous event in the history of Israel that it took on cosmic proportions for later generations. In prayer the desperate people should call on God to awake and to act as in times long past to rescue Israel. "Was it not you who crushed Rahab (a monster, symbol of Egypt), who pierced the dragon? Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep... for the redeemed to pass over?" (Is 51:9-10).

In the passage read this Sunday, the victory over Pharaoh's army at the Sea of Reeds is recalled. Those who stubbornly opposed the divine plan for Israel were defeated in a decisive manner (see Ex 15:1-18 for the song celebrating this triumph). Through the prophet God promises an event that will be even more marvelous. The desert would be transformed so that the people could return without difficulty to the land where they could serve their God.

Although the people are told to forget the events of the past as insignificant compared with the future deliverance (Is 43:18), the Exodus remains for Jews and Christians as the paradigm from which all subsequent acts of redemption are understood. Thus the New Testament writers interpret the work of Jesus, especially his death-and-resurrection, in terms of exodus (Lk 9:31), the Passover Meal (Lk 22:7-12), the Lamb (Jn 1:29) and the unleavened bread (1 Cor 5:6-8).

St. Paul considered his knowledge or experience of Christ Jesus to surpass by far all God's other

gifts. The entire purpose of life and the mystery of death itself must be understood in light of Christ's Paschal Mystery. To share the fullness of life, which is communion with the living God, the faithful unite with Christ's death; then they will participate in the resurrection of the dead (Phil 3:8-11).

John the Baptist and others expected the Messiah to vanquish evil in the world by an act of judgment before the Kingdom of God could be inaugurated (Lk 3:16-17, see Is 11:4). The Fourth Gospel makes a clear statement that Jesus came not to judge but to save the world (Jn 12:47), reserving judgment until the second coming. The case of the woman caught in adultery illustrates this salvific emphasis in Jesus' ministry. By outwitting the woman's accusers, Jesus delivered her from judgment in court and, in forgiving her sin, he challenged her to make a new response to life. The same mercy and forgiveness is extended to us during the season of Lent. Then we will be able to appreciate the Paschal Mystery more profoundly.