

Joseph and Pharaoh, Moses and Pharaoh. Slavery and Freedom. Preached by Peter Matheson at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 2 September 2018.

Our only calling as Church is to delight in God. But what does that mean? Over recent decades the Exodus story from the Hebrew bible, God's enslaved people walking through the Red Sea into freedom has become life-giving for the church. It's been a breakthrough vision which has shattered our easy God talk, our familiar pieties. The call on all of us to take part in the long, long trek through the desert to the Promised Land of peace and justice. Reminding us that it is in the desert, in the abyss of our despair that God comes to us. It has been particularly important for Christians like Bishop Tutu, for Catholics like Dorothy Day, up against oppressive régimes. It was life-giving, the Exodus story, for liberation theology. Living by and for miracle we all need these days. Little baby Moses in his basket and the brave women who plucked him out of the water in one corner and the ruthlessness of Pharaoh in the other. And who won?

But the Exodus Story is not only important for our politics, but for our reading of the world around us, of our rivers, and oceans, our McKenzie high country. The Hebrew word for the Moses basket is the same as that used for Noah's ark. So this wonderful saga is not just about **political** freedom but about the defiance of chaos, of the Flood, of our global incontinence. About our Western **culture** of scarcity. For the Hebrew world the sea symbolized chaos. The baby in the basket, the ark in the Flood, looks forward, then, to the Christ child, and back to the Creation story; it symbolises that deeper understanding of that giftedness of all reality that we call **creation**. This glorious, radiant world we live in, we rejoice in, that we are currently devastating.

Although the affluent West still shuts its eyes to it we are not unlike the endangered aliens in Egypt. Plague upon plague. As Pope Francis has said, our whole world now, our only home, is in peril. Jonathan Boston; we maintain our current short term ordering of things by betraying our children and children's children. If we go on as we are, they have no future. I am so tired of all these analyses of gloom. We know what we know. It is time for action. How do we turn this around; how cross our Red Sea, secure a Promised Land for our grand children? How recover in our supermarket world the giftedness of creation?

Our sole calling as Church is to delight in God. The bedrock of our faith is ancient Israel. Its sagas of Joseph and Moses, of Sinai, Israel's covenants with God, its prophets coursed through every moment of the living and teaching and agony of Jesus. The Resurrection only has meaning against the backdrop of Isaiah and the Old Covenant. The Holy Book of the first Christians as they gathered for worship was the Hebrew Bible. The Law and the Prophets. The Gospels, Paul's letters, were mere footnotes to it. It is our deepest well of inspiration.

As children we grew up with the stories of the seven sleek cows and the seven lean cows. Pharaoh's ominous dream. The mighty ruler who ruled everything and understood nothing, (like some world leaders we can think of today). To make sense of his dream Pharaoh had to haul Joseph out of the dungeon, stuck there on a trumped up charge.

Joseph explains the dream to the great man. Famine is looming. Prepare for it.

Joseph saw beneath the surface. And I ask again: Who sees beneath the surface today, interprets the nightmares of our swaggering, staggering rulers, our global magnates: Apple, Google, Amazon, you name them.

These seven rib-protruding cows. Starvation, symbolized, today by kangaroos dying in Australia, while its politicians play idiotic power games. Pharaoh's cynical solution. Famine's coming, so stock up the granaries. This crisis is our great opportunity, force the poor to sell everything they have to us, to sell their cattle force them to sell themselves into slavery to buy bread for naked survival. **The economy of scarcity**, as we say today. Resources are finite. So the tiny group of the rich in Egypt got richer. The poor poorer.

Heard that one before? We need a radically new order, environmental justice, social justice. Rutherford Waddell justice.

For Joseph's people, once privileged guests in Egypt, the dream goes sour. The Egyptians impose impossible tasks on the Israelites. Hard labour in the fields, bricks without straw we learnt in SS. Solzhenitzyn stuff. Gulag stuff. Arbeit macht frei. And we? In this lovely land of ours, radiant in Spring. We, the privileged guests in God's creation, the so-called first world people, are things beginning to go sour for us, are we about to enter the era of the seven lean cows?

