

## **EXODUS 2:1-10**

### **ST JOHN'S, 26.3.17, 9.30 am**

#### **INTRODUCTION: MOTHERHOOD**

As it's Mothering Sunday, I thought I'd begin with a few quotes about mothers and motherhood.

I'm sure we've all heard this Jewish proverb before: "God couldn't be everywhere and therefore he made mothers." It was Oscar Wilde who said: "All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That's his." I like this one, from novelist Lisa Alther: "Any mother could perform the jobs of several air-traffic controllers with ease." But this is my favourite: "The joy of motherhood: what a woman experiences when all the children are finally in bed."

In the passage we heard from Exodus, there are two mother-figures: Moses' birth mother, Jochebed; and Pharaoh's daughter. We're going to think about them both.

We're also going to think a little about those things which make Mothering Sunday a difficult day for some of us. As we consider the situation in which God's people found themselves here, it might help us to come to terms with our own pain and heartache.

#### **JOCHEBED, MOSES' BIRTH MOTHER**

Moses wasn't Jochebed's first child. Moses' sister, Miriam, is obviously several years older than her baby brother, and there was also Moses' brother Aaron, who was three years older than he.

When Moses was three months old, Jochebed was in an impossible position. She couldn't keep Moses hidden any more, but she couldn't bear to obey Pharaoh's command, and throw her own son into the Nile. Jochebed was nothing if not resourceful and bold. She obeyed the letter of the law by committing her child to the river. But first she gave him all the protection she could. She made a miniature boat, a little bit like a Welsh coracle. She chose her spot on the river very carefully: the tall grass, or reeds, would grow in shallow water, so there wouldn't be much of a current to carry the boat away, and there would be less danger of a crocodile finding a tasty meal; the reeds would also provide some protection from the heat of the sun. And the shallows of a river near to a village was where local women would come to wash clothes, to prepare food, or to bathe - a place where Moses was sure to be found and well cared for.

But it must have been a terrifying time for Jochebed. If she'd been caught, she would have suffered an extremely unpleasant punishment. She didn't know who would find her baby, and whether they'd dare to care for him, even if they were able to do so. We can imagine her faith growing in leaps and bounds as she saw how the Lord took care of her son when she wasn't able to, and how he even arranged for Moses to come home to his birth family for the next few years!

#### **PHARAOH'S DAUGHTER, MOSES' ADOPTIVE MOTHER**

Like Jochebed and Miriam, Pharaoh's daughter was a remarkable woman. She came from a savage and heartless family. Her father was an absolute monarch who hated and feared the Hebrews, and had

commanded that their sons be annihilated and their daughters enslaved. But his daughter was compassionate, tender-hearted and maternal. At the same time, she had no hesitation in going against her father's wishes, and not only saving one of the Hebrew babies, but adopting him as her own son.

When this princess found the basket containing the baby Moses, he was crying and she felt sorry for him. Sturdy boy babies were too precious to be thrown to the mercy of the river. She recognised that he was one of the Hebrew babies, but she didn't react as her father would have done, and throw him into the Nile. Instead, she took measures to make sure that he was properly cared for. From that moment, Moses was under the powerful protection of the royal family. When he was old enough, which might have been as much as five years later, Jochebed took him to the princess, and she adopted him as her own. And so Pharaoh's own daughter ensured that Moses not only had her protection, but that he received the best education available, and came to understand the workings of the Egyptian court. She also instilled in him her own values of care and compassion, and ensured that he grew up like her, feeling the feelings of others.

### **THE LORDS' SECRET, CEASELESS CARE**

In all this we can see the secret, ceaseless care of the Lord God. He was caring for individuals, like Moses and his family, and he was caring for the Hebrew nation as a whole. The Lord had brought his people down to Egypt for a purpose: while they were there, they grew into a great nation, and by the time they left, they had many possessions to

take with them. The time was coming for them to get out of Egypt, and so the Lord carefully chose a human leader. He made sure that Moses was kept safe; he arranged for him to learn not only the history of his own people, but also the history and culture of their Egyptian overlords. By the time Moses was ready to go and demand that Pharaoh let God's people go, he was in a unique position to take on that role.

For the people of Israel, their years as Egyptians slaves must have been agonising. They didn't only have to withstand the oppression and misery of their treatment at the hands of the Egyptians; they must also have been questioning why the Lord seemed to have abandoned them. There was no outward sign of God fulfilling his promise to take them back to Canaan. If anything, things just went from bad to worse: hard labour, then slavery, then the killing of their sons. Where on earth was God in all this?

It's only with the benefit of hindsight, that we can see the secret, ceaseless care of the Lord God for his people. We can also see how God overruled Pharaoh. Despite all Pharaoh's efforts, the Hebrews' spirits weren't crushed, they kept on increasing in number, and their little boys weren't all killed. But for God's people, caught in the midst of unendurable suffering for a generation or more, it must have felt as if the Lord had abandoned them and forgotten about them.

### **CONCLUSION**

I said at the beginning that we were going to think about the difficult and painful aspects of motherhood. Today must be very difficult for people who didn't have a good relationship with their own mother; for

people who maybe never even knew their own mother; for people whose mother has died; for mothers who've lost a child; and for women who've not been able to have their own children. It's tempting at times to wonder where God is in all this. How can he abandon people, forget about them and leave them to suffer such pain? Why doesn't he do something to ease the pain, to prevent the tragedy?

Often, of course, the Lord does do something. There was a young woman in the congregation at Halewood, who had two children, having been told she'd never have any. But what the Lord doesn't do is to explain himself. We don't know why some of God's people endure poverty or persecution, while we live very comfortable lives. We don't know why some believers are healed of disease or disability when they pray about it, and others aren't. We don't know why some women have so many children they don't know what to do, while others can't even conceive once. We'd possibly not find it so hard to accept, if only the Lord would tell us why it has to be like this. But despite our persistent questions, the only answer we're likely to get is the answer the Lord gave Job: "Who are you to question my wisdom with your ignorant, empty words?" (Job 38:2).

What we do know is that the Lord cares about every single tear we shed; he cares about every injustice, every insult, every pain we bear. Just as he promised to go down to Egypt and remain there with his people in the good times and the bad times, so he's promised that he will be us always, to the very end of the age. And we know that, no matter how dark our lives seem, no matter how much we're suffering,

no matter how meaningless it all appears to be, the Lord is constantly at work, building his kingdom, in our lives and in the lives of all his people. *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose* (Romans 8:28). Like the Hebrews in Egypt, we won't get the explanation we crave. But if we put our trust in the Lord, and in his promises, if we can exercise a patient faith, the time will come when we'll be able to see the Lord's hand at work in all the circumstances of our lives, including the painful and difficult relationships and responses which a day like Mothering Sunday can stir up in us. On that day, not only will all suffering come to an end, but we'll be able to see the Lord's secret, ceaseless care, through every incidence in our lives, both as individuals, and as the whole people of God.