

The Book of Exodus



1. Hope in a hopeless situation (Exodus 1:1-2:10)

If you watch TV awards one of the most popular is called continuing drama otherwise known as Soap Operas. To my mind, they are largely nonsense although they are often used by their writers to underline social issues. Part of the "excitement" of the soap opera is that they leave you hanging at the end of the episode.

If you didn't already know the outcome of the first chapter of Exodus, you'd think it was a hopeless situation for the Israelites. It couldn't get worse. Evil Pharaoh had first enslaved the Israelites, then demanded that their sons die as they were born and when that didn't happen, he demanded that any boys found be thrown into the Nile! (But you'll also remember that the last awful plague was that Egypt's firstborn sons were slain). It was a story of unmitigated disaster - or so it seemed. What do we have: mass genocide - ethnic cleansing, oppression and slavery, people taking desperate measures.

This was an impossible situation - or so it seemed. But we have a God who turns minuses to pluses. This passage is just the start of an amazing adventure for the people of Israel. He turns them into a special nation. It was the start of the fulfilment of the prophecies to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob about their offspring being numbered as the stars of the heavens. I wonder what the Israelites were thinking of that as they suffered under the yoke of slavery in Egypt? They had the promises, but where was the reality?

Does that sound familiar? How many times have we been in difficult situations, struggling hard to discern God's way. We may have the promises but can't quite see the way through to the reality of the situation.

In the years between Joseph and the birth of Moses, Israel had started to grow into a nation. There were so many of them that Pharaoh feared them! There may have been more to it. Take a look at Genesis 47 at some point. Jacob and his family were allowed to settle in Goshen and Joseph wielded enormous power on Pharaoh's part. He bought up land of people affected by the famine in Canaan and it became Pharaoh's. That meant that the state actually owned land. We know that in Joseph's period Egypt controlled Canaan and beyond. Joseph made Pharaoh powerful through that famine and extended the empire but probably made enemies of Egyptians who had to sell to Pharaoh.

I was surprised at my first reading reading of Exodus 1:8, a Pharaoh arose who did not know Joseph. People like him are often famous well beyond their lifetime. The Egyptians kept historic records and we know a lot about their history as a result. The words in verse 8 are *then a new king, who did not know about Joseph, came to power in Egypt*. The word *know* is a broad one that may include "recognise" in terms of recognising his place in history. In other words he knew about Joseph but He didn't know him as the Saviour of Egypt but common history had changed his legacy to one who didn't favour Egyptians. Genesis 47 is our key here. He wasn't one who liked Joseph's legacy. He knew about Joseph; he had to but he didn't know Joseph as a hero but as a villain who dispossessed people of their land (however willingly that may have been in famine) and gave it to these these Hebrews to live in the land - their land - and do very well under state patronage at the Egyptians expense.

It's history but not as we know it. It's called "conventional wisdom". Each generation changes history a little to suit its needs. History is shaped as much by prejudice as it is by facts. So take care that facts are facts. And the same has occurred through the years hasn't it - Nazi Germany, Bosnia, Rwanda, Darfur. It leads to discrimination of one group against another - Northern Ireland, Iraq whatever irrespective of what true facts may be.

When you think about how long and forgotten politicians and usually how long and forgotten their

legacies are - even in a generation, then what happened in Exodus 1 was not a surprise. Joseph's people had acquired a huge amount of influence because of Joseph, but the political tide may have turned against them. What was favour in one generation in another generation became xenophobia in another. They were so busy prospering in Egypt under Joseph that they failed to notice that they had become a nation. I wonder what they were doing with God in all those years? Was He forgotten as they prospered? They may have forgotten but the Egyptians saw their growth in numbers and power and saw them as a threat. And that slipped into bondage and then genocide. For the Hebrews, the slide from prosperity to bondage was a swift one.

God hadn't forgotten them. They were going to move into a new age - and a more blessed one according to His grace. How does the disaster of chapter 1 start to turn the corner?

By the raising up of bold women

15 Then the king of Egypt spoke to Shiphrah and Puah, the two midwives who helped the Hebrew women. 16 "When you help the Hebrew women give birth," he said to them, "kill the baby if it is a boy; but if it is a girl, let it live." 17 But the midwives were God-fearing and so did not obey the king; instead, they let the boys live. 18 So the king sent for the midwives and asked them, "Why are you doing this? Why are you letting the boys live?" 19 They answered, "The Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they give birth easily, and their babies are born before either of us gets there." 20 Because the midwives were God-fearing, God was good to them and gave them families of their own. And the Israelites continued to increase and become strong. 21 22 Finally the king issued a command to all his people: "Take every newborn Hebrew boy and throw him into the Nile, but let all the girls live." "

Resistance to Pharaoh was through two Hebrew midwives, Shiprah and Puah who refused to kill the boys at birth, making excuses why they had not. Sometimes we look for big gestures when we are in a difficult position. We look for someone to come and rescue us. Or we think that we have to do something that is out of our reach. But in all the bondage, some people were doing a small act of defiance against Pharaoh. It wasn't much, but it allowed Moses to be born.

