When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you’

In nomine…

Several days each week I take our children to school about a mile down the Abingdon Road, so our journey takes us out of Tom Gate, down St Aldates and over Folly Bridge. When crossing Folly Bridge by car you barely notice the river beneath it, but on foot the presence of the Thames is very clear. Each day it’s different: the water level rises and falls; the quality of light shifts; sometimes the stream glides imperturbably, at other times the surface is choppy with wind; sometimes it’s busy with rowers and canoeists and punters, at other times deserted.

I’ve always been fascinated by river bridges. In my native Pangbourne, twenty miles or so downstream from here, there is a wonderful early twentieth century toll bridge over the Thames. As a child, I loved the fact that you had to stop at a toll bar and pay a penny to cross the bridge; it gave a proper sense of wonder to the simple act of crossing the expanse of water. So each time I cross Folly Bridge I find myself visualising what life would be like without the gift of the bridge; I think back to the few rivers I’ve forded on foot – the Avon and the Dee in the Cairngorms – I think of the pressure of the water threatening to force one over, the doubt about how deep the river bed will be at the next step, the fear of losing one’s footing and being swept away. In the midst of a natural world that most of the time we keep at arm’s length, rivers are a reminder of a landscape deeper than the one we have tamed by concrete and tarmac.

We should have this in mind when we hear the Lord’s words through his prophet: ‘When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you’. The poetry of this chapter of second Isaiah is rich, at times its imagery borders on hyperbole. But as so often in the OT, it is firmly rooted in the physical reality of the natural world. Because they are so familiar it’s easy to miss the solidity of these images, but, dwelt with in prayer, they repay extended reflection. They bring home the lived encounter with the living God.

Asked to imagine God, most of us start from an unsatisfactory place and usually a pretty unscriptural too: the first image that comes to mind is probably a bearded old man; or, if we’re more conceptually-orientated, perhaps a triangle; or just some kind of fuzzy swirl of gases. Much better to start with the robust metaphors of the OT:

‘The LORD is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold’. (Psalm 18:2)

Sometimes the God of the OT is dismissed as crudely anthropomorphic, but that profusion of images from just one verse of one psalm strikes me as anything but. The metaphors here are properly three-dimensional; they don’t claim to say everything, but they give us a firm grasp on the reality of relationship with God. And the same is true of the image from today’s first reading: God as the one on whom we lean as we face the full force of an unbridged river:

‘When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you’.

This morning’s readings are both about salvation and they both describe God’s salvation in just these sort of solidly tangible terms. As the Christian faith has matured very often it has tended to shift salvation into future and to make it abstract. What in the scriptures is actual – something tangibly real for those who encounter God, especially in meeting Jesus – has increasingly been pushed away into the future and expressed in remote terminology.

In the scriptures, salvation is a comprehensive term for being delivered from personal or collective suffering and evil. And the first and greatest image for it is that of the passage of the people of Israel through the Red Sea.

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry
ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh’s horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. At the morning watch the LORD in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, ‘Let us flee from the Israelites, for the LORD is fighting for them against Egypt.’ Exodus 14:21-25.

This is a passage traditionally read at Evensong on Easter Day: a marvellously vivid, tangible image of the saving power of God at work. That deliverance through the water recalls the creation narrative of Genesis when an ordered creation is drawn out of the disorder of primal chaos: ‘the formless void [when] darkness covered the face of the deep’ (Genesis 1:2).

Here in these wonderfully direct OT narratives we are inducted into the felt reality of God’s presence both here and now. And this directness is intensified in the NT. Mary’s son is called Jesus, a name meaning ‘God is salvation’. The gospel accounts of his words and deeds spell out for us the meaning of salvation in human terms that are also unequivocally divine: the rule of God and the kingdom of heaven of which Jesus speaks are reverent circumlocutions for the divine salvation that will reach its climax in the last days. A salvation announced and inaugurated by Jesus here and now, bridging the divide between present and future, between time and eternity.

Perhaps the most powerful narrative of all is that in the nineteenth chapter of Luke’s gospel:

19 Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it. 2 A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax-collector and was rich. 3 He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. 4 So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. 5 When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, ‘Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.’ 6 So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. 7 All who saw it began to grumble and said, ‘He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.’ 8 Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, ‘Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.’ 9 Then Jesus said to him, ‘Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. 10 For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.’

‘Today salvation has come to this house’. As Ralph Cudworth, the great seventeenth century Platonist, wrote, ‘Salvation itself cannot save us, as long as it is only without us; no more than health can cure us, and make us sound, when it is within us, but at distance from us; no more than arts and sciences, whilst thy lie only in books and papers without us, can make us learned’.

But God in Christ is not at a distance; he has come unimaginably near, nearer to us than we are to ourselves, as Augustine said. Bridging the waters of sin and death and, in the terms of our second reading, ‘breaking down the dividing wall that is the hostility between us’ – not just between the nations, but between us and God.