

Sunday 23rd August - 2020 Readings and Sermon

1st Reading: Exodus 1 v8 – 2 v10

The Israelites are treated cruelly in Egypt

Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt. “Look,” he said to his people, “the Israelites have become far too numerous for us. Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country.”

So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labour, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites and worked them ruthlessly. They made their lives bitter with harsh labour in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; in all their harsh labour the Egyptians worked them ruthlessly.

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, “When you are helping the Hebrew women during childbirth on the delivery stool, if you see that the baby is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live.” The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live. Then the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, “Why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live?”

The midwives answered Pharaoh, “Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive.”

So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own.

Then Pharaoh gave this order to all his people: "Every Hebrew boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live."

The Birth of Moses

Now a man of the tribe of Levi married a Levite woman, and she became pregnant and gave birth to a son. When she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him for three months. But when she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket for him and coated it with tar and pitch. Then she placed the child in it and put it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile. His sister stood at a distance to see what would happen to him.

Then Pharaoh's daughter went down to the Nile to bathe, and her attendants were walking along the riverbank. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her female slave to get it. She opened it and saw the baby. He was crying, and she felt sorry for him. "This is one of the Hebrew babies," she said.

Then his sister asked Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get one of the Hebrew women to nurse the baby for you?"

"Yes, go," she answered. So the girl went and got the baby's mother. Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this baby and nurse him for me, and I will pay you." So the woman took the baby and nursed him. When the child grew older, she took him to Pharaoh's daughter and he became her son. She named him Moses, saying, "I drew him out of the water."

Gospel Reading: Matthew 16 v13-20

Peter declares that Jesus is the Messiah

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

“But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Sermon by Rev'd Kelvin Woolmer



Over the centuries and certainly within some Christian churches even today, the role of women is seen as secondary to men. I mean we're all aware that it's only within the last thirty years that women have been ordained as priests in the Church of England.

I remember before I became a priest myself that I had huge arguments with fellow Christians about the role of women in the Church. I was and still am very supportive of women in ministry, but

in our original church; where Jean and I went as members of the congregation, we used to get told that “women can’t be called by God because only men can do God’s work.” As you will expect I didn’t agree with that at all. And it didn’t make me very popular in that church, but then I’m used to being unpopular within clergy circles, so nothing new there!

However; as we shall see in from our reading; from Exodus and as I shall point out as I go in my sermon this morning, women are important to God and women are most definitely an important part of his work, and definitely called to be involved in his plans for humanity.



So, our reading says:

‘The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, “When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live.” But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded, but they let the boys live.’



This is dreadful isn’t it! Here’s a Pharaoh basically advocating child murder, infanticide, kill all the boys so they won’t grow up to become an army and fight against the Egyptians if there’s a war in the future. So here he is ordering women, the midwives,

to do the dirty work. But as it says in the text: **‘But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded, but they let the boys live.’**



Hurrah for these ladies, Shiprah and Puah; sensible and caring women prepared to put their own lives at risk because let's not forget, if it was found out that they were disobeying the Pharaoh they would be killed. But they ignored his instructions because they feared God more than Pharaoh. This is about God getting involved and being involved in the lives of the midwives because they actually knew who God was and they worshipped him and knew the Pharaoh was wrong.

But what's happened? Let's go back in time a few centuries before this reading from Exodus.

In Genesis we read that Joseph (the technicolour dream coat guy); a Hebrew, was a high official to the Pharaoh of Egypt. Joseph worked closely and helped that pharaoh save thousands of lives. He helped



save the Egyptians from famine; he helped keep the country of Egypt prosperous.

We read that Joseph invited his family to come and live in lovely safe Egypt. So they did. And the family grew and grew and now, 400 years later they number in the

millions. So what's happened to make this particular Pharaoh suddenly decide that the Hebrews, who had lived in the country for 400 years, were now enemies and must be treated like slaves and the baby boys should be murdered at birth?

Well as ever when someone is useless at what their supposed to be doing they point the finger in another direction and it diverts peoples' attention away from what they do. So the theologians think; and I tend to agree with them, that this particular Pharaoh; who they think is called Ramesses, was just useless at his job. And to divert

everyone's attention from what a useless Pharaoh he was, he points the finger at the Hebrews and stirs up what amounts to racial hatred. So then all the Egyptians are now denigrating the Hebrews and forgetting that their own lives are pretty bad - bad it doesn't matter because they get to make the lives of the Hebrews worse. So it makes them feel better.

It's been done so many times in history; remember it was done in Germany before the Second World War, and even more recently in the 'ethnic cleansing' of Myanmar's Rohingya Muslims...It used to be called Burma.

