

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

27.08.27

*Scripted*

It's generally true that women are overshadowed by men in the Bible. But not, however, in our story from the Book of Exodus this morning: a key and foundational passage in the history of God's people. Here it's all down to the women, as we shall see – but first, the story so far...

In the previous book of Genesis God has chosen one person, a man called Abraham, through whose descendants God promises to bring salvation and blessing to the world. Significantly, Abraham and his wife Sarah are old and barren so it seems a strange and unlikely promise – where are these descendants to come from? But God is faithful and Sarah conceives and soon Abraham's descendants are numerous and they migrate down to Egypt where they flourish. And our reading this morning picks up the story, beginning with the words, 'Now a new king arose over Egypt...' And this king, or Pharaoh as he's known, is deeply hostile to Abraham's descendants, now called Israelites.

To begin with Pharaoh sees them as a threat, but also as a source of cheap labour: 'Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them...' And so Pharaoh oppresses the Israelites with forced labour, harnessing their muscle for his great building programmes. This will keep their numbers down, while also aiding the economy, thinks Pharaoh. But actually it has the very opposite effect. And so we read in verse 12 a very important few words - key words in the narrative to which we shall return. We read, 'but the more the Israelites were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread...' Remember that – 'the more they were oppressed, the more multiplied they spread' - we'll return to it. And at this point Pharaoh has had enough. It's the usual story: we can't have all these foreigners crowding our nation. Doubtless they're terrorists and rapists and drug traffickers and they're different from us, and so Pharaoh takes more drastic steps and arranges for their elimination. All male Israelite new-borns are to be killed by the midwives. That way we'll soon be done with the Israelites! Pharaoh, however, underestimates the midwives. We are told that, 'they feared God. They did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live.' We are even told their names, and Shiphrah and Puah go down in history as biblical pioneers of civil disobedience, 'mere women' pitted against

Pharaoh, the ruler of the empire, defying and subverting him. So we read in verse 20 that ‘the people multiplied and became very strong...’, and there then follows the account of the birth of Moses, and the desperate attempt by his mother to preserve him, and his eventual adoption by Pharaoh’s daughter, and his nursing by his mother in Pharaoh’s palace. And so God’s people Israel survive, and endure, and the stage is set for the story that lies at the core of Israel’s life and indeed our life as Christians, the story of Israel’s liberation from slavery in Egypt.

So you could say that it’s the midwives versus Pharaoh the king – and it’s game, set and match to Shiphrah and Puah. I want, however, to probe this story a bit more deeply, because there is rather more going on here than meets the eye and we need to get it. So let me go back to that phrase that we noted in verse 12, ‘the more the Israelites were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread...’ Those words actually echo a phrase that has already appeared earlier in the narrative, in verse 7, which says of the Israelites after they moved to Egypt that they, ‘...were fruitful and prolific, they multiplied and grew exceeding strong so that the land was filled with them’. And we hear something similar again in verse 20 after the midwives have defied Pharaoh: ‘the people multiplied and grew very strong.’ In other words there is a fertility about the Israelites. It’s as if the force is with them. Nothing can stop them being fruitful and multiplying, not even mighty Pharaoh.

And here I want to take you back, right to the beginning of the Bible, to the story of creation, and we find there – surprise, surprise – this very phrase. On the fifth day of creation, when God has made living creatures of every kind, God says to them, ‘be fruitful and multiply...’ And we hear the phrase again on the sixth day when God has created men and women, and he says to them, ‘be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.’ Now, this is an important phrase in the books of Genesis and Exodus. It appears again, twice, after God has destroyed the earth with a flood and has begun creation over again with Noah. ‘Be fruitful and multiply...’ he says, and repeats it. And the point here is that the world has been created to be fertile and life-giving. Deep down in its foundations the world has been designed to be a place where life surges and teems and proliferates. We see this especially in Spring with a riot of blossom and lambs and rabbits and the world is surging with new life. And that is how creation is, deep down: fertile and luxuriant and prolific. I would suggest we might put it this way: creation is ‘scripted’. It is like a drama that follows a script. And

creation is inscribed by its Maker with life and abundance, so that it can ‘be fruitful and multiply...’ And living creatures and men and women are then commanded to follow that script.

