

“Big Question 5: Do we really have freedom?”

Sunday 8 February 2009

Karen Senior

Readings:

Exodus 4:1 - 17

Psalm 95: 1 - 7

Luke 12: 22 - 34

Sermon

The extract from Exodus that Maureen just read to us is really part 2 of the conversation between God and Moses which began in last week's reading, when Moses had seen a bush - on fire but not burning up - and discovered that here was God, wanting a conversation with him.

We need to keep the bigger picture of Moses story in mind, so

in the style of all my favourite American drama series on Channel 4.....

PREVIOUSLY IN EXODUS

Moses was born in Egypt, to Hebrew parents.

The Hebrews had been invited and welcomed into Egypt in a previous generation, but by the time we are thinking about they were seen as a threat to national security, but also a useful resource - as slaves to build up the mighty Egyptian Empire with its pyramids and cities.

Thanks to his mother's ingenuity Moses escaped being killed as a baby, but he was brought up by an Egyptian princess - one of Pharaoh's daughters, in the palace, where he was presumably always just a bit conscious of his not looking quite like everyone else.....

As a young man he went out to survey the vast building projects which the Hebrews were forced to work on - not just hard work but genuine slavery, no time off, no mercy, hard work - more work and harder work, year after backbreaking year.

Whilst watching all this, Moses saw for himself the brutality of the Egyptian slave drivers, and in a moment of outrage he killed an Egyptian and buried his body in the sand and if it were TV rather than the book, then the credits would have rolled as Moses strode back to the palace, wondering what had come over him to make him do such a thing, but with the hint of a swagger that in a way he'd made a tiny first blow against injustice...

THEN the following week's episode starts as he went back to the scene of his crime:

the Hebrews recognised him - and they didn't greet him as a freedom fighter, just as another murderous Egyptian, and suddenly Moses was overwhelmed with guilt and fear, and left Egypt for Midian - an area on the Eastern shore of the Red Sea, separated from Egypt - and the body in the sand - by plenty of desert.

The people of Midian, the Midianites, were distantly related to the Hebrews so Moses began a new career in shepherding, met a local girl, married and had a baby, and probably expected to stay in Midian for the rest of his life.

And as this morning's episode of Exodus begins we need to be aware that last week's important action was in two different places - 2 different nations.

In Egypt - the background music would be dramatic - the mighty Pharaoh had died and another one had assumed power, the treatment of the Hebrews was getting worse... not that they thought it was *possible* for it to get worse.

(Sadly - if there'd been a trailer for the next week at the end of this episode, we would see that in next week's episode it does indeed get MUCH worse for the Hebrews.)

Meanwhile, we'd have a gentle melody for the peaceful domestic scenes in Midian, where Moses had been doing ok really. Life wasn't bad for him, there were worse jobs than shepherding, he had a family, and he'd long stopped looking over his shoulder for anyone who might say:

"excuse me sir, I need to ask you some questions about a dead Egyptian slave driver.... I need to remind you that anything you say might be used in evidence against you"

And then a serious drum roll would break into the gentle background music as God found Moses, on remote Mount Horeb, in the desert. God attracted his attention with the bush which was on fire but not burning up, and then told Moses he had a job for him - to go back to Egypt and deliver the Hebrews from slavery.

This was NOT the career move Moses had been looking for..... "why me?" he said and "If I went - why should anyone in Egypt believe that God has sent me?"

So God reminded Moses that He was a God with power and authority well beyond the gods of Egypt, that he was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Moses' ancestors and the God of his peoples ancestors, and he had seen what was happening to the Hebrew people and wanted to stop it. And Moses was the man to make it happen.

And that's where the credits rolled at the end of last week's sermon ...but as we heard in the reading - the conversation continues.....

Moses was pretty darned sure that the Hebrew people weren't going to see an old man from Midian appear from the desert saying:

"God's sent me to rescue you" - and welcome him with excitement!

And Moses was keen to make that point very clear to God!

But God had a couple of miracles in mind: He turned Moses walking stick into a snake (and thankfully back again). Then he made Moses' hand all white and diseased - and then made it healthy again. And he told Moses about the third miracle he could do as a sign that he meant business - turning river Nile water to blood.

Moses wasn't sure that God understood his objections so he tried again:

"Look God I CAN'T do this - I'm NOT a public speaker...I get tongue tied and forget what I want to say."

And – as my favourite version says:

Moses begged: "Lord, please send someone else to do it" and The Lord became irritated with Moses (CEV 4v13-14)

Any good drama series on TV works by making us the viewers identify with at least some of the characters.... so who are you identifying with in this drama?

The Hebrews in slavery in Egypt, or Moses in Midian?

We only have to open a newspaper to know that whole nations live under cruel oppression - Zimbabwe is just one obvious example.

Genuine slavery in the form of forced labour is still alive and well in the 21st Century too – the recent media exposure of Primark suppliers, showed there's appalling exploitation in the fashion industry even here in the UK. In the developing world things are often much worse....and when we find a bargain, all too often someone else has paid a high price.

Like it or not, we are all too easily unwittingly involved in slavery as the final buyers of stuff.

We can thank God that we aren't slaves at production level, but how many people in Tunbridge Wells are feeling trapped by their mortgage and the need to pay off the debts?

Many who are in work are all too aware of how precarious that work looks at the present.

And how many people are in slavery to alcohol or to drugs? For some that is the result of defiant recklessness, but for others it is an imperceptible slide into addiction and all that it entails.

