



Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

21st August 2011

Exodus 1:8-2:10, Psalm 124, Romans 12: 1-8, Matthew 16:13-20

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Before we look at the sermon for today let's quickly have a look at another sermon for today, because just as we were listening to the readings, the last line of the second reading talks about the different gifts we have – 'the compassionate in cheerfulness'. There's a fantastic sermon in there - compassion and cheerfulness linked together really deserves some contemplation, so we might look at that during the week and write our own sermons, put them on the Net and we'll see what we come up with. I didn't see that line when I first read through, that's why it stood out today. What I did see in the readings – three completely different readings – is that they are so amazingly relevant to the present day and to us. When you first look at them they're just those readings from the Bible; they're amazing though, they have a thread through them and it's one of those lovely opportunities to appreciate that the Bible as a 'living Word' of God, rather than an ancient text.

A good starting point for reading and engaging the Scriptures is to ask questions of the text as we read it. What is being revealed? Don't look for a story about a past era but ask what is being revealed. Starting with the first reading we ask, what are **we** being shown to us in the story of Moses? First, let's briefly acknowledge the obvious, because as with any narrative there are surface layers of the text which are still important; they are serving a particular agenda, and sometimes provide a setting of the scene for later revelations. Moses in the bulrushes is a well-known story; this is the nativity narrative for Moses; just as the manger, the shepherds, the star and the three wise kings give us a nativity narrative for Jesus, here we have a nativity of Moses. And in the context of the book of Exodus this is a delightful story of an auspicious beginning that serves to tell the reader that Moses is special – just like the manger, the star, the shepherds, the angels, the wise men, that whole story tells us that Jesus is special. Moses has been chosen by God for a great purpose. That's one layer of the text – we can be misled therefore that this is all about Moses, but even at this surface layer of reading, we can still glimpse our reflection, for all are God's 'chosen'; we each have a mighty purpose – and I think that becomes clear later. So we're using the nativity of Moses almost as a device now – this isn't about Moses, it's now giving us the opportunity to see ourselves reflected.

The next surface layer of reading is primarily for a Jewish audience as it narrates a changing political climate. It is a writing or rewriting of history to explain the Egypt-Israel political divide. Remember the Jacob and Joseph story - there we found Israel

welcomed to Egypt and elevated to high status within Egypt. This new chapter, new book in Israel's political history serves to explain a very different political climate and sets the scene for the separation of Israel from Egypt.

So with these surface understandings out of the way we can look for the 'living Word of God'. What is revealed in the narrative and what is reflected back when we seek our own reflection in the Divine Word? And to discover that for ourselves we need to attend to the process or processes that the story is narrating.

The attitude or the energy of Egypt toward Israel is timeless: verse 13 '*The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing [tasks] on the Israelites*' - Egypt fears the potential power of the Israelites, a timeless fear of the 'other', the fear of another people, another race, another culture, another religion. Check the newspapers for the same evidence of 'fear': at this point I googled the front page of Al Jazeera and found Libya, Syria, Korea, Karachi, Somalia and Afghanistan, all in that same context. Israel and Palestine, America and Muslims, Australia and 'Boat people', and with a delightful irony from yesterday's headlines, "Egypt withdraws ambassador from Israel". These are all 'other' writings of Exodus and all, in one way or another, are stories of power, oppression and a yearning for freedom.

So when we read the first reading, we are encountering the very processes of today. The fear of changing balances of power drives the government of the day to implement draconian methods of people control – here we read another version of our 'Pacific Solution'. So now that we have found ourselves in the story, we look for the focus of the narrative and the process that is revealed. And the focus of the story is not on Moses but on the two '*Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah*' [v15]. These two chose to act in accord with a greater truth than that dictated by the government of the day. They take a stand, saying "no" to injustice, and their action alters the whole course of history. Their actions are most likely not consciously about initiating the 'Exodus'; they are more likely simply giving of themselves in accord with their integrity, an integrity found in relation to the Divine rather than with the dictates of the world. And the fruits of their actions they most likely would never have imagined.

