

EXODUS 1:1-22
LIVING IN THE SHADOWS

We are the product of our stories. The stories of our lives shape us as people. The people we are is the result of so many influences, but one of the strongest influences is our experience of life. Some of us love a particular sport or support a particular football team because in our growing up we were introduced to it. More seriously, I meet people who have a low sense of self-esteem now because in their growing-up they were constantly told they were failures! For many of us, our Christian faith is a product of Christian influence and the witness of a family member or friend. At the Book Festival the other evening, the author was talking about being a teenager and how easy it is for him to remember his experiences as a teenager, even 30 years ago, because these experiences had such an impact on the person he is now. That can be positive and negative. We are our stories and we can't avoid it. It is who we are; we can't turn the clock back to change our story; we can't forget it; some of it is brilliant and some of it we regret; we are shaped by our story.

Churches are the product of their stories. Like it or not, the congregation we are today is the product of our past 130 years. There are some parts of that story which are obvious highlights and we look back on them with great joy and delight; we praise God for His glorious goodness and faithfulness to our forefathers. Other parts of the story are very definite low lights and are times on which we look back with regret and sadness, the product of mistakes that were made or unwise decisions that we made; we look back on these parts of our story with repentance and sadness. The Church of 2013 is the product of our story; again it is not the only influence on church life, but it is a very real influence. This is true not only of congregations like ours, but true of whole denominations: churches are shaped by events, some of which took place hundreds of years ago and we have to live with that and work out our future in the light of our story.

If ever there was a people shaped by their story it is the people of Israel and the story of Exodus. All through the Old Testament, people, prophets, others look back to the days of the Exodus and remember what God did for them; they remember that He saved them and that He travelled with them through the desert. They remembered also their waywardness and how their forefathers behaved badly on that journey. It is a story that shaped their relationship with God and their relationships with each other; it is a story that shaped the life of their nation, their defining story and in many ways a story that still shapes the life of the modern nation of Israel. Their desire to build on the land – their understanding of the land goes back to the days of Exodus; Israel as the chosen people – again that goes back to the stories of Abraham and Moses. This story shaped not just one people: the whole of our world has been shaped by 10 commandments, part of this story. So the story of Exodus is not just a history lesson, but it is also our story too, a story that was fulfilled when Jesus came and that looks forward to Jesus. Our task - to learn from it.

Exodus chapter 1 is the canvas against which the rest of the story is told. This is the backdrop to the whole story of God saving His people from their dire circumstances in Egypt, but first we need to understand these dire circumstances. It didn't start off as dire: they have a golden past to look back to, days when everything was wonderful and they were a people on the up! Joseph was the great leader, second in command in Egypt; only Pharaoh was greater. When Joseph was great, the whole family came to live in Egypt in the days of famine, in a story told at the end of the book of Genesis and in the story it is clear that God was taking them there to save them from the famine and that God was going to be there with them in Egypt. One day they would come back from Egypt, that too was God's promise, but it has not yet been fulfilled. They are there

because God was saving them; they had the hope of God's promise in their hearts and they were waiting for the time when that promise would come true and they would go home.

Then things took a turn for the worse. Two things happened: first of all, Joseph died and all that generation with him; the golden days of the fathers had gone; they were now only to be found in history books; secondly and more ominous – “*then a...*” (*Exodus 1:8*) He looked at this growing nation inside a nation and took fright; “*Look*”, *he said...*” (*Exodus 1:9*) so he started to take steps to make sure that Israel was never going to be a threat to him and his power. “*So they...*” (*Exodus 1:11*) Some of the great buildings of Egypt were built with slave labour and while we're not told all the details, we're given enough to get the flavour of the situation; “*in all...*” (*Exodus 1:14*) The people were brought down, they were slaves, forced to work for their masters, being treated ‘ruthlessly’ which says it all. The irony of story is that the more they were oppressed, the more they grew; the more Pharaoh tried to shut them down, the more they became stronger. The whole weight of Egypt was made to bear down on Israel as a people; the whole machinery of government, the whole of Pharaoh's power, tried to break them down; the more that came to bear, the more they grew! “*The more...*” (*Exodus 1:12*)

So Pharaoh stepped up his plan and devised this awful plan to kill all the baby boys. The plan was to kill the boys, but let the girls live so that Israel be weaker as a fighting force. It is a genocide that has happened so often: one of the most disturbing sights in Cambodia is in place called Toul Sleng, which was a school, then in the days of the Killing Fields was a prison, and is now a museum. There are rows and rows of black and white photos of the people killed by the Khmer Rouge in the days of the Killing Fields and so many of them children; I was left asking “what threat were these children?” The NIV reads as “boys and girls”, but the Hebrew speaks of “sons and daughters”; that changes the sense and deepens the agony; these are not just boys and girls who are being targeted; these are sons and daughters and we get the sense of deep anguish that must have been felt by mothers and fathers, by the people of Israel.

