

Some thoughts on the Lectionary Readings for Year B – Third Sunday in Lent (2nd Service)

Lectionary Readings: **Exodus 5:1 – 6:1**
 Psalms 11; 12
 Philippians 3: 4b-14
 Matthew 10: 16-22

The story of the Israelite people in Egypt is long and involved. Joseph – that spoilt and favoured son – is despised by his older brothers because of his dreams of ‘superiority’. They plot to dispose of him and the opportunity comes when their father, Israel, sends Joseph to his brothers who are grazing the family flocks near Shechem. Seeing his arrival from a distance they plan murder and then to claim he has been devoured by a wild animal. No doubt the blood stained ‘coat of many colours’ would have been taken back to their father to support this story. One brother however, Reuben, shows a conscience and persuades the remaining brothers to cast Joseph into an empty cistern rather than kill him – planning to rescue him later and return him home. Unfortunately, for Reuben, the plan is thwarted by the arrival of Ishmaelite (Midianite) traders making their way to Egypt. Joseph is sold to the traders, his ‘coat of many colours’ as in the previous plan soaked in animal blood to be taken back to his father. In Genesis 37 we read that Joseph was sold by the Midianites to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh’s military officials.

We all know the story of Joseph, who through success in everything he did (“*the Lord was with him*”) had come to a position of authority over Potiphar’s household. We read (Genesis 39:7 and 12) the open invitation he twice received from Potiphars’s wife - “Come to bed with me!” The second time he flees from her presence, leaving his cloak in her hand – which gives the opportunity for a false accusation of sexual abuse.

When Potiphar returns home he accepts the allegation and has Joseph thrown into prison. Contrast that with the situation so often seen these days where a genuine accusation cannot be legally supported because there is a lack of corroborative evidence; or the converse where a false allegation, without any evidence, leads not to prosecution but to loss of standing, character and maybe even livelihood.

The Lord is again with Joseph and he prospers in prison, once again being given a position of responsibility among the prisoners. We remember how Joseph interpreted the dreams of two fellow prisoners – members of Pharaoh’s household who had angered the king and been thrown into prison. The chief cupbearer is restored to his position in court but forgets all about Joseph for several years until Pharaoh himself has two troubling dreams which nobody can interpret. It is then that the cupbearer remembers Joseph and his God given ability to interpret dreams.

Joseph, brought to Pharaoh, is able to interpret the dreams – the years of plenty, followed by the years of famine – and goes so far as to suggest a plan of action - the appointment of a ‘Supremo’ to collect and store food during the years of plenty. Joseph of course became that man and during the years of drought even had the pleasure of ‘entertaining’ his brothers who had come down to Egypt to purchase grain.

I think I would have liked to be a fly on the wall when the ‘Overseer - Joseph’ revealed his identity to his brothers – the panic that must have been generated in the latter!

Joseph however saw the hand of God in everything that had happened – Sold into slavery, with Potiphar’s household, in prison, interpreting Pharaoh’s dreams, in becoming ‘number two’ in Egypt. It was all for the purpose of saving his family – they travelled down to Egypt and were settled in the region of Goshen. (Genesis 46 and 47)

46² And God spoke to Israel in a vision at night and said, ‘Jacob! Jacob!’

‘Here I am,’ he replied.

3¹ ‘I am God, the God of your father,’ he said. ‘Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there.

4¹ I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will surely bring you back again. And Joseph’s own hand will close your eyes

47¹ Joseph went and told Pharaoh, ‘My father and brothers, with their flocks and herds and everything they own, have come from the land of Canaan and are now in Goshen.’

11 So Joseph settled his father and his brothers in Egypt and gave them property in the best part of the land, the district of Rameses, (*part of Goshen*) as Pharaoh directed.

27 Now the Israelites settled in Egypt in the region of Goshen.

They acquired property there and were fruitful and increased greatly in number.

After many years Joseph died and memory of him diminished: (Exodus 1)

6 Now Joseph and all his brothers and all that generation died, **7** but the Israelites were exceedingly fruitful; they multiplied greatly, increased in numbers and became so numerous that the land was filled with them.