And what about the hidden traps in the privacy of our own homes, in front of computer screens? The editorial in this month's "Christianity Today" magazine begins with the stark sentence: Statistics suggest that half of all Christian men use Internet pornography.

www.christianitymagazine.co.uk/editorials/0902%20dirty%20secrets

A half of all Christian men.... if that is anywhere near accurate it is a massive issue for the church. Such numbers might surprise you – or shock you it isn't a subject which is much spoken about in churches. The editorial continues:

"Men are not that good at opening up at the best of times. But to confront an issue as taboo as this would be beyond embarrassing – it would be shameful. The silence from the pulpit of most churches on this subject certainly doesn't help. Instead it makes the church complicit in this conspiracy of silence.

Huge numbers of Christian men, and a lesser number of women, struggle and fall under a crippling burden of guilt, fear and self-loathing because of Internet pornography."

An American survey 5 years back suggested that a third of Church ministers admitted to struggling with this issue.

And when you consider that more than a third of the total number of world wide websites are porn, maybe we shouldn't be surprised. But neither should we remain silent and do nothing.

(Don't worry, I'm really not going to end with one of those "If you would like prayer for this problem please come forward in the next hymn" lines)

But like any addiction, the first stage of learning to control it is to accept it exists.

There's a web address for Care on the bottom of the back page of the service sheet. (www.care.org.uk) We ask you to take the sheet home every week anyway, so no-one will know, and the Care website has a series of questions which help you to see whether this is indeed a serious issue for you.

And it suggests some practical steps to help. But it's not a battle everyone can fight alone. And for some, overcoming the embarrassment of admitting the issue and sharing it with a trusted friend who will ask frank questions about how you are managing can be the best support.

The other big internet addiction issue is gambling. The government reckon about a million people place bets online, but CARE's research suggests that it could well be as many as 6 million. They won't all be addicted, of course, But online gambling in the UK has grown 566 per cent since 2003 and that's mainly due to a big increase in the number of women betting online.

Most women aren't comfortable with the prospect of going into a betting shop. Women have traditionally met for bingo, but there your friends know what you are spending, and what you win, and hey, it's partly the social side of it they do for anyway.

Online there are no restrictions and lots of incentives, and nobody sees you. Last week I heard a radio interview with a woman who had spent £45,000 her share of a house sale after she and her boyfriend split up.

She'd used it all on online gambling sites, many of which are targeted at women. She was grateful that she hadn't gone into debt, but she was astonished at how effortless it had been to lose such a lot of money. And she was getting help. Again, the essential first step for this lady was to admit the reality of her situation.

But let's go back to Moses.....he was far from the slavery of his people, millennia away from internet addictions but trapped by anxieties, inadequacy, and insecurities. How many of us recognise ourselves in Moses here?

Me? I couldn't do that.....

But what will I say?

I can't speak very well and my mind goes blank if I try....

What if they ask me questions I can't answer?

How can I be sure this won't end in disaster?

Some years back there was an all too common kind of evangelistic message which could be summed up as "Come to Jesus and all your problems will be solved"

A very false promise, not borne out by the experience of the first followers of Jesus, nor of many of them since! Last week's sermon - "Why does God let us suffer?" is probably THE big question.

And we ask it because as Brian said, we as Christians are not in any way immune to the difficulties that everyone faces, and suffering touches all our lives at one level or another.

Yet, in the New Testament reading that Vera read, Jesus said to his disciples:

"Do not worry about your life.....which of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life.....Do not be afraid little flock"

Jesus never promised that we would come to him and have a problem free life, but he did tell his followers not to be trapped by anxieties and worries. So often what we worry about isn't even what IS happening to us, but what MIGHT happen

Adrian Plass wrote a poem some of you might know - "No Burglars came tonight" and he described the terrifying and violent things those burglars might do to him if they break in,

But the poem finishes: "They were not here again last night....." How much of our time and energy do we waste in anxieties and worries?

Can we really be free? That was the title of this week's big Question. I guess we all have different ideas of what freedom is? Is it the freedom to do whatever I want to whenever I want? That usually turns out to be a lack of freedom for someone else – not least our children if the recent Report on Childhood is right.

Reading the Bible makes it pretty clear that God has something of a bias to the poor those who are trapped by poverty and oppression, and that was the reason for him giving Moses the job back in Egypt.

God offers us forgiveness – that's a freedom and he calls us to serve him in bringing the freedom of that forgiveness to others.

And how do we respond?

Are we still saying: "Lord, please send someone else to do it"

Maybe you know there's an issue that you need to face and ask God to help you with, it may be that guilt, fear or self-loathing. It may be a lifetime struggle with feelings of inadequacy - Me? I couldn't do that...

God knows where we are – even if we can hide it from every other person here but the good news is that HE LOVES US ANYWAY!!! But that doesn't mean he wants us to stay tangled up in guilt or worry. He wants us to be free from those.

The music group are going to sing to us now ... think of it as a prayer set to music, the chorus goes:

*'Simply to the cross I cling letting go of all earthly things, I'm clinging to the cross.
Mercy's found a way for me, hope is here as I am free
Jesus you are all I need, I'm clinging to the cross.'*

And as the service progresses, I want to remind you that though God was irritated with Moses, or his anger burned against Moses (depending on your translation) God gave him Aaron, His brother, and they worked together at the work God had given.

So after the service – as after all services, there will be the opportunity to have someone else support you by praying for you.

The prayer ministry team is in the Chapel – and you can tell them as much or as little as you want, but sometimes having someone stand with us in prayer is really important.