What, however, becomes clear from these first books of the Bible is that there is another script being followed in creation, an opposing one. And this one is about death and scarcity and want, such that, for example, Abraham and Sarah are at first childless, and their descendants migrate to Egypt because they are threatened by famine. Here is the other script of barrenness. And in the Book of Exodus these two scripts collide and conflict with one another. Here, on the one hand, is Israel being fruitful and multiplying down in Egypt – prolific and teeming, in touch with the deep fertility of creation. And the midwives follow that script. They will not kill newborn babies. They will not stifle the surge of life that births Israelite babies so quickly on the birth stool. They will not eliminate life because it’s too plentiful like Pharaoh. They have learnt too well the Maker’s script with which he has endowed his handiwork: ‘be fruitful and multiply!’ But there, on the other hand, is Pharaoh, and he lives by the other script. His is the language of limitation, of reduction, of scarcity and he is well versed in it. He is threatened by life. He oppresses and eliminates it. He is an actor in a drama of death, performing different lines. And the Book of Exodus is all about the clash between these two scripts. And as the story continues God leads Israel out of captivity in Egypt and he gives them a law – the 10 commandments and all the others. And in being given those commandments the people are being given a script to live by. It’s a script that contrasts with the one Pharaoh lives by, a counter-script. And Israel’s script is inscribed in creation. So to live by those commandments is not just to obey God: it is to live in keeping with the way things are, deep down, in sync with the very constitution of the cosmos. And when we ignore that script, and when we resist it as Pharaoh did, then things fall apart. And later in the book of Exodus there will be plagues and horrors and nature will go crazy because Pharaoh is living out of kilter, against the grain of creation, and the result is chaos and death and destruction. And we see the same thing all around us today.

Reading this story of Pharaoh and the midwives, I’m reminded of Martin Luther King and something he said. You could say, after all, that King was like Shiphrah and Puah, engaged in resistance and civil disobedience against oppression and injustice. And as with Shiphrah and Puah you could say

that the odds were stacked against him, rendering him powerless to overthrow the system. But King used an interesting figure of speech. Pitted as he was against a deeply entrenched, unjust regime, King adapted some words of an 19<sup>th</sup> century abolitionist, ‘the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.’ In other words just as there is deep down in the nature of things a mandate to ‘be fruitful and multiply’, so in the moral foundations of the universe there is an arc that leans towards justice, even if it takes a long time to be realised. In fact as Christians we might elaborate somewhat on that. As Christians we might say that God has created the universe in a particular way, resting on certain foundations. As Psalm 89 puts it, ‘Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne.’ Only we would say that creation has fallen so that it has become distorted and twisted and detached from its foundations. But Christ has come to bend creation back into shape, to repair and to restore it so that indeed the arc of the moral universe bends towards righteousness and justice. And that’s why Shiprah and Puah can be emboldened to defy Pharaoh; and that’s why Martin Luther King could take on the might of an oppressive system; and that’s why you and I can be encouraged to pray for our world; and that’s why we can be encouraged to do little acts of justice and righteousness and kindness and generosity. Such actions might appear pointless and ineffective. Our prayers seem so often so hollow and powerless. But no, for they follow the arc of the universe and its bend, and so they will prevail.

So there we have it. Creation is scripted and to follow that script leads to life. Israel was summoned to learn it and to perform it. Pharaoh resisted it and the result was disaster for Egypt. And that brings us to our reading from Matthew’s Gospel this morning. Here this deep script, inscribed at the very heart of things, has become flesh and blood, embodied in a human being. Here the script is performed, perfectly, in the drama of this man’s life. And he’s teaching it to his disciples. They’re learning it. ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’ asks Jesus, and Peter gets the answer right because he is learning the script, though in fact if we had read on we would have seen that he only gets it partly right for he’s not yet fully versed in it. And to become a Christian is to learn that script and to perform it. And then we participate in the deep drama inscribed in the universe. So for Peter to confess ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God’ is to echo the stars and the suns and the galaxies which proclaim that Jesus is Lord. It is to articulate the foundations of creation.

It is to bend with the arc of the cosmos. And that gives weight to actions like those of Shiphrah and Puah. It gives substance to every defiance of Pharaoh, and to every prayer and every deed offered in Christ's name, to whom be the glory forever. Amen.

Holy and gracious God,  
sovereign Creator of all that is,  
we praise your holy name.  
We gather here today in this place to  
join with all created things,  
from the universe in all its vastness to the tiniest cell,  
in proclaiming that you are our Maker.  
Our songs resounding here in this place  
echo the song of creation,  
that hymn of praise that Jesus is Lord.  
Living God, we confess, however,  
that our lives tell a different story.  
We confess that often we are at odds with you,  
out of sync with the way you have made things,  
and we live against the grain of your will.  
Living God, we confess to you our sins  
and we seek your grace and mercy.  
Assure us we pray of your faithfulness to us,  
and send your Holy Spirit upon us  
Bend our lives to your will,  
align us with your purposes  
and the way you have made us to be.  
And so may we live to your praise and glory.  
We pray in Jesus' name and in the words  
he taught us we pray, saying...