

A Sermon preached at Evensong, 30 December 2012

Christ Church Cathedral Newcastle

by the Dean, The Very Reverend Dr James Rigney

Exodus 1.8-10

Galatians 4.22-28

Our readings this evening are a reminder, in this Christmas season, that great things often begin in difficult and dangerous circumstances, but that behind those circumstances lie the saving intentions and purposes of God, waiting to be discerned and lived out.

The events surrounding the birth and, more importantly, the preservation of Moses are evidence of God's sovereignty in overriding the designs of those in power.

The closing chapters of Genesis narrate the story of Joseph and his family. Sold into slavery and despair, Joseph eventually finds himself—through God's help—in a position of power in Egypt. An interpreter of dreams and a skilful diplomat, Joseph helps lead Egypt through a severe famine. He is rewarded for his service to the Egyptians, but the rise of a new Pharaoh means that the memory of Joseph and how Israel had helped Egypt in that time is lost.

As the book of Exodus opens, Moses is born during the reign of a Pharaoh who was indifferent to the contribution Israel had made to Egypt. This new Pharaoh enslaves and tries to eradicate a people who had previously been welcomed.

When the report was heard in Pharaoh's house, 'Joseph's brothers have come', Pharaoh and his servants were pleased. Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'Say to your brothers, "Do this: load your animals and go back to the land of Canaan. Take your father and your households and come to me, so that I may give you the best of the land of Egypt, and you may enjoy the fat of the land.'" You are further

charged to say, “Do this: take wagons from the land of Egypt for your little ones and for your wives, and bring your father, and come. Give no thought to your possessions, for the best of all the land of Egypt is yours.” ’ (Genesis 45.16-20)

This new king fears these foreigners. He worries that they will deceive the Egyptians and take their land. He fears their rising numbers and is anxious that this growing community will form an alliance with Egypt's enemies and attack the country from within.

Pharaoh chooses two tactics to deal with this perceived threat: slavery and genocide. The imposition of gruelling labour on a people will reduce them to cogs in a machine and kill the expectation of a better future. Take the life of every baby boy at birth and soon families and hope would be extinguished.

But where cruelty seeks its victims, courage and grace also arise. The two midwives Shiphrah and Puah refuse to execute Pharaoh's command. In response to this disobedience Pharaoh increases the pressure of his campaign against the Israelites, commanding “all his people” (not just the midwives) to throw each infant Israelite boy into the Nile.

Pharaoh's daughter recognizes Moses as one of the Hebrew children and, instead of abiding by her father's clear orders, rescues him and eventually adopts him as her own son. The courage and compassion of these women exceeds and out-manoeuvres the cruelty of political power and short-sighted fear.

Had that fear prevailed and had Pharaoh triumphed, the story of God's liberation of God's enslaved people could not have been told. Had a number of women not acted out of compassion and courage, the extermination of a people would have been sharply felt by them and their contemporaries but probably forgotten by history. The saving of Moses prefigures as well as enables the saving of Israel. The name Moses is given means 'to draw'.

In this sense it means to draw up out of the water, but can also be seen as looking ahead to the drawing of the people of Israel out of Egypt.

In chapter four of the Letter to the Galatians, Paul returns to the Old Testament and reflects on the children of Abraham and their different heritages, as well as the working out of God's promises through these descendants.

Earlier in Galatians Paul has referred to both Christ's divine nature and human nature. 'But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children'. (Galatians 4.4-5)

The Messiah was born under the Mosaic Law that He alone fulfilled by keeping it perfectly (as Jesus himself say in Matthew 5:17: 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil it.'). " These verses in Galatians 4 contain one of the most compressed and highly charged passages in the entire letter because they present the objective basis, the Christological and soteriological foundation, for the doctrine of justification by faith.

Because believers are full children and thus full heirs, Paul reminds them how foolish it would be then to go back under the bondage of the Law, from which they have been rescued as Moses was drawn out of the Nile . All Christians are heirs of God by faith alone. But as in the Old Testament family there are two kinds of inheritance: an inheritance which is merited and an inheritance which belongs to all Christians because they are children, and for no other reason.

Paul points out two contrasts between Ishmael and Isaac, the children of Abraham. First, Ishmael's mother was a slave, but Isaac's mother was free. These conditions affected the

status of their sons in Abraham's household. Second, Ishmael was born naturally, but Isaac was born supernaturally in fulfilment of God's promise. In the scriptural record of the birth of these two sons of Abraham, Paul recognizes the same opposition between reliance on self ('according to the flesh') and reliance on God ('through promise') as exists between those who would be justified by legal works and those who are justified by faith.

The gospel is the fulfilment of the promise made to Abraham that in him and his offspring all nations would be blessed (Paul writes of this elsewhere in Galatians 3:8: 'And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you.'). The law, which was given later, was a dispensation introduced by God for a limited purpose; its validity continued only until the promise to Abraham was fulfilled in Christ, and even while it was valid it did not modify the terms of the promise. As Paul writes in Galatians 3.17-25:

My point is this: the law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. For if the inheritance comes from the law, it no longer comes from the promise; but God granted it to Abraham through the promise.

Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring would come to whom the promise had been made; and it was ordained through angels by a mediator. Now a mediator involves more than one party; but God is one.

Is the law then opposed to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could make alive, then righteousness would indeed come through the law. But the scripture has imprisoned all things under the power of sin, so that

what was promised through faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian,

Paul's principal conclusion in this section of Galatians is that Christians are similar to Isaac in that they experience a supernatural birth and are part of the fulfilment of God's promise. Therefore they should not live as enslaved sons.

In Moses and in Christ we see God intervening in a situation of danger to preserve the life of one whom he has chosen to be the saviour of his people. In the case of Moses this is a limited salvation, though it is one that prefigures the future and greater salvation achieved by Christ. It is in Christ's saving acts, beginning with his birth at Christmas that the fullness of God's saving purpose is revealed to us.