

Proper 16 Year A August 27, 2023

The book of Exodus begins with a recap of Jacob's family's exile from Canaan to Egypt because of a severe famine. Joseph at that time had become second to Pharaoh and was in a position to save his family. Pharaoh graciously allowed them and their flocks to settle in the fertile land of Goshen. Over the years, the 70 persons who entered Egypt became a multitude.

Our passage begins with a new Pharaoh who sees the Hebrews as a threat to his security. They are foreigners and in the event of war may join Egypt's enemies. In order to reduce the number of Hebrews, Pharaoh enslaves them and oppresses them with hard labor and cruel taskmasters. It doesn't work. They keep on multiplying.

What to do? Pharaoh orders the Hebrew midwives, Shiphra and Puah, to throw the newborn boys into the Nile but let the girls live. But the Midwives fear God and disobey the King, giving him a lame excuse. There have been other times when it has been more righteous to obey God rather than the authorities. In Nazi Germany would you have hidden Jews from the Nazi's despite the danger to yourself? I would hope so.

Where is God in this turn of events? Into the midst of this situation a Levite man marries a Levite woman and she gives birth to a son. She hid him for 3 months. When she could no longer hide him, she lined a papyrus basket with pitch, put the baby in it and placed it among the reeds on the riverbank. His sister watched over him.

Just at this time Pharaoh's daughter comes to the Nile and sees the basket and the boy. He was crying and she took pity on him. His sister offered to get a wetnurse (who just happened to be the child's mother). Not only is the boy's life saved but when he is weaned, Pharaoh's daughter adopts him and names him Moses. This is Moses who will lead the Hebrews out of Egypt and into the land promised to Abraham and his descendants.

No matter how awful or hopeless the situation in your life seems, God is always working behind the scenes to save life and keep his promises.

Have you ever thought of washing the dishes, feeding the birds or walking the dog as giving worship to God? Do we only worship God in chapel or privately in our cells?

In his letter to the Romans, Paul calls us to present our bodies to God as a living sacrifice...which is our spiritual worship. The gentiles to whom he is writing would have been horrified. They regarded the body as a prison house for the spirit or the intellect and it was to be despised. Paul was a Hebrew and because of that matter (including our bodies) was not evil or a hindrance to the spirit. In fact he says that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit helps us to discern the will of God.

How can we tell what true worship looks like? Barclay says that real worship is the offering of our everyday life to God. To do this requires a radical change. God desires that we not conform to the world with its divisions, judgements or self-righteousness. We are to be transformed by the grace of the Holy Spirit. Our minds need to be renewed. To this end, within the Community of believers, Paul encourages us to be careful in comparing ourselves to others. We must not be self-centered but Christ centered.

Next Paul compares the Christian community to the body. First we give our bodies to God, then with others we are the body of Christ. He does this elsewhere in First Corinthians. We have gifts that differ from each other by the grace of God. To quote Paul "for as in one body we have many members and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many are one body in Christ and individually members of one another". There are no useless members of the body of Christ. Each of us has a purpose. Let us give true worship to God and true service to one another.

Now we come to the Gospel reading. What is the most important question Jesus could ask you? This is what he asks his disciples in this passage from Matthew's Gospel. It is near the end of his time with them and he wants to know whether or not they understand who he is so that they can continue his mission in the world. They are at Caesarea Philippi- a gentile city filled with Pagan temples and Roman administrative buildings.

The disciples have been with Jesus almost three years. They have witnessed his healings, casting out of demons and other miracles. They have heard his teaching. He asks the disciples who people say the Son of Man is. They tell him some people think he is one of the prophets like Jeremiah or Elijah. Others think he might be John the Baptist. Then he asked them the crucial question. Who do you say that I am? Peter speaks first (of course he does). He says you are the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Jesus tells Peter that this has been revealed to him by "my Father in Heaven". This addresses Peter calling him a rock. It's a play on words. In the Bible God is often called the rock. St. Augustine thought that Jesus was the rock. Peter's name means rock in Aramaic. Jesus says that on this rock he will build his church.

This statement opens up a world of contention between Roman Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox believers. What does it mean? Is Peter the first Pope, the head of the institution? Or is the church founded on Peter's belief that Jesus is the Christ? Jesus says the church will be attacked by all sides, but its enemies will not prevail against it. Finally, Jesus bestows on Peter the power to bind or loose in Heaven what he does on earth. Peter is the steward of the Kingdom of God. It's all very confusing.

I think Barclay has the best interpretation. "It is that Peter himself is the rock, but in a special sense. He is not the rock on which the church is founded; that rock is God. He is the first stone in the foundation of the whole church.

Peter was the first man on earth to discover who Jesus was; he was the first man to make the leap of faith and see in him the son of the living God.

"In other words, Peter was the first member of the church, and in that sense the whole church is built on him". It is as if Jesus said to Peter, you are the first man to grasp who I am, you are therefore the first stone, the foundation stone, the very beginning of the church I am founding. And in ages to come, everyone who makes the same discovery as Peter is another stone added into the edifice of the church of Christ."

Who do you say Jesus is? A martyred hero from the past? Or an inspirational teacher, or a mystic, or a miracle worker? These descriptions seem inadequate. For Jesus to redeem all humanity he must be not only human but divine.