They were a people living in the shadows. There were troubled days. They were being beaten down by oppression; being treated ruthlessly; their sons and daughters were being targeted and their anguish was deep and personal. The biggest shadow of all looming over the people was the question “why?” Where was God in all of this? After all, it was God who brought them to Egypt in the days of Joseph and brought them there to save them; He promised to be there with them and to bring them back out of Egypt to a new home. If they are the people whom God promised to bless then why was this happening? This was the deepest shadow of all! The story is horrifying because of all that we see going on; it is a puzzling story because we are trying to make sense of it all and can't! They were waiting for God to do something, but there was no sign of that happening!

It's here that this becomes our story. The circumstances are very different, but there are times when we live in the shadows. Our shadows are created by different circumstances, but we feel them and wonder where the light will come from. The shadows are caused by our of experiences of life: grief and bereavement is perhaps the most obvious; ill-health, our own or someone else's is another; there are all kinds of fears and anxieties with which we live at times, a new place, a new job, new friends and these kinds of fear can leave us anxious; unfulfilled hopes and aspirations – a job, our family, our relationships; then we look at the Church and consider the weakness and vulnerability of the Church in our culture and we see Christian faith under pressure. We are people living in the shadows and then the biggest question of all for us – why? Where is God? Will God not do something to help, to save?

Midwives! They are the glimmer of light in this story! There are two of them named, Shiphrah and Puah, but maybe there were more! God is not mentioned in the story till the midwives come along! They stand up to Pharaoh; their faith is so important to them that they resist the whole pressure that Pharaoh puts on them to kill the boys; they “feared God” - they trusted, loved and respected God and went about their daily business as midwives in a way shaped by their faith. It might be an unexpected source of hope and encouragement in a story like this, but the midwives are the glimmer of light. The next step in God’s plan to save His people is all about Moses and there is a whole group of women who make that work: the midwives, Moses’ mother, his sister, Pharaoh’s daughter; and it will take another 80 years before that plan comes to fruition. The people are to live in the shadows for a while yet!

“Why should we be foolish enough to assume that it is only when things are exciting that God is at work?” (George Philip) Is there no spectacular sign of God at work to save Israel in Egypt? The reality: God was there with His people in the shadows! We look at the story and we marvel at the glorious ways in which God will save His people and provide for them and we will come to these stories later; we have no problem about seeing these spectacular things as God at work: the parting of the Red sea, the water from the rock, the Passover. But we miss God at work in the ‘unexciting, ordinary’ things of life. God is at work in the ministry of the midwives; God is at work in the every-week worship that we hold Sunday by Sunday; God is at work in the ministry of the flowers we deliver; God is at work as we meet people in the street, the shops and clubs of which we are members; God is at work in our conversations over coffee; God at work in the melee of the Open Door Café Tuesday by Tuesday; God at work in the Guild of Friendship meetings and the chat; God is at work as the Green Strollers walk together and chat together; God at is work in the choir as they practice and lead worship; God is at work in the prayer times and Bible Studies even when its hard work to understand. How many more ordinary things? God is at work in the ministry of the midwives.

“Behind that one gleam of light stood the God of secret and ceaseless care.” (Motyer) God was there in Egypt, in the shadows. They would learn that, eventually; God’s care was ceaseless; it was seen in the ministry of the midwives; it would be seen in the ministry of Moses. It is seen in the gospel: “*God demonstrates...*” (Romans 5:8) We are people living in the shadows in another sense, in the shadows of sin, being alienated from God, rebelling against God and yet exactly there and then God shows His love for us in the death and resurrection of Jesus. God came down into our world in human flesh and blood and shared the shadows of life, suffered, was oppressed, even died so that we might be blessed, so that our world might know whole blessing of the loving, caring, saving God.

Patience is a robust quality; patience says “I’m going to wait, trust, persevere”. Nothing weak about patience; it is full of strength and the ability to endure. Israel would learn patience. 80 years ago Ghandi, Hitler and Mussolini were walking across the world stage – 1933. It would take 80 years for God’s plan to save Israel to come true; it would be 80 years before Moses led the people out of the shadows and the people would rejoice in the God who saves them. It is not always a smooth story; it is not always an easy story; they are not always the most patient people and we would share that with them perhaps. But in the shadows with His people is the God of secret and ceaseless care, with His people, loving them, listening to them, sustaining them, ultimately saving them. God is still the God of secret and ceaseless care, at work in the most ordinary ways, helping, saving us. Will we have a robust, patient faith that says “I will wait, I will trust, I will persevere?”