Sermon 11th After Trinity A. 23rd August 2020

Exodus 1.8-2.10; Romans 12.1-8; Matthew 16.13-20

One of the things that the lessons that I have taken from Black Lives Matter and the whole Windrush scandal is that it is important that we know our history. And not just the history of those in charge but the history of minorities. Those who peddle racism in this country often forget that many BAME people came to this country in response to a labour shortage in the post war era. In our first reading from Exodus, we have another example of the past being forgotten. A new pharaoh has come to the throne in Egypt and he knows nothing of the story of Joseph and of how the Israelites came to live in Egypt. And like many tyrants since then he decides to blame this minority for the ills of his nation and treats them as second class citizens.

But this story is not really about pharaoh. It’s about a group of remarkable, subversive women who find ways to fight the patriarchy. There are not that many stories about women in the Bible but this is one of the best. Too often, they are just given walk on parts and frequently they go unnamed. But in this story, we are told the names of some of the women involved and that that’s often a sign that people are doing something important.

The first two important women are Shiphrah and Puah. Like all midwives they have devoted themselves to bringing new life into the world. Pharaoh commanded them to kill every Hebrew boy that was born but they disobeyed him. Though pharaoh was thought of as a living deity and had absolute power, these women ignored his instructions and pretended that they never got to the births of the Israelite babies in time. The midwives feared God more than they feared pharaoh and God blessed them for their courage.

And then we have the story of Moses, one of those Hebrew boys. According to rabbinic literature, his mother’s name was Jochebed. And like any mother, she was tenacious in trying to preserve the life of her son. She hid him in that famous Moses basket in the reeds and set his older sister Miriam to keep an eye on him. And then pharaoh’s daughter came to the river to bathe. Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions give the princess many names. All three traditions bless her for preserving Moses’ life. She knew that he was a Hebrew baby. She knew that her father had ordered that such boys should be killed. But she used her limited power as a princess to save him. Moses’ sister Miriam was quick to make the most of the situation. She offered to go and find a wet nurse for the child. And so Moses’ mother ended up being paid to bring up her own child, something that many are still campaigning for today. Moses’ life was spared and he went on to lead the exodus, a defining event in Jewish history.

This story of seemingly powerless women subverting the system is an interesting contrast to our Gospel reading. Jesus asks the disciples who people say that he is. And they come up with a variety of responses. Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ And then Jesus asks the disciples who they say he is. And Peter comes straight back with the answer, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’ He is right on the money. And Jesus praises him for his faith and insight. And he names Simon Peter, Peter, the rock on which he will build the church. And he gives him the keys to the kingdom of heaven.

And part of us wants to say, hang on a minute, this is Peter. The one who keeps putting his foot in it. The one who will deny Jesus three times. He is the rock? Can that be right? A whole system of power and influence, money and buildings has been built on this rock. But I suspect that none of those things were in the minds of Jesus or of Peter when those words were first uttered. Jesus knew Peter’s shortcomings. He knew that Peter would let him down. But he also knew that Peter had moments of huge faith and would ultimately follow him to the cross, and it was on these things that the church was to be built. In many ways, Peter stands for all of us. We all have times of doubt, times when we let Jesus down. But like Peter we have moments too when the clouds seem to clear and faith suddenly comes alive and that’s enough for Jesus. He can work with that just as he worked with Peter.

Peter is a reminder that we are called, warts and all to follow Jesus. And use the gifts that we have been given in his service. Paul, in his letter to the Romans, exhorts us to present ourselves as living sacrifices. And warns us not to be conformed to this world. Not to live by its standards of racism or sexism or any other sort of ism. But to see ourselves as God sees us. With sober judgement. Paul warns us not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought. And too often those words have been used by the powerful to keep others in their places. Perhaps they should be addressed to some of the people who are currently in power who seem to have a sense of entitlement but perhaps lack the gifts they really need. That work of self-examination goes both ways. Some may need to develop a bit of humility while others may need a bit more self-confidence so that they can take their rightful place in the church and in the world. They need building up not taking down.

As Paul says, like the parts of the body, we all have different gifts. And it is important that each one of us uses those gifts to the full. If we only use the gifts of a few people we are disabled as a church, as a nation and as a planet. As a church, I hope that we can model a way of working in which all can use their gifts. Where those without power do not have to subvert the system as the women around Moses had to. And where those who have power, as Peter ultimately did, are allowed to express vulnerability and make mistakes. We are all members of the one body and all of us have a part to play. Amen.