

EXODUS 2:1-25  
FALSE STARTS; TRUE BEGINNINGS!

“God is working His purpose out” – there’s a statement of faith! Arthur Ainger’s hymn looks forward to the day when “the earth shall be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea”. He was a teacher at Eton College when he wrote the hymn and as we sing it there are two themes: firstly, God is King of time and history; and secondly, we have a task, to share the good news with the world. In meantime, God is working out His purpose for the world and for all creation. That is a big statement of faith to make; it is a big hope to have! It is a big statement of faith to make in Scotland in 2013 when so many things seem to work against it: the Church is in some measure of difficulty; congregations are finding life such a struggle; the culture is rejecting much of the Christian heritage which has been part of Scottish life for many generations; many people are facing up to difficult things individually. So how can we have the kind of faith and hope of which we were singing? Or are we looking at the world through a haze of pink fluffy clouds?

There’s another way of looking at life. It is a much more ‘ordinary’, one might even say mundane, way of looking at life. There are the normal events of life: children are born, thousands of times every day, in our world; people die and again that happens thousands of times across the world; on one scale these are special events that cause us joy or pain when they touch us personally, but on another scale these are everyday events. We make all kinds of choices all day, every day; some of these choices are ordinary – which coffee to drink; some are life-changing choices and we’re not always aware of the difference at the time. Every day, parents are bringing up their children, telling them stories, teaching them values, sometimes by words but more often by example. Every day, people are looking for jobs or changing direction in their lives; people are coming to Christian faith and are taking on a new set of values. Here’s a thing: by all of these ordinary, mundane, everyday pieces of life in our world, God is working out His purpose in our world. God is building His kingdom.

This is a way of understanding Exodus chapter 2. Here’s the story so far: last week, we began to tell the story of Exodus and Moses; we said last time that chapter 1 is the backdrop against which the story of God saving His people is told; it is the dark canvas onto which the story is written. It is the story of people being treated ruthlessly by the whole machinery of the Egypt government; Pharaoh is afraid that Israel will be an enemy nation inside the nation of Egypt, so he began to oppress them; his plan was to kill the boys, the sons, and it is all very grim. There is one glimmer of light – the midwives going about their daily business in a way shaped by their faith, trusting God rather than doing Pharaoh’s work; patiently, robustly trusting God. This is where the story begins and this is the backdrop against which we see God working out His purpose for Israel and for the world. What happens next?

*“Now a...” (Exodus 2:1f)* It happens every day; a man and woman get married; a woman gets pregnant; they have a son. This is ordinary life; right across the world this is still going on, this is still life as we know it in the world. By saying these are ordinary events, I am in no way playing these events down: human love, childbirth are still extraordinary things. A boy is born and that creates all kinds of complications for Jochebed and her husband; Pharaoh wants to kill her son; it is nothing personal against their son, but he is a boy and that’s the genocide plan; all the sons are to be killed! *“By faith...” (Hebrews 11:23)* “No ordinary child”? Well, he was their son after all and that alone makes him

special to mum and dad; but did they see something else in their son? Faith gave them the courage to overcome their fears, so they hid their child in defiance of Pharaoh.

But there came a time when they could hide him no longer. So they devised another strategy: *“when she...”* (Exodus 2:3) His sister watched from a distance. The child hidden in a basket on the river was rescued by Pharaoh’s daughter. She was caring and tender-hearted; she saw the child and wanted to rescue him. Here was the fantastic outcome: his mother is paid to do what she most wanted to do in all the world, to bring up her son. She would do what all mothers do, she tells him stories; she tells him the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph; she tells him about the history of his people and he takes it in; she tells him about God and the ways in which God has blessed His people and the promises He has made to bless His people again. Her son takes all of this in; he knows it; it is his. Then the boy goes to live in the palace, son of Pharaoh’s daughter; she gives him the name by which we know this boy – Moses. *“I drew...”* (Exodus 2:10) He learns other things: leadership, diplomacy, all the wisdom of Egypt; he learns compassion and to be tender-hearted from adoptive mother.