8 Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt. **9** ‘Look,’ he said to his people, ‘the Israelites have become far too numerous for us. **10** 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.’

¹¹ So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labour, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh. ¹² But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites ¹³ and worked them ruthlessly. ¹⁴ 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 passage goes on to record how Pharaoh instructed the Hebrew midwives to kill all of the male babies – they, fearing God more than the earthly king, declined to obey the instruction which led to an edict to Egyptians to throw all Israelite male babies into the Nile.

This leads us of course to Moses in the basket in the reeds; his discovery by the daughter of Pharaoh; and Moses being brought up in a palace. We read of the reason for his flight from Egypt to Midian, his marriage to Zipporah (daughter of Reuel / Jethro) and the birth of his son Gershom.

At the end of Exodus chapter 2:

²³ During that long period, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. ²⁴ God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. ²⁵ So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them.

We come to Moses encounter with God in the ‘Burning Bush’ and the instruction to return to Egypt, confront Pharaoh and take the Israelite people 3 days journey into the desert to offer sacrifice. For a whole chapter we find Moses offering excuse after excuse as to why he is not the perfect ‘man for the job’. One of his claims is to be inarticulate - which leads to the dual ‘ministry’ of Moses and Aaron, the latter to be the spokesman.

In our reading today we find Moses and Aaron going to the then current Pharaoh with the request ‘**from the Lord**’.

The audience with the king goes badly – he does not recognise the ‘God of the Hebrews’ and makes the work conditions for the captive nation worse than ever. Up to this time they have been given straw (harvested?) to make bricks but now they have to collect their own straw while maintaining the brick output. In verse 12 we read “*So the people scattered all over Egypt to gather **stubble** to use for straw*”.

The Israelite overseers went to Pharaoh directly, to appeal – unsuccessfully - to him. They immediately find Moses and Aaron – accusing them of making the working conditions intolerable.

Moses turns to the Lord.

The Lord knew this would happen and what would be necessary before Pharaoh eventually let the Israelites go: (Exodus 5: 19-6: 1)

¹⁹ The Israelite overseers realised they were in trouble when they were told, ‘You are not to reduce the number of bricks required of you for each day.’ ²⁰ When they left Pharaoh, they found Moses and Aaron waiting to meet them, ²¹ and they said, ‘May the LORD look on you and judge you! You have made us obnoxious to Pharaoh and his officials and have put a sword in their hand to kill us.’

God promises deliverance

²² Moses returned to the LORD and said, ‘Why, Lord, why have you brought trouble on this people? Is this why you sent me? ²³ **Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has brought trouble on this people, and you have not rescued your people at all.**’

Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh: because of my mighty hand he will let them go; because of my mighty hand he will drive them out of his country.’

Our Old Testament Readings for the next couple of week continue the story in Exodus – we remember that Pharaoh was constantly challenged with the plagues of Egypt leading ultimately to the evening of the Passover and the great EXODUS.

Two short psalms this week – numbers 11 and 12. The NIV Bible Commentary describes Psalm 11 as an “*individual lament*”, Psalm 12 as a “*community lament*”. Psalm 11 is headed “**Refuge in the Righteous King**” and is divided into three sections – “*Refuge in God*” (verses 1-3), “*The Lord is the Righteous King*” (verses 4-6), “*God is the Refuge of the Righteous*” (verse 7). From the spacing of the psalm text in the Daily Study Bible verses 1-3 comprise the first section and verses 4-7 a second section. The heading above the text in this commentary, a descriptor for the psalm’s content is “*STAY WHERE YOU ARE*”. The Psalmist describes God as all seeing, hating wickedness and violence, loving justice. It follows that those whose ways are wicked will experience his vengeance but the upright, the just will see His face.

The NIV Commentary heads Psalm 12 “**Lying Tongues and the Truthfulness of God’s Word**” and once again it is divided into sections – “*Prayer for Deliverance*” (verses 1-4), “*Promise of the Lord*” (verse 5), “*Reflection on God’s Promises*” (verse 6), “*Prayer for Deliverance*” (verses 7-8). The text in the Daily Study Bible is headed “*I, EVEN I ONLY, AM LEFT*” and the layout divides the psalm into four sections, each containing two verses.

