

PENTECOST 12A 23-08-2020 *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Exodus 1.8 – 2.10; Psalm 124; Romans 12.1-8;

*Matthew 16.13-20*

*Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' And Jesus answered him, '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. 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.' Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.*

The reading from the book of Exodus this morning begins some years after the time of Joseph, who was one of the sons of Jacob- also known as Israel. If you remember, Joseph had been sold as a slave by his brothers and ended up in Egypt as the Pharaoh's right-hand-man. When the crops failed, Israel sent a bunch of his sons to Egypt to find food, and- to cut a long story short- the family was reconciled, and they all came to live with Joseph.

Jacob had twelve sons, and they had children, and when they all settled in Egypt there were seventy of them. By the time all that generation had died there were many more grandchildren, great-grandchildren and so on. Then along came a new Pharaoh who didn't remember Joseph and all he had done.

What this Pharaoh saw was a community of refugees, who had a different religion and culture to the Egyptian people but were living in his country. He saw them as a threat, as people who could not be relied upon to fight on the same side if there was a war- and there were often wars.

Pharaoh made the Israelites into slaves, forcing them to work on his massive building projects. But the oppression and hard work didn't stop them breeding: they just kept right on having kids, and the Egyptians became increasingly concerned at their growing community.

Pharaoh tried different strategies to keep these foreigners under control, even resorting to threatening their midwives, demanding they kill the baby boys. Those women were smart and got around that one, so Pharaoh tried something else.

He made a new law- that all the baby boys born to Israelite people should be drowned in the River Nile. He sounds like a very unpleasant man, to be so desperate to control a population that he would order their babies to be murdered.

The next part of the story is one you are bound to have heard if you went to Sunday School: Moses in the bulrushes. It is a very unlikely story of a woman making a little boat for her 3-month-old baby and floating him off down the river, while his big sister kept watch.

And guess who finds this cute little bundle? It's Pharaoh's daughter, ironically! Brave big sister offers to find a wet-nurse for him, so his mum gets to have him back for a couple of years AND get paid for feeding him, outsmarting those nasty Egyptians once again.

In amongst the irony and humour of the story are deeper, darker shadows, of prejudice, oppression, and disregard for human life. Pharaoh is the bad guy here; he's an archetypal evil tyrant and we all want to see his downfall.

How many times in history have there been rulers, kings, leaders, presidents, politicians, who use the power they have to destroy others? How many have used as a reason or excuse for their cruelty the 'security' of their country, or defence of their way of life?

This is not something that only happened in the dim and distant past. It is something that happens today, even in our own country.

Of course our leaders would never tell people to throw their babies in the river; but not too many years ago, we were told that a boat full of refugees threw their little ones overboard so they would be rescued and brought to Australia. It was proved to be completely untrue, and just a way to demonise desperate families seeking refuge in another country.

Rumours were circulated a couple of years ago that the streets of Melbourne were being overrun by gangs of young African men, and the locals were living in terror: that was also a beat-up, with little basis in truth. I could give you any number of examples of how people who are migrants, refugees or are seeking asylum continue to be treated badly in our country; kept in indefinite detention, denied the ability to work or to claim government benefits, and denied the kind of freedoms we not only take for granted but demand as our rights.

All of this stems from fear. Pharaoh feared that the Israelites would be a threat to his country; and they were different, they were foreign, their religion was strange, and he just didn't want them being anything other than a slave workforce.

There are people who fear that this country is threatened by foreigners with different religions, that refugees might be criminals, or will want to change our way of life or even affect our standard of living-gasp! And as we have seen, this is sadly nothing new.

Paul, in his letter to the Romans, tells us not to be conformed to this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. As members of the one body, the Body of Christ, we are to recognise that every person has gifts and is a gift, made in God's image and precious in God's sight.

If we can look at a person and see beyond their skin colour, their language, religion (or lack of it), their culture and ethnicity, we can see the human being who is unique and yet just like us.

When Jesus looked at Simon Peter he saw beyond the rough-as-guts fisherman, past the bloke who so often opened his mouth only to put in his foot, and saw the leader he would grow to be. He called him Peter, from the Greek word Petros, meaning rock- and he became Rocky Pete. I wonder what the other disciples thought? I wonder if any of them chuckled to themselves, thinking, "HIM? Bull-at-a-gate Simon? You must be kidding!"

Jesus saw the gifts in Peter, recognised and nurtured his potential, forgave him his failings, and best of all-loved him.

Pharaoh, thousands of years ago in Egypt, could not see a way to accept and include the Israelite people. Too many leaders of countries today, even while acknowledging the benefits of multi-culturalism, cannot see a way to accept and include people who have been forced to leave their homes to find a safe place to live.

I am convinced that God expects us to be better than this. We CAN be better than this. Simon became Peter, the Rock; Saul the persecutor of Christians became Paul, the Apostle. Let us pray that we as individuals, as a country, and as a world, become the people God knows we can be.

The Lord be with you.