

THE STORY OF MOSES

Exodus 2-15

Departure as liberation

The people of Israel lived in a foreign country, Egypt. But God didn't abandon them. He gave Moses a sign through a burning bush. Moses was to lead his people out of Egypt. "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey... The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." (Exodus 3:7-10)

Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and told him, "Let our people go!" Aaron took his staff and threw it down in front of Pharaoh. It turned into a snake. Pharaoh called his wise men and sorcerers, and they did the same thing: threw down their staffs and they also became snakes. But Aaron's staff swallowed up theirs. (Exodus 7:8-12.)

This was proof that Moses was sent by God and was mightier than Pharaoh. At last the people of Israel could leave Egypt. That's what they thought! But Pharaoh changed his mind and just laughed. Only when God had sent ten plagues – blood in the Nile, frogs, gnats, flies, pestilence, boils, storm, locusts, darkness and death – did Pharaoh stop laughing. He sent word to the Israelites in the middle of the night and said, "Go! Take everything with you! And never come back!"

The Lord God went before the people of Israel, that day and every day. In the daytime his sign was a pillar of cloud, at night God lit the way for them in a pillar of fire. The people could travel both day and night, away from Pharaoh, back to their home country. It took them more than 40 years.

Discuss...

The story of the exodus from Egypt is by no means a journalistic description of events, but an account of God's plan for his people, as it has been experienced and retold from generation to generation.

The people's hope during their journey was that God would lead them back to the land that the sons of Jacob had left – and that they regarded as "their own" land. A land that would offer them all a life of freedom.

The God who led the people out of Egypt was also the God that insisted that "The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (Leviticus 19:34).

- Imagine that you are one of those who experienced liberation through the exodus from Egypt. What thoughts would you have about the kind of welcome you would get in your new country?
- Do you think that those who experience liberation in a similar way to the Exodus story will themselves never oppress aliens?

STORIES FROM NORWAY

MEET A BOSNIAN WOMAN, 40 YEARS OLD

When I came to Norway, I came from a country at war, in chaos. How could you understand my situation? Before I came here, I didn't know what the word "refugee" meant, but I gradually began to understand. The main thing for us was to get away from the shelling, the anxiety and the unsafe conditions. I remember one of my first encounters with Norwegians. We were sent by taxi from the police station to a hotel. All our worldly possessions were stuffed into two bags. The taxi driver lifted them carefully and put them in the boot of the car. He did it with so much respect and understanding. I shall never forget that.

In the beginning it was the practical aspects of our new life that was the most important. That the children could go to school, that we could cook our own food. We tried to live as normal a life as possible. We had lost everything, and we just had to accept that.

Many Norwegians wanted to help us, but we felt that they couldn't help. My head was full of things you couldn't understand: images from the war, the experience of suddenly being treated like inferior human beings, just like Jews during the second world war. In the first place in Norway where we lived, we felt that people stared at us and kept their eye on us all the time. But it was a small place, where everybody knew everything about everybody. We felt guilty about the war – as though we were responsible for all the suffering. But I know with my reason that it was the political system that failed. But we felt that Norwegians regarded us as guilty. Many Norwegians think that if there is war in a country and people flee, then the material conditions there must be primitive. But we are from Europe and are used to the same standard of living as you are. We all had status and a position in Bosnia. But now we must start from scratch.

My husband and I are both 40. We know that the life we had in Bosnia will never come back. The freedom, the economic conditions, and not least the faith we had in human beings, the belief that all human beings are equal – that has gone for ever. I know now that it is easy to manipulate people, especially when there is war. Even now, when there is peace, I know that we never can or will forget what has happened. It will take many generations. Life in Norway can never be the same as life in Bosnia. And the knowledge that those who would like to help, can't, is hard to bear.

MEET A WOMAN FROM PAKISTAN

MY HUSBAND TOLD ME THAT NORWAY IS A FINE COUNTRY!

The whole family of six are Norwegian citizens. She came to Norway through family reunion after her husband had been here for several years. She had gone to school for 14 years in Pakistani Punjab, at Women's College. With four children to look after, she hasn't yet had time to look for a job, and she realises that she needs to learn Norwegian in order to have better work opportunities.

When asked if the family had renounced their Pakistani citizenship in order to be able to stay in Norway, she said yes. The standard of living and security are the most important

advantages that Norway has. When asked what is the greatest problem about living in Norway, she finds it more difficult to answer.

The family take practising Islam seriously. They speak Urdu, but when they read from the Koran, they would rather do it in Arabic. Koran school is therefore obligatory, and the two oldest children have completed Koran school. The two youngest are taught at home, every day from 4 to 6 pm. They don't need to go to the mosque to learn, but the family tries to go to the mosque on other occasions.

Even though it isn't strictly necessary to learn the Koran in Arabic, it was in Arabic that the Prophet received his revelations. They explain that their own language – in this case Urdu – can be used as an aid if words or sentences in the Koran cannot be understood.

Reflections about the multicultural society and the thesis that a democracy should be judged by how it treats its minorities, becomes more relevant after an encounter like this. That someone from another country wishes to preserve his or her own language and religion can be regarded by many as a sign that they don't want to be Norwegian. Many ethnic Norwegians are afraid that what we think of as Norwegian and Christian values will disappear.

After meeting this Muslim, Pakistani-born, Norwegian woman, who wants to contribute to making Norway a better place for everyone to live in, I can see that we have many possibilities for achieving this. Respect for other people's faith and convictions has been weakened in Norway in recent years. When we know what our own basic beliefs are, encounters like this one can strengthen our awareness of what faith means for individuals and communities.