

## Short study on Exodus 1:8-2:10 (lectionary reading for Sunday 23rd August 2020)

Having spent a couple of weeks on readings concerning the story of Joseph and his part in the salvation history of Israel, the story for this Sunday moves on. Yet again, the future of Israel and the future of God's plans for humanity are at stake. This is reflected by the events surrounding the birth of Moses. The story begins in verse 8 in a rather chilling way: "Now a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph." So straight away we get the signal that things are going to be very different. Joseph had brought his family, the family of Israel, into Egypt in order to save them and help them prosper. He had welcomed them to Egypt as refugees, and he had provided for them, but their status as refugees and as a minority ethnic group made them vulnerable too to people like slave traders and people traffickers. Slavery was a common reality in the ancient world. People might become slaves if they suffered a terrible misfortune that could lead to their death from homelessness or starvation. They might be the residents of a defeated nation whose enemies kept them as slaves rather than killing them outright. They might be refugees or part of a vulnerable minority group who could be enslaved by the dominant majority. Or they might be born to slaves and therefore slavery was their apparent destiny. Here the Israelites (foreigners and refugees) are perceived to be numerous and therefore potentially powerful, and the new Pharaoh can't take the chance of an uprising against him. Better to act first to prevent revolution than to have to try and quash it later on. So "taskmasters" are set over the Israelites, they are oppressed and forced to labour in building cities for the new ruler. Words like "dread", "ruthless" and "bitter" in these few verses give us some impression of what things were like - the Egyptians "made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labour. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them." (v.14)

This is still not enough for Pharaoh. The Israelites may be slaves, but they are still having more and more children. So Pharaoh initially calls for a gradual genocide - the killing of any male children at the moment of birth. If only female babies are allowed to live then within a relatively short period of time (generationally speaking) the Israelites will be bred out. The Israelite women will be vulnerable to sexual enslavement by the Egyptians and any new babies born in those circumstances could be claimed as Egyptian. But although the midwives will not openly defy this ruling, neither will they go along with it. God blesses the midwives and the Israelites, and in verse 20 it sounds as though the birthrate might have actually increased. So the responsibility of seeing that this genocide is carried out is passed to all Egyptians. We don't know how diligently the ordinary people carried out this command to throw all Israelite boys into the Nile, but clearly the threat was very real, as we can see when we read on into chapter 2.

Moses is one of the babies who should have been killed. But his unnamed mother comes up with a creative plan to try and keep him safe. She technically does what Pharaoh has decreed - she puts her baby into the river, but first she makes him a waterproof crib - and her older daughter keeps an eye on the baby in the basket to see what happens to him. They must have hoped for something like this to happen - for some compassionate Egyptian to find the baby and not ask any questions about his origins. The irony is that it is the daughter of Pharaoh himself who finds the baby and chooses to save him. It seems strange that the survival of Moses is completely dependent on 3 women, yet we are not told the names of any of them. In chapter 6 verse 20 we learn his mother's name, and we make assumptions that the sister mentioned is Miriam. It's an indication of the insidiousness of patriarchy, where even today so many women are written out of their own stories. Moses' mother and sister are representative of the bravery and resourcefulness of the Israelites, and they are probably not alone in this. There must have been many other courageous Israelite families who took

the chance to hide their baby boys and hoped to save them from death, otherwise the Israelites would have been in decline by the time Moses reaches adulthood, and we're not given any indication that this is the case.

So many times in the Bible we can see that when there is a big problem God prepares people to be agents in its solution. Brian McLaren wrote that "God gets involved by challenging us to get involved. In this case, God prepared a man named Moses." We can only imagine the bravery of the women who acted to ensure his survival. Pharaoh's daughter would have been stupid if she didn't realise that the woman on hand at that moment and able to provide milk was the baby's natural mother. She sends the baby back with his mother - we don't know for how long - and she pays for his care. We don't know how old he is when he is taken to Pharaoh's household - all we are told in verse 10 is that this happens "when the child grew up." So this raises a lot of questions! How did Moses feel to be taken into a strange household? How did his mother and the rest of the family feel? How often did Pharaoh's daughter visit Moses during this growing up period? What did she tell her father about the boy? What kind of negative attention did Moses' mother get from other Israelites who may have guessed at what had happened and were perhaps jealous? And how did Moses cope with this double life and dual identity? Did it make him sometimes bossy and infuriating to his own natural family? Could they tell him any of the truth or did they always have to keep up the pretence for his (and their own) safety?

We see the fact that Moses' mother is allowed to nurse him as a blessing (although I'm sure there were times when this was also painful and difficult). The writer ultimately wants us to see that the ultimate blessing was on the whole of Israel, and through Israel on the whole of humanity because Moses survives. If you read on through Exodus you see that all that happens is only possible because Moses survives. The great themes of freedom and deliverance that mark the Jewish experience and our Christian tradition are only made possible because Moses survives. Moses survives because of the painful courage of his mother, the unprejudiced compassion of the royal princess, and because of the faithfulness of God. God's role is made clear at the end of chapter 1 with the brief mention of the courage of the Israelite midwives, and in the light of this we see God's provision in the events of this part of chapter 2. And this continues through Exodus. The oppressors may be strong but God's capacity to save and redeem is stronger still.

So this passage which takes place over an unspecified number of years is the context for a movement away from oppression towards freedom, and away from despair to hope. There is still a lot of suffering and struggle to go. The liberation is not yet a reality, but the birth and survival of Moses signals that God is at work in the life of Israel, and evil forces will not triumph.

There is another thing worth noting. Often God is described as responding to the cries of the people when they are in need, but here in the story of Moses' birth there is no such mention. In this story, God does not wait for the people to plead for help and salvation. God is seen to be acting here without invitation. This shows another dimension to God's compassion. God's love and mercy is not reactive, returning love for love, but it is proactive. God's compassion sees human need even more profoundly than those who are having to endure that need, and God generously is present and active. God's grace is constantly there, even when we haven't opened our mouths or our hearts to speak God's name and cry for help.

**For further reflection:**

Read through the passage again slowly. Try to imagine yourself as one of the characters in the story. Who speaks to you? Who do you perhaps identify with?

Think of a time when you took the side of a vulnerable person when you could see them being treated unjustly.

Think of a time when you have been in a vulnerable position. How did that feel? Did any other people take your side or not?

Think about modern day slavery. Who are the equivalent of the Israelite slaves today? Who today is being exploited? Who is crying out for help?

What can we do to seek liberation for those who are trapped or enslaved today?

How can this passage affect our thoughts about refugees? How can we speak out to address the balance in what appears to be the predominant media or government view?

Are there any things in our lives that hold us captive? What can we ask God to liberate us from personally today?

How do you feel about the idea of defying or speaking out against political authority if you can see that it serves to oppress and disadvantage vulnerable groups?

In what ways might God be challenging you and preparing you to be part of the solution?