*“One day...”* (Exodus 2:11) There is 40 years in that phrase. Moses knew something about where he really belonged. Call it gut-instinct, he knew that he belonged with the Hebrews. What his mother had taught him all these years before, he remembered; it was part of his instinct that he may look like a prince of Egypt, but he really belonged to the Hebrew people. He knows it, but then he has a choice to make. Hebrews 11 again – *“by faith...”* (Hebrews 11:24f) Instinct took him so far, but then he had a choice to make; it was a choice that was informed and shaped by his faith. His faith was learned from his mother; it was a faith that had been in his heart these 40 years and now it comes to the surface in very real way. What choice will he make? He is faced with a choice that is all about his values and passions: will he value the treasures of Egypt, a life of luxury in the royal palace as the adopted son of Pharaoh’s daughter? Or will he identify with the people who are slaves, but his own flesh and blood? His faith guided him to choose Israel.

Moses had so much going for him. He was a good-hearted man, full of compassion. He lived in a palace; he had a position for which most people would give their right arm. He must also have had a sense of leadership, that he had some kind of responsibility for these people. So he intervened on behalf of the Hebrew being beaten by Egyptian; he killed him, and it was inexcusable; for all that Moses had going for him, he was also naïve, a bit foolish. What he saw as intervening leadership proved to be a false start; all that it did was make him a wanted man and antagonise his own people – *“Are you...”* (Exodus 2:14) All he could do was run away; it was a false start; *“I’ve messed things up!”* Maybe he even thought that it was over before it had really begun.

Have you messed things up? Hands up anyone who has ever messed something up? You had a plan, an idea and you wanted so much to make it work, but because of your naivety, inexperience, foolishness, or something else, it all went wrong; the wheels fell off and you messed it up and felt so disappointed and perhaps even guilty. We come away from an experience like that thinking that we’re pretty hopeless as human beings; all we’ve done is antagonise the people we wanted to impress and they’ll never respect or trust us again. We made the wrong choices and will never be able to learn to make right choices. Here’s a thing: grace rebuilds messed up people. The grace of God in the gospel reminds us that God knows us and loves us despite having messed up, despite our faults and mistakes; we learn from our naivety and become wiser. Moses spent 40

years in the desert in obscurity, forgotten by Israel, but not forgotten by God; he was loved by God, blessed by God through the love of his wife and children; over the next 40 years his faith is rebuilt.

If Moses brought a false start to the story, there is also a true beginning. God was preparing Moses to lead and at same time He was preparing the people. *"During that..." (Exodus 2:23)* They groaned and cried out; this was a natural, spontaneous reaction to their situation. But then they prayed; they put their groans and cries into words and cried out to God for help. Surely God already knew their situation, but the Bible tells us that prayer jogs God's elbow about our situation, that God wants us to remind Him of our needs and then He will act on our behalf. Prayer made a difference to their situation. *"God heard..." (Exodus 2:24)* 'God heard... God looked... God was concerned...' It was as if in response to their prayers, God took a deeper interest in their plight. Here was a people aware of their need and aware perhaps for the first time that God would help them. When they prayed, they involved God in their situation; they asked God for help. God heard... God looked... God was concerned.

God knows "what it is like to be us!" (Motyer) He knows because He listens to our prayers and reads our hearts; He knows because Jesus is *"The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighbourhood."* (John 1:14) God knows what it is like to be us and is able to help us. He hears our prayers; He looks on us and He knows and is concerned for us and is able to help us. We don't have to persuade Him, but somehow He has set things up so that our prayers jog His elbow, remind Him of our needs and He comes to help us. "When God intends great mercy for His people, the first thing He does is to set them a-praying." (Matthew Hendry) In a day when plans and vision-statements and consultations and SMART goals are part of the Church leadership's aim for the future, here is another – to pray. In the world's view, it seems silly; in human terms it seems "last-resort-ish"; in God's terms, it is the key to grace and blessing for our lives. We groan, cry and put these groans and cries into words when we pray; God hears... God looks... God knows; He knows what it is like to be us.

God is working His purpose out. A child was born yesterday; we don't know his or her name – might (s)he be the person who will lead the Church in the days of a great revival of faith in Scotland in 50 years time? A mother is reading her son or daughter Bible stories at bedtime tonight – might that child be Prime Minister one day who will shape his or her place in high office by the Christian faith? A doctor is going to work tomorrow – might her research work be the place where the cure is found for your illness? You choose to apply for a university course or for a job – might that be the first step on your life's work that will help many people? There is nothing out of the ordinary about any of these, yet these are the ways in which God is at work to bless the world. A Couple got married; years later, the woman is pregnant and she gives birth to a son and wants to keep him safe; she teaches him his faith; he grows up, a bit naïve and foolish in some of his decisions, but chooses to go way of faith. God is working His purpose out – Moses will save his people!