When we have our problems, what do we do: give up because it seems too difficult? Or do we look for the way God has provided out of it. Sometimes it is the smallest act of all - prayer. As a church we often look for the grand schemes to see change here. We think "maybe the Pastor and the Deacons should come up with a scheme to get more people in" "Dennis should do a few more doors". "They must do it, because I could never do it myself". But change will come when we are prepared to be Shiprah and Puah. When we are ready to devote prayer to the situation. When we are prepared to make that small risk of talking to our friend or neighbour. That's when Moses gets to be born. That's when we see God in action. "Blessed are those that expect little - they will never be disappointed!"

By a desperate act of faith

2:1 During this time a man from the tribe of Levi married a woman of his own tribe, 2 and she bore him a son. When she saw what a fine baby he was, she hid him for three months. 3 But when she could not hide him any longer, she took a basket made of reeds and covered it with tar to make it watertight. She put the baby in it and then placed it in the tall grass at the edge of the river.

The bravery of Shiprah and Puah didn't seem to be very productive to begin with. Pharaoh commanded that all male be thrown into the Nile. So for Amram and Jochebed and their small son Moses things don't look hopeful. So she takes on an act of faith - she puts him in a basket amongst the rushes near the Nile. We are not told why, just that she did it and then set Miriam to watch over it. Sometimes God asks us to just trust Him. Whether that be in our personal problems or as a church, the bottom line is that big things start with a small act of trust.

Do we want release from our personal problems and difficulties. Do we want to see new things here in our fellowship? Then it starts with small acts of faith - a prayer here, a small risk there, and an act of faith. Out of small beginnings grow great things. That was certainly the case for young Moses.

Never underestimate God

5 The king's daughter came down to the river to bathe, while her servants walked along the bank. Suddenly she noticed the basket in the tall grass and sent a slave woman to get it. 6 The princess

opened it and saw a baby boy. He was crying, and she felt sorry for him. "This is one of the Hebrew babies," she said. 7 Then his sister asked her, "Shall I go and call a Hebrew woman to nurse the baby for you?" 8 "Please do," she answered. So the girl went and brought the baby's own mother. 9 The princess told the woman, "Take this baby and nurse him for me, and I will pay you." So she took the baby and nursed him. 10 Later, when the child was old enough, she took him to the king's daughter, who adopted him as her own son. She said to herself, "I pulled him out of the water, and so I name him Moses."

Who would have thought that God's salvation would come this way? It came through an act of compassion by the daughter of the man who oppressed the Hebrews! Never dictate to God how He should work. Who ever would have thought that the man God raised up to lead His people out of Egypt would have been by a man brought up with the oppressors and all the privileges that brought with it.

Let's take a reality check here. This is God's church, not yours or mine. He doesn't follow the rules we set Him - he sets the rules. What He does elsewhere is what He does elsewhere and praise Him for that. But we have to learn to trust Him for what He wants to do here and look for that, and not just look in the obvious places, but expect to find God working in amazing and unexpected ways.

It's all about where we are casting our eyes. For the Israelites, it was casting their eyes on the bondage of Egypt and seeing no hope. For Shiprah and Puah, Amram and Jochebed, and Miriam, it was celebrating the small blessings even though they did not see a way through quite yet.

So how do we respond to this story. In two ways. Firstly to look and see what He is doing here already with MRBC. He's doing lots. Sometimes we look for solutions in this programme and that – purpose driven, seeker friendly or whatever, when we should be asking ourselves; what's God doing? Who has He brought us in contact with? What gifts and skills has He given us? The salvation of Israel was right under everyone's noses – baby boy floating in a river he was supposed to have been drowned in; saved by the family of the man who wanted his sort dead! Let's start with what God is actually doing? Who has He given us now to minister to, to witness to, to lead to Christ? We should try looking under our noses because they are there – the prodigals, the families that always come when we invite them, people who have nothing but goodwill for the church. They are ready – ripe to harvest. People willing to be prayed for, witnessed to and ready to listen because they are our friends. What we need to do is listen to the voice of God and find His way of reaching them. All I can say is don't forget the bullrushes! Look in the unexpected places and celebrate what God is doing, discern where He is going and follow Him!

The salvation of Israel came out of the court of the oppressors! The last place the Hebrews or Pharaoh himself would ever have looked. And this man had unique insight and knowledge that would be critical at a later stage. Let's seek God and keep our eyes peeled because there just may be a Moses waiting to come to Christ who will be a breakthrough person in days to come.

So let's trust the God who turns minuses to pluses, let's be faithful in the small acts that we can easily do, the small risks that we can take, and look in the bulrushes for the unexpected God who brings in amazing ways and makes a way where there is no way.

A good way of summing this up is in a song by Don Moen:

*God will make a way, where there seems to be no way;
He works in ways we cannot see, He will make a way for me.
He will be my Guide, Hold me closely to His side;
With love and strength for each new day,
He will make a way, He will make a way.*

*By a roadway in the wilderness He leads me,
Rivers in the desert will I see. Heaven and Earth will fail,
But His word will still remain; He will do something new today.*