Our nice Sunday School stories about Joseph, about baby Moses. Suddenly scandingly relevant.

So I ask again: We as Church, called to delight in God. Where is Joseph today, where the interpreter of dreams, where Moses, defying the geo-political realities? Our churches, alas, show scant evidence of prophetic inspiration. On the contrary I hear horror stories from some of our congregations, Anglican, Catholic, Presbyterian; head in the sand; antagonizing local schools, communities. Primitive theology. Sexual abuse is the least of it.

Thank God for Jonathan Boston. Our own congregation here in Knox flies a sonsy banner. Opoho. Knox in Christchurch. The Community of St Luke in Auckland. The Methodists in Mornington. The remarkable outreach of Splice in inner-city Auckland. Here and there stirrings of insight.

So let's open the Hebrew bible and listen to this call to dreamer the dream, to transform the world like Moses. We walk in the steps God's chosen people Israel. Our Scottish forbears, the Covenanters, knew this. They took on tyrannies in their time, they did. They took on a corrupt Established Church. 1848. That strong insurrectionist strain in our tradition. The Otago settlement built on it. For freedom Christ has set you free. Galatians. Our Christ the dreamer of justice.

Well, this is all fine and good, this pulpit rhetoric, I hear you say. But what does it mean on a personal and congregational level? One of the Desert Fathers in 4th century Egypt; "Each morning I wake up with all these solutions; and joyous lay waste the day"

If I were to say to you I have answers to all these urgent political and theological questions, how we are to unpicturise Christ, how we are to interpret our contemporary nightmares, how

we are to find our way out of an economy of scarcity I would indeed be a fool. And I don't think I am.

But what I am commissioned to say to you from this high pulpit is that these questions. The Joseph questions, the Moses questions. They are the urgent ones.

Here are three pointers: I take them from Kathy Galloway, leader of the Iona Community, a gifted folk-singer, an activist for social justice all her life. Speaking to church leaders across Europe.

We need to **lament**. Jesus wept over Jerusalem. Malcolm Gordon, our gifted hymn writer, has just written a superb thesis on lament. It sounds like weakness, but it isn't. It's naming disaster as disaster. It takes courage to lament. Our Dunedin poet, Sue Wooton, puts it this way:

*There's blood on the walls
of the rich and the poor. Yet recoil, yet speak.
Caught by pen, by camera, caught in thought-
tried and caught, and tried in court. Some wrongs
must be fought. No one can silence the report.*

There are leaders in politics or society who never lament. Give themselves A+ reports. Dishonest. Dangerous. Here in church, at work, in our homes we can like the Psalmist, like the prophets, lament, name what is amiss, the first step to transforming it.

Secondly, we see everywhere the dangers of a polarized society, one half not talking to the other. We who delight in God, we in the church are called to **wrestle** with those who don't see things as we do. We're good at this, because church folk are such a mix, young and old, cautious and radical, not tied to any one political party, never giving up on one another.

Lament, wrestling and finally, like anct Israel remember we are a **pilgrim people**. We're not there yet. Our own lives still in a mess. Our Church nationally, dear me. Sure. We're desert wanderers. But we're on the way. Moses leading his people to that promised land, never getting there h.s.

As church doing this for the whole community. This precious role of **encouragers**.

Here's a poem from an old friend of mine, Peter Millar, also in the Iona community:

*Through
hunger
injustice
poverty
violence,
and the other
sorrow-filled markers
of our age,*

*there is a time
to pause,
to listen,
to laugh,
to see beauty,
to seek truth,
to love deeply,
and to mend our broken
but beautiful
human fabric.*

*And maybe,
just maybe,
that time is
now-
today,
right where we are.*

We Knox people. Knowing that in our time we've been a power house, a house of meaning. Friends, we still are. In a disenchanted world we stand for re-enchantment. We can speak to people from the margins. We know we're not in the Bishop Tutu league. But there's this great God-shaped gap in our society. There's this huge hunger for integrity. For communities like ours, delighting in God, willing to have a go at interpreting the nightmare, taking a lead.

And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph. The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night. And the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the water a wall for them on their right and on their left.

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