

SERMON FOR SUNDAY 23rd August 2020 ORDINARY 21A

READINGS: Exodus 1:6 – 2:10; Psalm 124; Matthew 16:13-20 & Romans 12:1-8

We live in a world where many people are fearful. They may be fearful of the possibility of nuclear war. They may be fearful of what President Trump or Kim Jong Un of North Korea will do next, or of what ISIS or any other terrorist group will do next. They may be fearful of bombings, ethnic cleansing, rape, poverty, starvation, illness, disability, strangers, Muslims, refugees, and a thousand and one other things.

Some people have every reason to be fearful. People who live in South Sudan or Syria or the Gaza Strip or Niger or Myanmar any other war torn part of the world have every good reason to be fearful that they will become victims of the horrors being played out in their lands. For they live in extremely dangerous places. People in East Africa, Mozambique and other drought and famine prone lands have the right to fear starvation and disease. Dalits in India, Muslims in Myanmar, Palestinians in Israel, Christians in Pakistan, Uighurs in China and other persecuted minority groups have the right to fear discrimination, for it is an everyday reality in their lands. At present, people in Southern California east of Los Angeles have every right to fear wildfires as they are having a bad wildfire season. And, of course, many parts of the world, including our neighbourhood are facing the COVID 19 pandemic, and people have the right to fear this contagion. And many people are realistic in fearing that they may lose their jobs or businesses due to the economic effects of the pandemic restrictions.

But very often people's fears are not rational. We live in an extremely safe part of the world, yet many people are fearful far more often than they should be. These fears are often fed by radio 'shock jocks' and other sensationalist driven media, by ill-informed campaigners and self-appointed experts, and many others.

Some of these fears can be quite dangerous. For example, we are beginning to have more outbreaks of contagious diseases in Australia like measles and whooping cough because anti vaccine campaigners have convinced many parents not to vaccinate their children by telling them that vaccines caused autism. The research that linked autism to vaccination has long been disproved, but still we have parents who refuse to vaccinate their children. Conversely, Pakistan is experiencing outbreaks of Polio because the Taliban has convinced parents that Polio vaccination is a western plot to poison their children.

And I would venture that some of the other fears that Australians experience are misplaced. Many people, for example, are fearful about people who are different to them. They worry, for example, about a perceived threat from Muslims, Asians, Sudanese and other black Africans, and other migrant groups. They worry about our society being overwhelmed and changed, about threats of violence and robberies. Now, of course, people can do bad and wicked things, but we also know that the vast majority of the members of these migrant groups are nice, law abiding people and that realistically the threat level is really low. But for many the fear and the prejudice remains.

Fear can make people act very cruelly. The beginning of our Old Testament story today is a textbook study in cruelty driven by fear.

The Egyptian Pharaoh fears how great and numerous the tribe of Israel is becoming. He sees that they are different, and even though they are a minority, he fears them. He sees that they are thriving and growing in numbers and he sees that as a threat. Even though the people of Israel, the Hebrew people, were once welcomed and invited to settle in the land, that history had been forgotten by the time this new leader ascended the throne of Egypt. This leads the new leader to do what many other aspiring despots have done down through the course of history, he seeks to consolidate his power by singling out a minority or outsider group and calling them an enemy. This was exactly the same thing that Hitler did to the Jews in Germany.

Whether the Pharaoh's fear was real or just a ploy to show how powerful he was, we do not know. But we do know that he denounced the Israelites as a threat to the security and way of life of Egypt. What Genesis describes as God's faithfulness in blessing the Israelites with many descendants, the Pharaoh described as terroristic threat. There is no hint in the story that the Israelites have ever acted as anything but as good, faithful citizens of the empire, yet the delusional Pharaoh imagined that this minority would somehow become more numerous and more powerful than the rest of his citizens. Furthermore, he warned the Egyptians that in the event of a war, the Israelites might join their enemies and fight against Egypt. Out of this fear, the Pharaoh sets out to oppress the Israelites and to ensure that they have no capacity to rebel. And he also seeks to stem their growth.

This he did by first enslaving the Israelites and putting them to hard labour. Then, because they continued to thrive even under these harsh conditions, he turned to an even darker means to punish and ultimately get rid of them. He ordered the Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, to kill all the Hebrew baby boys that are delivered. But they refuse. They do not kill the boys. They lie to Pharaoh, telling them that the Hebrew women give birth too quickly, delivering the babies before the midwives arrive on the scene.

Pharaoh then commanded all Egyptians to kill the Hebrew baby boys by throwing them into the Nile River to drown them. This last command was not only horrific and cruel, but it also defied all good sense. The Nile River was the source of life to the Egyptians – it enabled them to live and prosper in that hard and arid land by providing them with water for irrigation, for drinking, for washing, and for cooling them down. Why would you want to pollute that river with the corpses of dead babies and make it unsafe to use? It was a stupid, as well as a wicked edict.

That aside, this was clearly an attempt at genocide. The Pharaoh was a powerful despot, with the power of life and death over all his subjects. His command was law. His power was absolute, and yet, there were those brave individuals whose actions thwarted his intentions.

Those individuals were obviously working out of a different paradigm or belief system to the Pharaoh. It's very clear that instead of working out of fear, they were working out of the paradigms of faith and of love and compassion.

I find it somewhat amusing that the Pharaoh clearly saw the Hebrew men as the greatest threats to the security of Egypt. He has obviously decided that he could control and enslave the women, for he made no efforts to have girls killed, but it actually was the women who were his undoing in this story. They are the courageous and defiant heroines who together undermine his strategy and ultimately raise the leader who will lead the Israelites out of their bondage. Each of them played their part despite a very real risk of retribution and punishment.

