

Prayer

These devotions are for Sunday, 23rd August 2020. 25th August is the feast day of St Ebbe. She is a saint venerated in Oxfordshire and appears to be a rare example from the south of England of an abbess (a female abbot), something more common among the Celtic Christians of Northumbria.

We begin with a prayer associated with St Ebbe:

Shine on us, Lord,
like the sun that lights up day.
As day follows night,
chase away the dark and all shadow of sin.
May we wake eager to hear your Word.
As day follows night may we be bathed in your glory.¹

[Exodus 1:8-2:10](#)

One of the most heart-breaking aspects of my late father’s final years spent in the uncongenial company of Alzheimer’s Disease was the loss of his memory. There were other distressing symptoms too, not least the loss of his ability to know when he was hungry or thirsty. But to have conversations where he couldn’t remember what you’d said a few sentences earlier was certainly painful.

Thankfully, like many dementia sufferers, his long-term memory remained – even if that memory seemed to concentrate on the pranks he got up to at grammar school.

The conflict at the beginning of Exodus between Pharaoh’s Egypt and the Israelites is a lot to do with memory versus forgetting. We read that ‘

a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt’ (verse 8).

We don’t know how long this is after Joseph had rescued Egypt from famine, but this failure of memory is catastrophic. Had the new Pharaoh known and remembered this, it seems less likely that he would have engaged in the racist scaremongering he uses to whip up populist feeling against the Israelites, and which sadly has too many resonances today:

⁹ ‘Look,’ he said to his people, ‘the Israelites have become far too numerous for us. ¹⁰ Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or

they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country.'

So the Israelites are first of all made slaves (with echoes of what would come in Roman Empire and the British Empire) (1:11-14) and then Pharaoh orders the killing of the baby boys (you can't help think of Nazi Germany) (1:15-16).

Failure to remember can have brutal consequences. Pharaoh doesn't know who he is, as a successor to the predecessor who elevated Joseph. He doesn't know his nation, as one that had been thankful for Joseph. He doesn't know Joseph's people, the Israelites. Without that restraining and directing memory, state-sanctioned violence explodes against the Israelites.

No wonder the poet Steve Turner wrote a short poem entitled 'History Lesson'. It says:

History
Repeats itself.
Has to.
No-one listens.²

Not only that, Turner dots that poem about four times in the book in which it originally appears.

What, though, if you remember your history, your identity, and most of all, the working of God in your personal and corporate past? Then you are in a better place, or you will be.

For this remembering is what Israel did, and there are hints of it in the way our inspired author writes this part of Exodus.

You may say that Israel is not in a good place, suffering slavery and an attempted slaughter of male innocents. But hold that judgment while we explore the text, and you may see that even though things are not looking good at this point, there are enough hints here that the Israelites' remembering opens them up to the work of God, who has seemed to be silent or even absent.

It's there right from the very beginning of Exodus. I know we started at chapter 1 verse 8 but if we had begun at chapter 1 verse 1, there is a Hebrew word missing from most English translations. In Hebrew, Exodus starts with the word 'And'.

Now that only makes sense if the author is saying that this is a continuation of what has gone before, namely Genesis, with its stories of the patriarchs, from Abraham to Jacob and his sons, especially Joseph, who saved Egypt (but whom this Pharaoh forgot). And before the patriarchs there is what many call the ‘proto-history’ from creation through the Fall to the Flood and the Tower of Babel.

‘And’ tells us that the Exodus story is linked back to all of that.

Why is that important? Because it locates the Israelites within the great story of God and of his purposes. Their destiny is to become a great nation with a land of their own, but at this point they are nowhere near that. In fact, Jacob and his family had to leave the Promised Land to come to Egypt in order to survive.

And remembering you are part of the great story of God and his purposes is something that brings hope to all God’s people. The Israelites may feel they are off course here and in the wrong place, not least when this Pharaoh begins his campaign of persecution against them. But the sovereign God is still in charge, and he has not abandoned his good plans for them.