So a new Pharaoh is on the throne in Egypt, a Pharaoh 'who did not know Joseph', meaning he obviously didn't know his country's history and how the Hebrew Joseph has saved Egypt from starvation. To make things even more tense, that original family of 'seventy' born to old Jacob had grown by leaps and bounds during their stay in Egypt 'so that the land was filled with them.'



"More numerous even than we are", the new Pharaoh noticed. That is why the Hebrews became slaves in the land of Egypt - because the new Pharaoh of Egypt saw it as a way to keep them in their place. "Better to have them in chains," the new Boss-man said, "than joining up with our enemies." Like most plans of tyrants, however, Pharaoh's plan backfired in spades.

'But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites.'



Until finally; starting to feel like he was trying to hold back the tide, Pharaoh came up with the brilliant plan (or so it seemed to him at the time.) He approached the two women who had been appointed as midwives to all those thousands of Hebrew women, and said to them, "Start killing all the boys of the Hebrews whenever you get the chance."

Apparently, it never occurred to this unnamed Pharaoh (whom we suspect was Rameses II) that, aside from being one of the worst kinds of pogroms imaginable, it was also a pretty stupid business move. How was he going to keep building all those monuments without male slaves to do it?! Without the supply of men, who was going to do all the heavy lifting? Who was going to work the fields grow the food? He was not only one of the most wicked rulers of Egypt but one of the stupidest!



Clearly our heroic midwives were risking their lives to do the thing they did, which was to tell Pharaoh the whopper that they could never get there fast enough to give all those sturdy Hebrew women a hand before their babies just popped out on their

own! The way those two brave women figured it, they were dealing with a Pharaoh who was a wee bit thick; and, as things turned out, they were right. Pharaoh bought their story hook, line and sinker.



Then Pharaoh, in order to deal with the baby boom in boys, decided to command all his own people to take every Hebrew baby boy and drown them in the Nile!

Well, apparently this Pharaoh wasn't as in control as he thought, because our

story moves to when little Moses himself was born and was put into the water-proofed basket his mother made for him. Cleverly she



placed the child in the reeds close to where the daughter of Pharaoh bathed, and she found him and, realizing at once what kind of child he must have been, took him into her care.

This Pharaoh really had a way with women, didn't he?! Now bear in mind he's given this command that all Hebrew baby boys should be drowned - here's his own daughter coming to him with one of these children and telling him she's going to bring him up as her own child.

And then his daughter gets approached by Moses' sister Miriam (who had been watching in the bulrushes) who offers to find a nurse-maid for little baby Moses. Who does she just happen to choose?



None other than her own mother (also the baby's actual mother, just in case you were missing the plot line there.) And she ends nursing her own baby!

So, in the end, Pharaoh ends up with a Hebrew boy living in his palace, protected by his own daughter bringing up and educating Moses; a Hebrew boy who is going to make big changes for the Hebrews and the Egyptians when he grows up.

And just to say again how much women are loved by God and involved in God's plans, it's the women who have done the right thing and made the decisions on behalf of God to get Moses to live in the palace and set the future plans of God in motion.

SO, God's plan for the future of Israel is now in motion. Because let's be honest without the women doing what they did, there may never have been a nation called Israel. The midwives, Shiphrah and Puah defied Pharaoh because they 'feared God', and Pharaoh's daughter and her helpers did what they did because she 'took pity' on a little baby.

That is how a nation got saved. It needed the women in our story to act on behalf of God to save Moses to save the Israelites.



Now, you may say very well indeed that God was on the side of these five women whether things appeared that way or not, that God was somehow working behind the scenes, prompting people to do the very thing that He

would later give them a hand in finishing. But, right here, in this story from Exodus, we are reminded that before Moses could grow up to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt; before Moses could stand before the Pharaoh and show the power of God; before even Moses could stand at the Nile and part the waters with God's authority; right here at the beginning it was groups of women, integral players in the plans of God, who made it all possible.

So when we look for heroes in the Bible, we need to remember these women: the midwives, Mose's mother and sister, and the daughter of Pharaoh - women used in God's plan.



How does that affect us in our modern world? Well let's be honest: God uses us all in his work; our gender is irrelevant; our past is behind us and forgiven. God uses us to further His plans and His kingdom; no one has any excuse to 'opt out and say "Ah, but I'm only a man, or I'm only a woman" - we are all equal in God's sight and we are loved by him.

So this week - and I say this to men and women - whatever you do, tell someone about God; about Jesus who you might not usually talk to, and be excited because God will love you for it. And anyway, you're all part of his plan, so you don't really get the choice. And if you're not sure what to say, come back next week and I'll tell you more about how God can use you in his work here in Bedford.

Amen

