

St Mary's & St Augustine's Sunday's Reflection 23rd August 2020

Lectionary Readings: Exodus 1:8 – 2:10; Psalm 124; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

Reflection brought to us by Ela

God has a plan. How many times have we heard that? And how many times have we doubted it? Our readings this morning cover some key moments — the birth of Moses and the birth of *ecclesia*, Christ's Church — and show us afresh that God has a plan, even when we don't immediately discern it, and that our actions matter.

In Genesis, Joseph declares to his brothers, 'God sent me before you to preserve life' (Gen 45:5b). With Joseph out of the picture, the new Pharaoh in Exodus decides to 'deal shrewdly' with the Israelites, for fear that 'they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land' (v. 10). This **fear** leads Pharaoh to abuse the Israelites through forced, 'crushing labour' (v. 13); and also to instruct the Hebrew midwives to kill all the male children. And here we arrive to the birth of Moses ... but not before reading some interesting details. We learn the names of **names of the midwives**: Shiphrah and Puah; then the details of Moses' parents ... the fact that they were **Levite**, they got married, had a baby boy who was a 'fine baby' and decided to hide him for three months. These details, and the ones to follow, present us with a very human story; and **every character plays a part** that has consequences later on.

Moses' mother and sister find a loophole in the instructions to 'throw [boys] into the Nile' and instead 'place' Moses in the water, in a basket, amongst the reeds, precisely where the Pharaoh's daughter bathed. The word for basket here, *tevah*, actually means 'ark', and is the same word used for Noah's ark in Genesis. The birth of Moses thus alludes to the Flood story, where water destroys most of the human race, in as much as here the Hebrew race face annihilation. Moses survives amongst the reeds, and later he parts the Sea of Reeds to ensure the survival of his people.

The **Egyptian princess** knows the baby to be 'one of the Hebrews' children', but she still acts against the wishes of the Pharaoh, her family. She not only ensures the boy's survival by hiring a wet nurse, she also ensures the survival of his identity as a son of Israel. She adopts the child when he 'grew up' (v. 10), meaning when he reached weaning age, which would have been around three. The child would have acquired **Hebrew as his first language**, his mother tongue, therefore, before he became Egyptian by adoption – hence Moses considering the Hebrews as his 'brothers' (vv. 11-12).

God calls us to use our different skills to accomplish his plan; to advance his kingdom. We just need to discern what that is ... **Paul writes to the Romans** about precisely that. Paul understands discernment of the will of God as the result of our relationship with God; our spiritual worship. While the Bible guides us and God's love anchors us, we must allow the word of God to be alive in us; must allow the love of God and the Holy Spirit of God to work in us to help us discern 'the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect' within our current contexts; be it spiritual, physical, psychological, professional, or indeed socio-economical. Anchored in the Bible, we need to respond to issues as they arise in our times.

In our **Gospel reading**, Jesus calls the disciples to be *ecclesia*, his body acting here on Earth, with consequences in Heaven. In the words of Roger Spiller, the church envisaged by Matthew was very different from the great, bulky, bureaucratic, hippopotamus figure – as T.S. Eliot called it – that we may know today. If Peter is a rock (his name comes from the Greek *petros*, meaning 'rock'), then *ecclesia*, the 'church', is living stones. The word *ecclesia* was used in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) to represent the congregation of Israel. ***Ecclesia* is not a building, but an assembly; not a thing, but an event; not a place to visit, but a community.** This community gathers around Jesus, and to Matthew Jesus matters decisively. The promise Jesus makes is

that the church will endure and that 'the gates of Hades will not prevail against it' (v. 18). This may seem unlikely in the face of the many challenges facing Christians today. But it is not a claim for the numerical size, or liturgical tradition of the church – these can and do change. It's a claim that the 'living stones' that gather faithfully around Jesus will remain the witness of God to the world. Even during a pandemic.

As Paul writes, however, '[A]s in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we [...] have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us.' (Rom 12:4-6) As members of the church, as living stones, we don't lose our individual identity. We do not become assimilated, like the Borg. Whilst identifying as a Hebrew, Moses did not change his Egyptian name; instead he lived up to his name by 'drawing out from the water' and liberating his people. We don't lose our individual identity; instead we change through the renewal of our minds in Christ and the discernment of God's will; and we choose to bring our bodies and our abilities to the service of God's kingdom. We fit in our individual niches according to God's plan.

Our little girl stubbed her foot last week. We didn't think much of it at the time, but things got worse, and when we went to A&E a couple of days later, they confirmed that she'd fractured a couple of toes. Apart from the fact that she's in pain, she also can't walk very well, and now the opposite knee is painful too, because she's putting a lot of strain on her other leg when walking awkwardly ... All because of two little broken toes. Similarly, the **body of Christ cannot function perfectly when missing even seemingly small gifts and abilities**. Whilst we may think humbly, 'What can I do? I'm only one person', let us remember that we are 'members one of another'; **together we are ecclesia, the church**. It takes all of us. **God has a plan and a use for each and every one of us** and our individual gifts and abilities. As he did with Joseph; and Shiphrah and Puah, the midwives; and the Levite couple; and their daughter; and the Pharaoh's daughter; and Moses ... and Peter and the disciples; and Paul who wrote the Letter to the Romans; and indeed, with Jesus, who chose to be our Saviour.

Let us pray that, like them, **we are not conformed to this world**, but are, with God's help, transformed by the renewing of our minds, so that we may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect ... and that in humility, and by his grace, we work together for God's kingdom. Amen.

**God of glory,
the end of our searching,
help us lay aside all that prevents
us from seeking your kingdom,
and to give all that we have to gain
the pearl beyond all price,
through our Saviour Jesus Christ.**

Notices

St Augustine's Church will be holding a simple Communion service on:

Sunday 23rd August at 10.30am. Bring your own refreshments for outside afterwards.

September services Sunday 13th and Sunday 27th at 10.30am

St Mary's Church will be **meeting outside** in August:

Sunday 30th August at 10.30am short communion service bring your own refreshments

September Services inside: Sunday 13th Sunday 27th Sept at 10.30am

Roots resources, prayers and reflections for adults, families and children for each Sunday

<https://www.rootsontheweb.com/i-am-looking-for/public-copies/worshipathome23aug>

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