Does that help you when you are down or despairing? It does me. There are many days and seasons when the last thing I want to be is a Methodist minister. It may be the relentless effect of church decline, it may be a protracted time of feeling that people just don’t get my vision, decisions of the Methodist Conference may dismay me, or occasionally it may be real nastiness in the church, and I tell God that I’d rather be almost anything than a Methodist minister. But never have I sensed the liberty to move on. This is where he led me all those years ago and being here is part of the bigger story in which he has placed me.

If you are presently living in a place where you don’t want to be, whether that’s physical, emotional, relational, or something else, take a look at God’s story and purposes in your past. How did you come to here? Was God in it? Be assured he is not absent. It may not be ideal and at some point (just like the Israelites) the time to move on will come, but in the meantime you are still part of God’s story.

So what to do in the meantime? There’s no doubt that the Israelites were doing: they were having babies. They were fulfilling the creation mandate in

Genesis chapter 1 to go forth and multiply in order to fill the earth and subdue it. Again, they exhibit a remembering of their place in the story of God.

Am I suggesting this is what we should all be doing? Obviously not! There are some for whom that is the call, some for whom it is not possible, and some for whom that time has been and gone. Indeed, the great Swiss Christian theologian of a century ago, Karl Barth, said that the command to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth had been fulfilled.

But I am saying that while we wait in circumstances that may not always be to our liking for God to move his story on with us, what we are all called to do is to get on with the basic patterns of obedience and discipleship to which Jesus calls us. While we wait for things to resolve, there are always Christian things to be getting on with. Love, forgiveness, prayer, giving, care for the needy, times to speak about our faith, worship, and so on. There will always be some acts of Christian love and faithfulness to occupy us, whether the surroundings are pleasant or not.

What have we said so far? We dare not forget all that God has done and our place in his story. But when we do remember it, we have something that holds us firm, even in difficulty. And during that time, we get on with all the basic things that go with Christian life and witness.

Yet there's one last thing. We need a sign that the story, which has been going on since time immemorial, has a hopeful future. And our reading from Exodus has one such future sign, one which is hopeful because it picks up signals from the past.

What is that sign? It's the birth of Moses. Against all the odds of the orders to kill the Israelite baby boys, he is saved and even brought up in the royal palace, under the nose of the Pharaoh who would have had him murdered.

And it links back to the past in this way. The baby is put by his mother in a papyrus basket (2:3). The word translated 'papyrus basket' is the word used for the ark that Noah builds in Genesis. And like that ark, it is covered in bitumen.

Furthermore, just as Noah and his ark survive the flood, so the baby and the basket survive the Nile and the murderous orders of Pharaoh.

The deliverer is delivered. Salvation is coming.

How do Christians interpret this? Given that we see things through the lens of Jesus Christ, perhaps we say, 'Unto us a Son is given, unto us a Son is born.'

Jesus, the One Greater Than Moses, is our great sign of hope, not only for sins of the past being forgiven, but for life in the present and hope in the future.

When we do find ourselves in those dark, discouraging, or unjust situations, we celebrate the birth of a baby. Like Noah, he would bring deliverance from God's great flood of judgment. Like Moses, he delivers his people from the oppression of sin and of sinners.

If you are not where you want to be in life – and that's millions of us at present under COVID-19 – remember that God's great story that began so long ago is still progressing and we are part of it, even if the plot has become complicated.

Not only that, there are still godly things to be getting on with, whether others appreciate them or not.

And we place our hope in the gift of an infant who would grow up to deliver his people and the world.

Prayer

Holy Spirit, fulfil through us
the work begun by Jesus.
Invigorate our work,
subdue our natural presumptions,
raise us to humility and generous courage.
May no personal scheming
reduce our love to petty dimensions.
May all be accomplished according to the spirit
of your Son's last prayer for his Church
and through the Spirit of love
which you send to us.³

The Lord's Prayer

Blessing

God be with you whatever you pass.
Jesus be with you whatever you climb.
Spirit be with you wherever you stay.⁴

¹ Ray Simpson, *His Complete Celtic Prayers*, #340.

² Steve Turner, *Nice And Nasty*, 1979.

³ Simpson, *op. cit.*, #1182; echoes a prayer of Pope John XXIII.

⁴ Simpson, *op. cit.*, #1253.