Sermon for 21st in Ordinary Year A

Readings: Exodus 1:8 – 2:10; Matthew 16:13-20

i

The story of Moses is so fantastic and dramatic that many people have concluded it must be laced with a large measure of fiction. But often fact is stranger than fiction.

The story opens in a way that is eerily close to what we have been witnessing over recent months in many parts of the world, and especially in Europe. Pharaoh voices an all too familiar fear and suspicion of migrants. Political memory can be conveniently short when expedient and the new pharaoh fears the sheer number of Israelites poses a potential threat, although there is no evidence that they were plotting any harm against Egypt.

The salvation brought to both the Israelite migrants and the Egyptian host country through the visions of Joseph, who predicted they must prepare for 7 lean years during the 7 years of plenty, has been forgotten. The Israelites have become slaves, not merely short-term guests who wished to ride out the famine. Like political bullies everywhere, pharaoh uses others to do his handiwork and decrees that midwives should kill all the baby boys.

We are told the names of two such midwives, Shiphrah and Puah (Exodus 1:15). It is possible that these two midwives were Hebrew women under orders from the pharaoh, but why would they obey such a law against their own people?

Josephus, the Jewish historian of the time of Jesus, records the tradition that they were midwives *to the* Hebrews, not *of the* Hebrews. In other words, they were Egyptian women – this is why pharaoh trusts them to follow his decree. Verse 16 certainly reads as though they were Egyptian women attending Hebrew mothers.

The midwives, two women of a lower social order, are named by the text. The mighty new pharaoh is not named by *Exodus*. This is a deliberate snub to make the point about who is important in God’s eyes: those who do the will of God. The midwives ‘fear God” (verse 21) – this is further evidence that they are Egyptians who belong to the proselyte Jewish community of ‘God-fearers’.

Pharaoh hears that his plan is failing and summons the midwives who proffer an unlikely explanation that all the Hebrew women give birth before they can get there. Frustrated, pharaoh then commands all Egyptian citizens to throw every Hebrew baby boy into the Nile.

Moses is hidden by his mother for 3 months before she hatches the desperate plan to put him on the Nile in a wicker basket, with Miriam, his sister, watching from a safe distance. The Hebrew word for the “little basket” is the same word as is used of Noah’s ark – another vessel of safety for God’s people upon the waters.

It is at this point in the story that things strain credulity for the sceptically minded; pharaoh’s own daughter discovers the child, recognises he is a Jewish boy by his circumcision as well as by being cast upon the river, but still defies her father’s edict by taking the child to the heart of the royal palace from where the boy will eventually emerge to lead a rebellion and defeat pharaoh’s army.

The story culminates in one of the most touching moments of providential irony to be found in the bible. It is Moses’ own mother that the royal princess takes on to act as wet-nurse to the rescued infant. The role of Miriam, Moses’ sister, is a crucial detail and makes this almost incredulous story have a ring of historical truth. Fact can indeed sometimes be stranger than fiction.

 ii

There are several powerful lessons we can take from this famous story. Firstly, we should all take to heart the obvious truth that goodness and compassion do not run along ethnic lines. Pharaoh is a cruel dictator who is willing to consign hundreds of infants to death just in case they might one day constitute a threat. His own daughter is brave and principled and full of compassion and knowingly defies her father’s edict and rescues Moses from the bulrushes. The Egyptian midwives are also good and decent and courageous women.

Goodness is not restricted to certain ethnic groups, or social classes, or religious beliefs. Today we must proclaim that loud and clear once again.

Secondly, we see that it is sometimes the morally right thing to do to defy the laws of the land. The midwives, pharaoh’s daughter, Moses’ mother and sister are examples of how occasionally we need to allow conscience to dictate our actions even in defiance of law and order.

Such defiance of the lawful instruments of the State is no small matter: it is far too easy to persuade oneself of the rightness of one’s cause and allow defiance of the law to turn into illegal actions of violence against others, often against innocent members of the public, or the police, in the pursuit of one’s claimed moral imperative.

