

ADDRESS 27 August 2017 12th Sunday after Pentecost Refugee Sunday

Exodus 1.8 – 2.10	Birth of Moses
Psalms 124	Thanksgiving for deliverance
Romans 12.1-8	The new life in Christ
Matthew 16. 13-20	Peter's confession of faith

Lord, grant that we may always find more light and more truth in your holy word. AMEN

Outside the high seasons of the church year, leading up to Easter and Christmas, the three readings the lectionary chooses for our Communion services each Sunday aren't intended to relate to each other -- each reading speaks for itself. But because the whole Bible is about God's loving relationships with his people, sometimes the readings do connect in some way, as they do today. When they do, the preacher gives special thanks to God for making the sharing of the Word just a little easier.

The connection in today's readings is summed up in the hymn we sang earlier, *This is a day of new beginnings*. Each of today's readings is about new beginnings – and each has something to say about God's saving grace and our response.

Our first long reading begins by telling us about the Hebrew people being enslaved by a Pharaoh who did not know how they had come to Egypt generations earlier. They were, of course, refugees, escaping from famine in their homeland, and they were probably not the only extended family from Canaan to seek refuge in Egypt. The second part of the reading records a new beginning for the Hebrew people, the birth of the one who would lead them from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land. This child was condemned to die, but God sent a deliverer, an unlikely deliverer, the daughter of the man who had condemned him to death, along with all the other boys born to the Hebrew slaves. In Hebrew, the reading ends with a play on words— *mashah*, to pull out, *Mosheh*, pulled out of the water, the name we Anglicise as Moses.

There is an obvious parallel here with the story of our deliverer, the Son of God, who was born to deliver us from the double curse of sin and death, as Paul puts it in an earlier chapter of his letter to the church in Rome. (Romans 8.2). And the story of the Exodus can be seen as a parable of our own deliverance from the slavery of love of self to the freedom of love of God and love for others. Sometimes it is a long, slow journey, just as the original Exodus was, because we do not always want to follow the example and the teaching of our Deliverer.

As always, the Psalm is chosen to help us respond to the message of the first reading – *Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth*. In my edition of the Bible this Psalm is headed *Thanksgiving for God's deliverance* and that's a good title, because most of us don't take

enough time to thank God for our deliverance, and for the blessings He has given us, beginning with the blessing of life itself.

Our second reading continues our series from Paul's letter to the Romans. These verses are the start of a new section in Paul's letter – in the first eleven chapters, Paul expounds and defends his Christology, his teachings about the righteous judgments of God, about justification, sanctification and election, about the law and sin and much more. '*Therefore*', he says, '*therefore, be transformed by the renewing of your minds*'. Because of what God has done for us, through Christ, we need to leave our sins behind and make a new beginning as a child of God.

Some of us are uncomfortable with hearing sermons about sin: perhaps we think we are being personally accused of the sins condemned in the 10 commandments – murder, and adultery, and stealing, the big S sins, and we plead 'not guilty'.

But it's hard to accept that we are probably all guilty of the primary sin, the sin of not putting God first in all that we say and do, in how we use our time and our money– we have not always loved God with all our heart and our soul and our mind and our strength; we have not taken advantage of every opportunity to worship and to help our neighbours; we have often made decisions only on the basis of what we think is best for us. Yet Paul says, in his letter to the Romans, *there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*. And he includes himself, as I do, and we all must do, if we are honest to God, and to ourselves.

There is no essential difference between big S sins and little S sins, between what the Catholic catechism calls mortal sins and venial sins -- the Biblical teaching is that *whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it*. The quote comes from the 2nd chapter of the letter of James. (Js 2.10) To fail in any point is to fail in love, and the whole divine law is summed up in the command to love. We shall be reminded of this in our epistle reading in two weeks' time

In chapter 12 of this epistle, Paul moves from Christology to personal morality: he begins to write about Christianity in practice, what making a new beginning as a redeemed child of God involves – it means refusing to be conformed to the standards of this world, literally, to the standards of the age; it involves humility, it involves accepting difference, it involves acknowledging the varied gifts that other people have, and working together, in the church and in the community, to do the will of God.