There is a comment that the psalmist in the opening words sees none around who are faithful to the Lord. There is a sense of depression – much as experienced by Elijah when he fled to Mount Horeb. We remember that prophet met God in the still small voice not in the great natural events of wind, earthquake or fire. He was commanded to go back – he wasn’t on his own; there were 7000 who had never worshipped Baal.

Like most of the Psalms we have read, both of these psalms paint a picture of a people suffering because they have turned from God; yet He is always there for those who follow His ways.

There were two main strands to the belief and worship of the Jewish people – “The Law” and “The Prophets”. Standing in the community was established by visible adherence to “The Law”.

If we read from the beginning of chapter 3 in Paul’s letter to the Philippians:

¹Further, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you.

²Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh. ³For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh – ⁴though I myself have reasons for such confidence.

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more:

Our reading commences at verse 4(b) – shown in bold above. Paul lays out his impeccable Jewish credentials – I wonder how many of us would be able to say, as he does here - “*as for righteousness based on the law, faultless*”!!

In conventional terms, among his own people, he had everything going for him but he says (verse 7) “... *whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ*”.

We read in Acts 9 how he set out from Jerusalem with the intention of rooting out the ‘Followers of the Way’ in Damascus – on the journey there he encounters the risen Jesus. I often think about the hidden preparation – I am sure he must have been realising how ineffective his persecution was. The more zealous he became the stronger the ‘church’ grew.

In Acts 5 we read how the arrested apostles, freed by the Lord during the night, are taken into custody again the following day when preaching in the Temple courtyard and appear before the Sanhedrin. There is a desire among the majority of the Council to put them to death to stop the word spreading:

³⁴ But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honoured by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while. ³⁵ Then he addressed the Sanhedrin: ‘Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. ³⁶ Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. ³⁷ After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered.

³⁸ **Therefore, in the present case I advise you: leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. ³⁹ But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.**

Paul had been a student of Gamaliel and these thoughts expressed to the Sanhedrin may well have been in his mind as the light blazed about him and he heard the voice. Whatever the reason, he met Jesus and his life was transformed – the former zeal for persecuting the church now becomes zeal to know Christ, to share in the power of His resurrection etc.

We should all note the concluding verses of this reading and make them our own prayer:

¹⁰ I want to know Christ –

¹² Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³ Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it.

But one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead,

¹⁴ **I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus.**

Matthew tells us that Jesus sends out His disciples to the “Lost Sheep of Israel”. They are to preach, heal etc. and to travel ‘light’ accepting hospitality where it is shown.

He then gives them warnings and promises which are as applicable to us today – perhaps in a different context:

¹⁶ I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.

¹⁷ Be on your guard; you will be handed over to the local councils and be flogged in the synagogues.

¹⁸ On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles.

¹⁹ **But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, ²⁰ for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.**

²¹ Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death.

²² You will be hated by everyone because of me, **but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.**

Final questions – do we allow the Holy Spirit to speak through us in all and every circumstances?

Are we standing firm in the faith that Paul came to know; are we like him pressing on towards the goal – answering the call God has put on our lives in Christ Jesus.

Jesus comes with all His grace,
Comes to save a fallen race:
Object of our glorious hope,
Jesus comes to lift us up.
Alleluia!

Let the living stones cry out;
Let the seed of Abram shout;
Praise we all our lowly King,
Give Him thanks, rejoice and sing.
Alleluia!

He has our salvation wrought,
He our captive souls has bought,
He has reconciled to God,
He has washed us in His blood.
Alleluia!

We are now His lawful right,
Walk as children of the light;
We shall soon obtain the grace,
Pure in heart, to see His face.
Alleluia!

We shall gain our calling’s prize;
After God we all shall rise,
Filled with joy, and love, and peace,
Perfected in holiness.
Alleluia!

Charles Wesley