Note that the motivation for breaking the law in the story of Moses was compassion. It was to show natural compassion to babies, irrespective of their ethnicity, that made the midwives, princess and others break the law. It was not for selfish gain.

Note also that their actions were to protect others from harm.

Pope Francis has recently asked that the doctrine of the *Just War* be re-examined. This reminds us that sometimes violence is the only resistance possible that will prevent a greater evil. The Church has understood this over the centuries and tried to establish meaningful principles to limit the violence. Moses will one day return to challenge pharaoh about his treatment of the Hebrew people. Violence will play a role within that confrontation, both within the plagues of Egypt and the death of pharaoh’s soldiers as they give chase over the Red Sea.

Pope Francis’ call for a re-examination of the *Just War doctrine* illustrates how difficult this whole area is for Christians and society at large. Christians who believe pacifism is the only response in every situation have always been the minority view. When someone has to put a stop to putting people into gas chambers as in Nazi Germany, or throwing young men off the rooftop or making sex slaves of young girls as in the ISIS horror – then it is understandably a huge moral dilemma whether war can be justified in those circumstances. Traditionally, most Christians have said it can, but let no one suppose that such choices are ever easy.

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Another lesson which we can learn from this story concerns freedom. Freedom is not just about power politics – freedom is a state of mind which seeks to express itself in political freedom. Without a spiritual conviction that you are free, even when political freedom exists, you can stay enslaved in other ways.

It was the inner conviction of Moses’ mother that she would not be cowed by the dictatorial pharaoh that motivated her to find a way to express that inner sense of freedom, despite the political oppression surrounding her. It was the inner sense of moral freedom in the hearts of the Egyptian midwives that gave them the courage to defy their political master and strike out on their own moral highway.

Freedom starts with an emotional, spiritual and intellectual conviction that you have the right to be free. That is the motivating power that can overcome oppression; without it, you acquiesce in slavery. The heroines of Moses’ infancy story believed they were free when the world around them told them they were slaves, or at least, subject to the whim of the pharaoh.

It is ironic that so many people who enjoy political freedom in the West are today enslaved to illegal drugs, alcohol, sugar, and various forms of manipulative consumerism. Enslavement takes many subtle forms and exists in various degrees.

Some enslave themselves without realising what they are doing. Some groups struggling at the bottom of the social pile, rather like the Hebrews in Egypt, willingly play the victim role. They inculcate into their children the idea that they are unjustly oppressed and find themselves unfairly at the bottom of the pile. This behaviour stimulates a whole grievance industry around them which can profit from their sense of injustice. Middle class lawyers looking for a cause, political activists looking the next campaign, charities looking for their next clients quickly gather around such narratives.

This does not mean that social and political injustices do not exist; that would be a foolish claim. However, such groups need to be very aware of the unexpected consequences of such a victim mentality. To sustain the narrative of being unjustly treated instils an insidious expectation of failure. People start living out their lives expecting to fulfil the role that they have been assigned – and if your community claims to be the victims, you risk instilling an expectation of failure and disaffection among your young people.

So be very careful about the language you use when speaking of social injustice – especially if you identify yourself with the oppressed. If you claim the role of victim, you may unwittingly encourage your community to live down to that expectation. Freedom starts in the hearts of those who believe themselves to be free. Success also starts in the minds of those who simply assume they will succeed.

In Matthew 16:13-20 Peter believes Jesus is the Messiah. It is this inner conviction that helps make it become a reality.

This is still the role of faith today:

Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see (Hebrews 11:1).

Faith anticipates reality. Jesus is not yet the name at which every knee bows or the name which every tongue confesses, but believing that one day it shall be so helps you to live as if it is true and thereby you help to make it true.

This is one of the meanings of Jesus’ claim that “If the Son sets you free, you shall be free indeed” (John 8:36). Faith gives you the inner conviction that the future is ultimately in God’s hands and so that means evil will be defeated, goodness shall triumph, compassion shall win the day, the earth shall be redeemed and the meek shall inherit the earth. From such inner convictions comes the power to turn the world upside down.

Just look at Moses’ mother and St Peter for inspiration.

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