

Sermon –Exodus 1:6-22 – 14 June 2020
The Exodus journey - Oppression

- **Introduction**

- John Olley wrote this, “Flourishing prosperity, brutal oppression, threat of genocide, bold women, a reluctant leader, hopes raised and dashed, battles between powers, a rushed meal that becomes an annual ceremony, an amazing escape, shortage of food and water, unexpected supply, awesome experiences on a mountainside, insecurity and disbelief, forgiveness and new beginnings – the book of Exodus has it all!”
- Today we start our 7 weeks journey through the book of Exodus – indeed it is a journey through the story of a journey
- In fact the background to the journey starts in the previous book of the Bible – Genesis – where we read of God’s covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15), Isaac and Jacob (Genesis 26 and 27) and then Joseph (he of the multicoloured coat (Genesis 37 to 50)
- At the end of Genesis we learn that Joseph is well established as highly regarded member of Egyptian society – his family also is settled and secure
- At the very end of Genesis – Genesis 50 there is a statement from Joseph that, “God will visit

you and bring you out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac and Jacob” – Joseph is articulating and repeating the fulfilment of God’s promise

- And so our journey continues as we move from Joseph and his family, settled in Egypt to the beginning of the story of the Exodus – a narrative that is referred to again and again in the Bible – both Old and New Testaments

- **Point 1 – Immigrants welcomed**

- We must first remember that Joseph and his family were immigrants in Egypt
- Joseph was a slave - sold into slavery by his brothers and bought by Potiphar, a captain of Pharaoh’s guard (Genesis chapters 37 and 39)
- His father and brothers were economic migrants, seeking food in the midst of a severe famine (Genesis 42 and 43)
- Because of Joseph’s favour in the eyes (see Gen 41:39-41), “Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you.’ So Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘I hereby put you in charge of the whole land of Egypt.’”
- As a result, his family was welcomed into Egypt, not just accepted but made to feel

welcomed and wanted – and they also found favour in Pharaoh’s sight too

- An imported slave and a family of economic migrants have become respected members of their host country – they are seen as contributors and are welcomed as such
- So Gen 47:5-6, 11-12, “Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Your father and your brothers have come to you, and the land of Egypt is before you; settle your father and your brothers in the best part of the land. Let them live in Goshen. And if you know of any among them with special ability, put them in charge of my own livestock.” “So Joseph settled his father and his brothers in Egypt and gave them property in the best part of the land, the district of Rameses, as Pharaoh directed. Joseph also provided his father and his brothers and all his father’s household with food, according to the number of their children.”
- These immigrants were welcomed – and not only welcomed but settled in the best of the land – food and drink aplenty
- **Application** – And so how do we welcome those who are immigrants into our community – many bring gifts and skills which bless us and our communities

- It is a particular question that is pertinent at this current time as we think through what makes the UK a place that welcomes people
- Where would we be without the contribution that those who have come to the UK as immigrants - recent or in times past – make?

Point 2 – Immigrants persecuted

- Fast forward and we see a different story – Exodus 1:8, “Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt.”
- A new ruler and a new political and social regime
- You see. the immigrants have just been **TOO** successful!, so Exodus 1:6-7 “Now Joseph and all his brothers and all that generation died, but the Israelites were exceedingly fruitful; they multiplied greatly, increased in numbers and became so numerous that the land was filled with them.”
- The immigrants have become **TOO** successful – their contribution, instead of being an economic asset is seen as a threat – so we read the Egyptian response in vv9-10, “‘Look,’ Pharaoh said to his people, ‘the Israelites have become far too numerous for us. 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.’”

- Welcome has turned to hate
- A recognition of a valued contribution makes way for fear and anxiety of being 'overwhelmed'
- What happens if they are **TOO** successful?
- What happens if they are **TOO** numerous and outnumber us?
- They will join with our enemies and fight against us
- Warm hospitality and social integration have given way to self-protectionism and racist xenophobia
- Initially this reaction leads to slavery (so verses 11-14, "So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labour, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites and worked them ruthlessly. They made their lives bitter with harsh labour in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; in all their harsh labour, the Egyptians worked them ruthlessly."
- And the end point of this will be - **genocide!** – so verses 15-16, "The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, 'When you are helping the Hebrew women during childbirth on the

delivery stool, if you see that the baby is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live.”

- Kill the male children and eventually the problem will die out – literally!
- **Application** – How does this resonate with us?
- Do we welcome “cultural diversity” until we feel threatened
- Do we even secretly think, “They are taking our jobs and our homes and our land” whoever “they” happen to be ...
- Challenging questions if we are honest
- **Point 3 – Immigrant resistance**
 - The genocide is not a forgone conclusion however...
 - We have counter-sabotage in the shape of two midwives – how unlikely is that!
 - Verses 17-19, “The midwives (Shiphrah and Puah), however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live. Then the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, ‘Why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live?’ The midwives answered Pharaoh, ‘Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive.’
 - So not only are they participating in counter-sabotage of the genocide plot of Pharaoh –

they tell him that the Hebrew women are more 'vigorous' – our wives are better than your wives! – we are even better at giving birth!

- What a come down for Pharaoh – his genocidal plot is thwarted because of two God-fearing midwives who then tell him that Hebrew women are better anyway
- **Application** – These two named midwives are the heroes of this narrative – fearing God trumps any fear of retribution from Pharaoh
- So what might stop us from standing up for the rights of the marginalised, the oppressed, the immigrant?
- Are we more fearful of God or of the earthly powers around us?

- **Conclusion**

- Exodus 1 sets the scene for the Exodus journey
- Over the next 6 weeks we will walk with Moses and the Israelites through the wilderness on to the promised land
- We will see the actions of a faithful God who acts justly, shows mercy and is true to his covenant promise to Abraham, even when the Israelites are disobedient
- Today's reading sets the scene for the journey – but it also challenges us right at the start of this journey, "How might we be more like the Hebrew midwives" – to fear God and act accordingly – to seek out and speak out against injustice and oppression.

- As the prophet Micah writes many centuries after the Exodus, in answer to the question what does God want of us, "To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."
- May we indeed do that today. Amen!