Exodus 14:19-end

Romans 14:1-12

Matthew 18: 21-35

**May the words of my lips and the meditations of my heart be acceptable unto you, O Lord. Amen.**

I have spent some time this week gardening. I enjoy gardening, but I am not good at finding the time, and I am not very knowledgeable.

I make judgements about whether something is a plant or a weed and then act accordingly.

I planted a plant that I was given for Christmas outside when the weather improved, and when I went to weed the border it looked exactly as it did when I had planted it.

However, when I started to remove the weeds from around it and cleared the space, I was surprised to see that, right at the bottom of the plant, there were some new shoots.

My judgement had been that the plant would need to be pulled up, but actually, once I had weeded the bed, there were signs of new life. My judgement was wrong.

I love the way that when I am reading my Bible there is always something different that gets my attention.

We know the story of the crossing of the Red Sea so well, it is a favourite story in Sunday Schools across the world.

When I re-read it the thing that struck me was how the angel of God, who had been going in front of the Israelite army, moved and went behind them.

The pillar of cloud also moved from in front of to behind them.

God had their back, in today’s colloquial English.

God came between the army of the Egyptians and the Israelites.

God’s judgement was about to be felt by the Egyptians.

They had been given plenty of chances.

Exodus 7:16 tells us that Moses was told to go to Pharaoh and say “the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you to say, ‘let my people go, so that they may worship me in the wilderness’.

God was not taking them into the wilderness to be rich, famous, for an easy life, it was to free his people from bondage so that they could worship him.

You would think that:

1. Turning water into blood so that the fish died and the river stank
2. A plague of frogs
3. A plague of gnats
4. A plague of flies
5. Disease of livestock
6. A plague of boils
7. A plague of thunder and hail
8. A plague of locusts which ate every plant in the land
9. A plague of darkness
10. And the death of all firstborn children

Would show that God meant business, but Pharaoh was not listening, and so we have today’s account of Moses taking the Israelites across the Red Sea and into the wilderness.

God’s judgement on the Egyptians for coming between Him and His people.

We are told at the end of the passage that “Israel saw the great work that the Lord did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.” (v31)

God’s judgement led to faith, to a faith community being freed to worship God.

What we also see is that when the going got tough God moved from leading the Israelites to coming between them and their enemy, thereby protecting them.

God wanted the Israelites to build their worshipping community.

In our Bible study this week we saw how God freed the disciples from jail to allow them to preach in the temple courtyards, to build a worshipping community.

We are reminded in our Romans reading that is not our place to judge.

The early Christian church was struggling to become a community of faith.

They had members from diverse backgrounds, Gentiles and Jews who were struggling to work together with different attitudes to food, festivals and how their faith should be lived out.

Again, we are reminded that God’s plan is for every knee to bow to God and every tongue to praise God, a worshipping community.

Our gospel reading starts with the again well-known words of Jesus about how often we should forgive people.

This reading is talking about forgiveness within a church community, it is part of the section which starts at verse 15 and says “If another member of the church sins against you”.

The Rabbis of the time recommended forgiving not more than three times, so Peter’s seven times therefore seems generous by comparison. Jesus reply simply does away with all limits on forgiveness within the church community.

Then follows the parable of the unforgiving servant. The servant owes ten thousand talents, ten thousand is the highest Greek numeral, equivalent to us saying billions today.

To be forgiven so much makes it unthinkable that he would not forgive someone else 100 denarii, about one six hundredth thousandth of his own debt.

Jesus uses the parable to make a point. He emphasises the importance of forgiveness, if we do not forgive, we will not be forgiven.

We must remember that we are under GRACE, it is because of the death and resurrection of Jesus that we are forgiven people.

Our forgiveness came at a cost.

In Matthew’s gospel the Lord’s prayer says “forgive us our debts as we have also forgiven our debtors”.

Every time we pray the Lord’s prayer, we are stating that we are forgiving others.

The church, a community of forgiven people, must be forgiving from the heart.

Judging is God’s job, like my poor gardening judgements it is not our place to judge.

Our job is to forgive, and to keep on forgiving within our church community, as that forgiveness helps to build community.

I always remember that some time ago someone in our church came to me and said that they were not happy with something that I had done. I went away and thought and prayed about it, and then went and sought his forgiveness. It was that which became a firm basis for fellowship.

We have been forgiven so much; we should be forgiving others who are on the same Christian journey.

It is sad that some churches are pulled apart because people cannot forgive each other.

Forgiveness builds community.

Israel was led out of Egypt to be a community of worshipping people.

We will sometimes feel that God is leading, and sometimes God comes behind us and has our backs, but we are called to be a worshipping community of forgiven, forgiving people.

Amen.