Here we see that it is not the 'hand of God' giving shape to the world, rather it is the activity of these two women; unafraid of the king, their actions mirror the activity of God, and they find themselves participating in the activity of the unfolding of creation. It's a stunning story – it's good to get that it's not God that is going to sort it out. That gift has been given.

Paul in Romans, illuminates this very same revelation; '*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God--what is good and acceptable and perfect.*' [v2]. Then in verse 3, '*I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think...*' Why? Because as is explained in verses 4-7, we are of one body, and as one

body so also we find ourselves - there is no other - as midwives of creation. *'Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds..'*

Paul calls us into a divine integrity, and in following that call we take a different path to that dictated by the world; we move beyond our cultural norms, and that movement is occasioned by the activity of transformation and renewal; that is, it requires our active participation: *'I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.'* Paul does not invite us to Church on Sunday, he is not offering us a grandstand seat so we can be spectators of the game of life; rather, he asks that we *'present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.'* Our worship is the giving of ourselves in integrity with the Divine. Like *Shiphrah and Puah* we are called to be midwives, birthing and bringing to birth the process of freedom from oppression, giving of ourselves, without fear, participating in the very enterprise of creation, undertaking the activity of God.

That same thread is underlined once more in the gospel and we go back to the initial question again: What is being revealed, what are **we** being shown in this story of Jesus? Many, maybe most, in the Church have received an institutional reading of this gospel narrative, which tells us that this is the making explicit that Jesus is the Messiah, and the institutional agenda then takes over to tell us that this is also the commissioning of Peter as the beginning of the papacy and of all ordained ministry. Jesus says to Peter, 'here are the keys'. Peter, by the Church, then hands that down to pope after pope after pope and so on. But just as the first reading is not about Moses, let's look for a deeper understanding here.

The question Jesus asks of Peter; *"But who do you say that I am?"* reveals as much about the integrity of Peter as it does about Jesus. Peter has seen and understood what is revealed in the Christ. He has encountered the Divine. And that 'encounter' is what Paul was referring to in *'be transformed by the renewing of your minds'*. The process that follows from that point of transformation then offers an important insight for us, for that is the journey that we seek. And again, Jesus does not say, 'Blessed are you Peter, now come to church on Sundays and worship me.' He says, *"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it."* That point of transformation changes his whole identity, such that he is renamed: 'You did not receive this from worldly dictates, for this of Divine origin, and on you will I build my church. You will be midwives of a new creation that reflects a Divine integrity. And it shall be an activity of creation without fear – for *the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.'*

In taking this text to apply an identity to Jesus, the whole import and value has been lost. Here we see the Christ handing on the divine flame; this is the first Pentecost account, and the process will be repeated over and over in the gospels and the Acts of the Apostles; it's a process that Paul understood and so was drawn him into true discipleship. When Paul says, *'present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and*

acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship', he echoes Jesus saying, 'and on this rock I will build my church'.

Verse 19 continues, *"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."* This is not the institutional handing over of priestly power from Jesus to the first pope. It is the declaration of One Body, the authoring of the Body of Christ with Divine authority. And for those schooled in Catholicism, who have been taught that this text makes Peter special, read Matthew 18:18; it's another chapter or two further along and exactly the same words – the handing over of the keys – exactly the same is repeated again to all the disciples. This is not about Peter at all.

All three readings today speak of Nativity: not the Nativity of Moses, nor of the Messiah, not of Peter and his new name; they speak of renewal, of new birth and of participation in the Divine activity, and they identify some special things about some special people, because they speak of *us* and of what we are called to be. For the Church, the Body of Christ, the midwives of creation and the key holders of Kingdom of Heaven are no less and none other than you and me.

The Lord be with you.
Peter Humphris