

Midwives of the future

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Psalm 124

Exodus 1:8-2:10

Matthew 16:13-20



http://www.stlukesinthecity.org.nz/sermons_pid_22.html

The next month will be all about Leadership in our country and we've already seen a fair few dramatic changes on that front in this year's election campaign. What is being a good political leader all about? Is it just Personality? Popularity? Photogenic potential? Promises? How about, dare I say it, Policies? Principles? Philosophy?! Leadership - what's it worth? One way of thinking about leadership is putting a price on it. I've seen this expressed in a way that couldn't be more stark - 'the great divide' between the pay-rate of an MP which is 5 times that of a parliamentary cleaner, who doesn't yet get a living wage. The pay rate of profit-winning AirNZ's CEO is 20 times that of a minimum wage earner. The pay rate of the CEO's of our banks is 100-150 times that of a minimum wage earner. Yes, we know that with power comes great responsibility, and yet there is an ever-increasing disparity and distance between the very rich and the very poor in our country.

It doesn't seem quite so far a step then to our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, where we begin the saga of the leader Moses, born into the Hebrew people enslaved by Pharaoh, ruler of Egypt. But surprisingly enough, we hear first of all of the leadership of women, two Hebrew midwives who are also given names - Shiphrah and Puah, two resourceful characters, who faced with the absolute power and command of Pharaoh, yet feared God more and were able in an act of civil disobedience to defiantly stand up for life, and bring to birth new life, foreshadowing there is hope yet for God's people.

Then we come to three women who act together to save one child, Moses, the future leader of God's people out from slavery. Three women - the child's mother, not named here but called elsewhere Jochebed (Ex 6:20) and Moses' older sister whom we know from elsewhere is Miriam. Both Jochebed and Miriam go to extraordinary lengths of courage and ingenuity to protect the infant Moses, but they are assisted in this through the compassion of Pharaoh's daughter, who will adopt the child as her own, while allowing his birth mother to raise him according to the childcare arrangements of the time!

And yet we know this must have been a dangerous undertaking for all, contravening all the orders of those in power, in order to protect and nurture the child Moses to maturity.

Hebrew tradition has it that Pharaoh's daughter was named Bithiah, and that she went out with Moses and the Israelites from Egypt into the wilderness. She chose her adopted son's God as her own, and changed all her allegiances and her life, from a place of power to allying herself with the powerless, putting a higher value on relationship than blood.

Moses we know as the inspirational leader of his people, his name meaning 'one drawn from the water'. He will in turn lead his people through the waters of the Reed Sea and through the long years in the wilderness to the brink of freedom in the promised land. Yet we know he too was not without his flaws, he committed murder in his youth, he tried to wriggle out of the call to leadership, he had a fear of public speaking: Here I am, Lord, send my brother! (Ex. 4) Yet God worked with that, gave him the companionship in leadership of his brother Aaron and sister Miriam, and the wisdom of his father-in-law Jethro (Ex. 18) to encourage him to share the load of leading the people of God with many others.

Our Gospel reading also raises the question of leadership, just who is this Jesus whom the disciples are following. Jesus has taken his disciples to Caesarea Philippi, two days' walk north of Galilee, a place marked out by its name as a centre of emperor worship, named for Caesar and Herod Philip the Tetrarch. It was also a place linked with Syrian Baal worship and was said to be the birthplace of the Greek nature god Pan.

So Jesus has taken the disciples out of their comfort zone, into a place where many competing religious and political leaders' names ring in their ears, and challenges them: Who do people say that the Son of Man is? What are people saying? What's the news, what are the polls saying?

We can imagine the scene, with the disciples eagerly putting in their pennyworth, well, I've heard people wondering if you're not John the Baptist come back to life? Or Elijah, the one we were told would come before the Messiah? Or Jeremiah or one of the prophets? All feisty out-there public figures, note, none of this 'Gentle Jesus meek and mild' stuff here!

'But who do YOU say that I am?' You can see the eyes quickly cast down, feet shuffling – now this is a bit closer to home, a bit more personal! Who will be brave enough to reply? To take the risk of commitment, of allegiance?

As ever, it is Simon who goes out on a limb – “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And you can imagine the collective sigh of relief, including Simon’s, when he gets it right, and Jesus acknowledges that this answer is not just a human bright idea, but a God-given insight, which has enabled Simon to recognise the activity of God in Jesus, to see that God was at work in him and to have the courage to name it. But this is not just some sort of intellectual coup that Simon has scored, for calling Jesus the Messiah means a commitment that will call all other commitments into question, including to the existing political structures – hence Jesus’ order at this stage for the disciples to keep this news quiet.

Mind-boggling stuff, and not least for Simon who receives a new name, as Jesus puns on the Palestinian Aramaic word *Kephas* which works for both Peter and Rock. In Greek, you are *Petros* and on this *Petra*, rock, I will build my church. Before Peter’s head swells too much though, *Petros* means a little stone or pebble, and *Petra* means a big rock, a boulder. Peter is but a chip off the old block; the real rock is Jesus, the rock of ages, the church's one foundation and cornerstone.

But Jesus will build from Peter’s faith, from the commitment to follow Jesus that Peter and the other disciples have made over the three years of relationship with him. And it will have its ups and downs, this commitment and this relationship.

I find it consoling that Peter, a man of such huge strengths, and yet of such huge weaknesses and failings, a very flaky rock at times, is still chosen by God to be the rock on which the church is built. And God still chooses such people to be part of the church, people like us. It was the early church father Origen who said of this passage: ‘For a rock is every disciple of Christ...For all bear the surname ‘rock’ who are the imitators of Christ...these bear the surname of ‘rock’ just as Christ does.’

I’m reminded of a book¹ by Alan Roxburgh, who uses a range of images to describe Christian leaders. I am ruminating on some of these and invite you to also as you reflect on places where you are called to exercise leadership in your life and work and relationships.

¹ Alan Roxburgh & Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: equipping your church to reach a changing world*. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2006.

Alan talked of leaders as being '**detectives of divinity**' in our midst, sniffing out rumours of the transcendent God at work in our world. Another image he used was that of being **poets**, those who listen to the stories being told among people and then give voice to them, interpreting them in the light of God's story.

But perhaps the image that most resonates with me today, in the light of our reading is that of being '**midwives of the ordinary**', trusting that the Spirit of God is at work among us, pregnant with the future in our midst. And we are called to help along that bringing to birth of God's creative life, in each individual life here and where we see God at work in the other 167 hours or so of our week not spent here.

So pick your image - midwife of God's future, detective of divinity, poet, story-teller, or perhaps another - and live it out this week, to God's glory among us. Amen.