Today, in particular, we are called to acknowledge what refugees and other migrants have given to this community and to pray for their welfare and to take every opportunity to make them welcome. Whether people have come to Australia as refugees, fleeing persecution, or as economic migrants, looking for a better life, as most of our own ancestors did, they have all had to make a

new beginning, often a difficult beginning – finding work, finding a home, perhaps learning a new language, adjusting to new customs, and learning to live with people whose cultures and beliefs may be quite different from those of their home countries. Some newcomers fail, because they cannot accept that a nation, too, has many members, and that not all the members are alike. Sadly, some even turn to violence against the people who have given them a new beginning, to express their anger that other people see things so differently. And some become angry because they feel misunderstood and rejected.

Paul reminds us that personal differences are to be valued, and that we should never see ourselves as being better than other people. This is “*thinking with sober judgment*”, in our translation, but the meaning is stronger than this. Paul uses a word meaning ‘*in our right minds*’. This is the same word that both Mark and Luke use when they record how Jesus drove the evil spirits out of a man into a herd of swine, which then rushed down the hillside into the Sea of Galilee and were drowned. Later the people saw the man sitting at the feet of Jesus, ‘*clothed and in his right mind*’. Thinking with sober judgment. If we think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think, if we think that our opinions or our way of life are naturally superior to everyone else’s, we are not in our right minds, we are crazy, if you like, and our judgment will be warped.

Paul then speaks of seven gifts given to people in the church. They are all different, but they are all God’s gifts, and they are all important, just as the parts of our body are all different, but they are all important. As we grow older, we all seem to have various doctors patching up our bits and pieces, but we don’t all have the same medical problems, thankfully.

Our Gospel reading, too, speaks of new beginnings. When Peter declares his faith in Jesus as the long-expected Messiah, the Christ, Jesus appears to commend him by telling him that because of this confession, he will become the foundation of the new community, the church, the people called out for a special purpose. This is the derivation of the word *ekklesia*, the people called out, called out to form Jesus’ new post-Resurrection body, to continue his ministry on earth.

The three verses recording Jesus’ commendation are a problem for some scholars -- they are not in the parallel passages in the gospels according to Mark and Luke; the word *ekklesia* is not found anywhere in the Gospels except in this chapter; and, after the day of Pentecost, the Biblical story of the growth of the infant church gives a much more important place to Paul than it gives to Peter.

So, in the second or third century, as the bishops of Rome fought for more and more authority over the other bishops in the Roman empire, were these verses inserted into the text before any of the surviving copies were made? Of course, we don’t know, but these verses are the foundation of the claim the Roman Catholic church made for centuries that it was the only true church, the

only church built upon the witness and work of the apostle Peter. The claim was quietly abandoned in 1964 when one of the key documents of the Second Vatican Council (*Lumen Gentium*) was rewritten before it was promulgated.

Some Protestant scholars have a more inclusive interpretation: that Jesus is saying that it is the truth that Peter confessed, that Jesus is the Messiah, this is the *petra*, the giant rock, on which the church is to be built, not Peter himself. To honour his confession, Jesus gives him his new name, *petros*, which is the masculine form of the same word. Another play on words, in the original text.

Yet Jesus is then recorded as saying he would give Peter himself the keys of the kingdom of heaven and there are other interpretations of this passage as well, from Orthodox scholars and others. But surely the most important point is that Peter's confession marks a new beginning – the very next verse, after today's reading, confirms that the ministry of the *ekklesia* is to replace Jesus' personal ministry, for Jesus is destined for the Cross.

The next verse says, *From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.* This verse will be the beginning of our Gospel reading next week. So Jesus' question and Peter's declaration of faith is the turning point of Jesus' ministry, as told in the Synoptic gospels.

Our most important new beginning is when we make the same confession of faith, when we turn from self and turn to God.

As the hymn says, every day we gather to share in the holy communion can be a day of new beginnings. The exhortation in the Book of Common Prayer puts it well: *Ye that do truly and earnestly repent you of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbours, and intend to lead a new life, following the commandments of God and walking from henceforth in his holy ways; draw near with faith . . .* regular communion is important, because each communion service gives us the opportunity of making a new beginning, by confessing our sins and receiving the assurance of God's forgiveness. This gives us the strength to keep living the life of love.

But we don't have to wait for our next communion to make a new beginning: every day can be a day of new beginnings, *a day to remember and move on, a time to remember what love is bringing, laying to rest the pain that is gone.* We cannot wipe out all the hurt we have caused other people by our sin, by our falling short in love; we cannot wipe out all the hurt other people have caused us, by their sin, but we can move on, in hope and faith and love, sharing in the ministry of our *ekklesia* and supported by our faith in Jesus the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. Let us pray for the grace to be transformed, today and every day. #