

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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EXODUS THE BEGINNING OF THE STORY

6th May 2018

Exodus 1:8-22

Matthew 11:25-30

One of the things that we are trying to do when we are walking the Path of Renewal, is to see our story in the light of the Bible story. We don't need to all wear ancient middle eastern dress or adopt an alien life-style to find parallels between our story and the story of God's interaction with his people that we find in Scripture.

One of the great stories of the Bible, which colours almost everything else that happens, is the story of the Exodus, the story of how God called his people out of Egypt and led them through the desert for forty years, and in the journey made them a nation. It is a great story from a story-teller's perspective, of course, and there are many dramatic incidents in it, from the actual leaving of Egypt and the drama of the Passover, to the crossing of the sea of reeds, to the giving of the ten commandments and the debacle of the Golden Calf and so on and so on. Great stories making up an even greater story, most of which you will have heard in Sunday School.

When we see these stories as all part of one narrative, then we can begin to see patterns emerging, patterns to do with the way that God works and leads his people, patterns that we can then look for in our own journey of faith. So today we read the beginning of the story. Or did we? Finding the beginning of a story is not always easy, because there is always something which went before. And what went before is hinted at in the first words we read, that a new king or Pharaoh, arose in Egypt who did not know Joseph.

Joseph was the reason that the Israelites were in Egypt. Joseph had been God's way of saving them from starvation in the seven-year famine. He had also been the means of saving the Egyptians from starvation, so the land owed him a lot. When his family arrived, they had been welcomed into the land as honoured guests, because they were Joseph's family. But then, some time after Joseph's death, and we are not told how long – but it might have been several generations – a new king arose who did not know Joseph and who did not choose to remember this chapter in the nation's history.

History is a complicated thing to grapple with. For one thing, the nuances of difficult situations get smoothed out and lost over time, so that what people remember tends to be painted with a broad brush. History is something which can hold us enslaved, so that we can't move forward, and yet we ignore our history at our peril. Everyone and every institution and every nation and every church has a history from which there are lessons to learn. But this king chose to forget this part of his history and so the Israelites lost their welcome in his land.

So, they made the Israelites work for them. They made them do forced labour, building the great monuments and cities which made Egypt famous, not just then, but ever since. They made them work in the fields, but not for their own gain. Later

in the story, when the Israelites show signs of wanting to leave they make life harder for them by making them forage for their own materials to make the bricks for building, but expecting just as great an output. You see, the Egyptians knew what dominant peoples have known for ever; that if you want to keep people subdued, you make their lives so hard and so full that they have no time to think about anything but survival.

This is where we come into the story. There are things we have in common with God's enslaved people in Egypt. The Church of Scotland, along with other western churches, are in their own way becoming like the enslaved people of Israel. We are struggling to keep going. There is a shortage of ministers, and of money and of people, but we are expected – we expect it of ourselves - that we will do everything that we have become used to seeing the church do. And so, more and more is asked of us, by ourselves, either locally, or by our national structures. And sometimes it feels as though the straw is being withheld but that we are trying to make just as many bricks, if not more.

Yet Jesus said "My yoke is easy and my burden is light."

The Israelites were kept so busy that they had no time to reflect that the reason that they were in Egypt was because in the past it had been a place of salvation, that in the past it had been a place of welcome, but that this past had changed. The Israelite slaves had no time to think about other ways of living, about moving away from Egypt, maybe, about organising themselves so that they could work more efficiently, or standing up for themselves with the Egyptians. They were too busy. We need to be careful that we don't allow this to become our way of being in the church as well. Particularly in the church at national or presbytery level. As the traditional structures contract, we can spend more and more time on maintaining them, instead of asking what new things and new way of being God might want to lead us on to. If the Israelites had been able to stop and think, they would have known that they didn't really want to remain slaves for ever, but they were on a treadmill of survival, and it took radical action on God's part – using Moses – to jolt them off it.

On the Path of Renewal we are taking the time to think about what we do and why, and we are taking the time to listen for God to speak to us and lead us. We need to remember why we are here – we thought about that in Lent – we are here because of those in the past, who passed on the faith, but more importantly we are here to be a blessing and bring in God's coming kingdom in our words and deeds.

Organisationally, we seem to be in a bit of a whirlwind, (it certainly feels that way to me) as Presbytery asks us to go into a union with Laggan/St. Bride's and prepare for a linkage with Kingussie – which will mean that the minister's way of working will have to change, but not, as someone was asking, that either of our church buildings will cease to be used for regular worship, and by regular I mean weekly, if that is what we want. Organisationally it will mean changes, but that is no bad thing, as it gives us the chance to think about who we are and what we are for, and what our priorities are as we seek to be a blessing, to bring God's blessing to our community.

Jesus said that if we carry heavy burdens we should come to him, and it is a word I have to let him speak to me often. We should come to him, and remember that we are his children that he helps us, that he guides us and that he leads us, not in lazy ways, but in paths which become easy in his company.

As the Israelites scurried around tending Egyptian fields, making bricks, finding straw, constructing Egyptian buildings, they were perhaps too busy to wonder what God was up to. The Pharaoh brought in his edict against the male children, and it looked as though these people, who were seen as nobodies, were about to disappear from the face of the earth, in just two generations, wiped away in yet another Shoah. But when the cries of the slaves came to God's ear, God claimed them as his people and determined to free them from bondage and misery. They were too busy to know about Moses, growing up in the royal palace and being readied to lead them out.

The place of welcome in Egypt had become a hostile place for God's people. And we can hear echoes of this aspect of the story in our present story as well. Or once our faith was mainstream. Once, not so long ago that some of us can't remember it, people had respect for the church. If you were known to be an elder of the Kirk, for instance, it meant that you got added respect in your daily life and your business, if you had one, as well as in the church. But now, increasingly, society is hostile to the church and to people expressing their faith in any but a private way. This is truer nationally, but you can come up against it locally as well. Certainly, when people are organising events locally – daffodil walk, litter pick, bikeathon, for instance - it doesn't seem to occur to them that it might be a good idea to avoid the time when some people will be expressing their faith together in worship. I am not saying this to rail against the zeitgeist, just to remind us that the times that we live in have changed from the past. And just as God's people have always done, since the exodus, since the exile, since the early church were scattered to the four winds in persecution, we have to find a way of living our faith in the circumstances in which we find ourselves, rather than lament for the past.

We have to find a way of living our faith, not just in the privacy of our homes, as society would like, but in ways that benefit our neighbours. I am not advocating an aggressive demanding of our "rights" as Christians. There are those who do this, but I think it is counterproductive. But at the same time our faith is not valid if it is kept private, because we are not called to have holy feelings, but to follow Jesus, who brought the challenges of healing and wholeness, of feeding and clear thinking; who taught that we are to put ourselves out in loving actions for others – which you cannot always do in the privacy of your own home! So we too are on a journey, and we too are in a story, and it is the same journey and the same story that God's people have been in from the beginning of time. And we are led, not by Moses, but by Jesus, who bids us come to him and find our rest in walking his way. Amen.

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