It begins with two women, Shiphrah and Puah, who made a courageous decision, defied a decree, and took some risks, and ultimately changed the world. It was simultaneously a small gesture and heroic act. They disobeyed. And because of their act of disobedience God was able to rescue Israel from oppression. It's an act of civil disobedience that changed history, for one of the boys that was spared was Moses and he was the one who led the Israelites out of the Egyptian captivity. He would later deliver God's law to the Israelites and bring them to the promised land. But it all started here, with two women willing to say "no" to an act of injustice.

I doubt very much that the two women thought they were changing the world, or even doing something important. But they were, just by seeking to be faithful, by listening to God and following the dictates of their hearts, and by heeding the call of conscience. They in their faithfulness, along with Moses' mother, his sister Miriam, and the Pharaoh's daughter. No doubt many Hebrew baby boys died, killed by those who obeyed the Pharaoh. Yet, because of the bravery and compassion of these women many others were saved.

Salvation through the plagues, the Passover event and the Exodus is still in the distant future at the time of the events we read about today, but these future salvation events were made possible by those brave women who defied the Pharaoh. The motivations of these brave women were very different to the fear ridden motivations of the Pharaoh. For all the women were motivated by compassion and love, and in the case of Puah and Shiprah they were also driven by faith. They are the heroines of the story. They are the ones whose examples we are clear meant to applaud and emulate. Their acts are courageous act of civil disobedience that changed history

Andy Andrews wrote a little book called *The Butterfly Effect* in which he catalogued the extraordinary impact of simple and courageous efforts. Andrews points out how inter-connected our actions are, creating an unforeseen butterfly effect that can ripple across time and space to affect the lives of millions. We might not think very much about most of the everyday decisions we make, although from time to time we might agonise over a particularly hard or complex decision. But sometimes our actions, large or small, have an impact far beyond what we might imagine. For example, I was thinking about this when I was watching some teachers being interviewed on television, and they talked about how important it was give some encouragement to a student who will then see something in herself or himself that she or he hadn't before. They then might go on to have a very different career than they'd originally planned and make a very important scientific or medical discovery that will save countless lives.

Another example

Some of the men who returned from the First World War felt their colleagues in business were failing to assist other returned men adequately. One of them who lived in Hobart decided to do something about it. His name was General Sir John Gellibrand.

In 1923 Gellibrand founded the Remembrance Club in Hobart. Its aim was to encourage returned servicemen in business and to encourage them to look after their fellow ex-service men. Stanley Savige, a former 24 Battalion Officer who had also served on Gellibrand's brigade staff, visited Hobart in August 1923. Gellibrand urged him to set up a similar club in Melbourne. So, Stanley Savige gathered together ex-servicemen to form a club in Melbourne which met in ANZAC House in Melbourne, which later became known as Legacy. For the next 26 years, due to his commitment, energy, and enthusiasm, Savige's name became inseparable from both the club and the movement.

In 1925, it was suggested that Legacy should look into caring for the children of deceased servicemen. This proposal was accepted, and Legacy found its soul. The legacy of care continues today. Today, legacy makes a difference to the lives of 1,900 children and dependents of service men and women, and also 70,000 widows; and over the years has cared for countless more. All this because a couple of men decided to try to help their fellow servicemen.

We can all make a difference. Maybe someone reading this will ring up or make contact with someone who is depressed and on the verge of giving up on life, and that person will change their minds and seek the help that will turn their life around. Or your support of a grandchild or great child might help them make good choices in their lives and make a difference to the world. Or maybe you might volunteer (once this COVID lockdown is over) to help others and find real purpose yourself as well as make a difference to the lives of others. Maybe someone in the congregation will decide to get involved in a social justice program that will ultimately make a big difference to the lives of other people- perhaps helping them start a business through micro-credit or get an education or improve their nutrition and well being. In the long term this could make a substantial difference to their lives and the well being of their communities. Maybe the letters/emails you write to politicians might help them make more just and compassionate decisions.

When I was in the former East Germany, I got to meet some Christians who were part of the very risky protests against oppression in that country up right until 1989 when the Berlin wall came down. These Christians met to pray, sing, and protest in their churches, despite the fact that protests of any sort were illegal. This movement gradually grew across East Germany and was believed to have been influential in leading to change.

Small actions can make a vast difference to someone's life. Especially the things that are done to stand up for truth and justice, or against the bullies and tyrants, and for those who are in need of help. The things we do this week – our actions, decision, choices – will, in fact, ripple out with consequences foreseen and unforeseen, for good or for ill, for the health or damage of the world. That question isn't whether, but what...what will we do this week to make a difference in the world. Some of these actions may be big, bold, and courageous. Others may be small, hardly noticeable. And yet they all have the potential to ripple out, affecting countless lives.

In today's reading it's Shiphrah and Puah, Moses' mother and his sister Miriam, the Pharaoh's daughter and her servants who quietly stand up to a bully and tyrant. Who knows whom it will be today, this week, this year.

The Apostle Paul, in the reading from Romans, says that we all are members of the body of Christ, each with different gifts, yet all one in faith and with the same potential for God to use us to change the world. Just think about what the world would be like if every Christian used all of their God-given gifts, especially if we and they all worked co-operatively together to make the best use of our complementary gifts. What a wonderful world it would be! Especially if all those gifts and all that energy was focused on standing up for justice against the bullies of the world, and on helping those in need, especially the poor and the vulnerable. Amen.

P.S. And be reminded that Jesus told us not to worry or be afraid, for he is watching over us. "Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest?" "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." Luke 12:22-26,32

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