

Sermon Sunday 22nd March

Exodus 2.1-10 Mothering Sunday

As lineups of male experts tell us what to do about the coronavirus pandemic each day, I've been thinking about the events leading up to today's amazing story from Exodus. These were dark and terrifying days under a paranoid and brutal new pharaoh. With regard to Egypt's Israelite immigrant community, pharaoh led his people in a rapid decline from ignorance of history (Exodus 1.8), through exaggeration of threat (1.9-10), through prejudice to oppression (1.11) and finally to genocide (1.16, 22) – the 'final solution' as it were. By the time Moses was born, it was the duty of every loyal Egyptian to drown every Hebrew boy in the river Nile. This was after the Hebrew midwives had followed a brave path of non co-operation with pharaoh and now we find further examples of female leadership emerging.

One of the things I think we learn from the Bible is that 'male' leadership has its limitations and sometimes 'female' leadership offers the only way forward (CARE: Of course these gender roles and qualities are not mutually exclusive)

This surprises us more than it should, since God has motherly as well as fatherly characteristics and we are made in God's image. Anyway, first let's look at the story in 3 parts, then we'll think about how it relates to the Christian gospel and to our own lives.

Later, I will come back to our current, extraordinary circumstances, which have been brought about because of a new and dangerous enemy.

Verses 1-4

- Moses is born into a genocide with a death sentence over his head.
- His parents are Levites, people of faith but we hear nothing of his father, only his mother. My opinion is that the Hebrew men were effectively emasculated, humiliated by their slavery. Traditional male solutions to difference – confrontation, fighting – were not an available option. It would be up to the baby boy's mother to find a solution.
- First, we read that she hid him for three months – no mean feat!
- Then, realizing she can't keep this up, she comes up with an extraordinary, risky plan – getting a papyrus basket for him, coating it with tar and pitch to make it waterproof and then putting the baby into the basket and the basket into the reeds by the river bank.
- What was she feeling as she abandoned her child in this way? What would you feel?
- What was she thinking? Did she plan to go back regularly and feed him? Did she think he'd be better off dying of thirst or being eaten by wild animals, rather than being killed by an Egyptian sword?
- Or did her intuition lead her to believe that there just might be a surprising way that he could survive?

- In verse 4 we read that his sister stood and watched at a distance, to see what would happen to the baby (perhaps showing her maternal instinct, or acting on mum's instructions?)

Verses 5-9

- Now a new character comes onto the scene - Pharaoh's daughter. Hold on a minute! That's the daughter of the tyrant who had enslaved the Hebrews in forced labour and then ordered the killing of all their baby boys.

- Fortunately, Pharaoh's daughter doesn't share his prejudice and has the courage to defy his orders. Seeing the basket while bathing in the river, she sends her female slave to fetch it and finds the baby boy crying inside.

- She recognizes that he is a Hebrew baby (ethnic difference) – one who ought by her Father's law to be thrown into the river to drown. But she shows no inclination to do so and is open to the suggestion of Moses' sister, who intervenes, offering 'shall I go and get one of the Hebrew women to nurse the baby for you?'

- Pharaoh's daughter agrees and of course Moses' sister goes to fetch her own and his mother!

- Pharaoh's daughter then offers to pay Moses' mother for nursing and caring for the baby boy for her until he is weaned and ready to enter the royal household. That would be at 3 to 5 years old.

- Her child will survive, but even so there is a dilemma. One point of view might be – 'I'd rather have him die as a Hebrew baby than be brought up as an Egyptian'. Perhaps this could be characterized as a 'male' response! But Moses' mother accepts the deal in faith and compassion.

Verse 10

- Finally in verse 10 the mother keeps her side of the bargain, takes the child to Pharaoh's daughter, who adopts him and names him Moses. So Moses has a new mother who is able to give him the most secure upbringing and the best education possible.

- Pharaoh's plan has been undermined by two women and a girl. The boy who will become his nemesis is growing up in his own household, acquiring the skills and knowledge which will equip him to set the Israelites free.

- Of course we are supposed to see the hidden hand of God at work behind the scenes, but this is also a story of the best kind of female leadership and problem solving. Intuition, empathy, compassion and collaboration are victorious over the male effort to confront, force and dominate.

Links to the gospel

- Clear parallels with infancy of Jesus, the insecurity he was born into and Herod's slaughter of the innocents.

- The gospel Jesus preached in his sermons and parables is all about the Kingdom of God being near to us and in fact growing secretly among us, bringing hope, healing and life. The

rich and powerful are blind to what is going on. Those who have nothing are raised up and empowered.

- Evil is defeated by Jesus not by force and power but by servanthood and submission. This does not mean rolling over and giving in; it means a courageous refusal to co-operate with the oppressor. It means denying self and loving our neighbours, including our enemies. It means taking up our cross daily and following Jesus.

Lessons for us

- For those who are mothers – be confident in God, whatever the circumstances you face.

Know that God understands the joys, pains and dilemmas of Motherhood – even though we usually call God ‘Father’.

- For women generally (and men) - Learn from the example of positive female qualities in this Bible story – empathy, intuition, compassion, creative opposition without confrontation, having the faith to let go and trust... these are more important than the superficial, skin-deep femininity our society sells us.

- For those who find it difficult to accept female leadership ... be aware of the limitations of exclusively male leadership.

- Society, church and family need strong and godly men. Moses grew up to become one of the best. But strong and godly women are needed as well. To give just one recent example – Northern Ireland. It was mainly the men who grabbed the headlines in the process of achieving peace, but perhaps more than any other factor it was the cross-community empathy of mothers; grieving, hoping, forgiving mothers, which broke the walls down and paved the way to peace.

- Perhaps mothers, supported by enlightened men, will play an equally significant role in resolving more of the world’s biggest current problems and fears.

- Perhaps as we are threatened by an invisible enemy every bit as threatening as the Bible’s Pharaoh, we too, like the Hebrew midwives and the mother and sister of Moses, will find brave and creative ways of undermining the enemy’s threat and protecting the most vulnerable. We can already see this happening, in acts of kindness and in the budding of grassroots support groups and neighbourhood schemes.

- Perhaps new alliances, inconceivable in normal times, will be formed – like the alliance between the natural and adopting mothers of Moses.

- Even as the headlines are often grabbed by acts of greed and selfishness and panic, we can see a stronger force at work – a kind of resistance movement. Our role as Christians is surely to be deeply engaged in this fight back, this resistance movement and to use all of our resources; individual and collective, practical and spiritual, to calmly, ingeniously, faithfully, patiently and compassionately work for the common good.

- I want to end with a prayer written by Barbara Glasson, President of the Methodist Conference:

We are not people of fear: we are people of courage.

We are not people who protect our own safety: we are people who protect our neighbours' safety.

We are not people of greed: we are people of generosity.

We are your people God, giving and loving,

wherever we are, whatever it costs,

for as long as it takes, wherever you call us.

AMEN.