

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

Exodus 1:8 – 2:10

What you do this week could possibly change the world

Here's a thought... What you do this week, could possibly change the world.

That may sound rather fanciful, but it seems to me that we're here for a purpose. This is God's world, and God has brought us to this time and place, with our different gifts and talents, with our various experiences and resources, to share in God's purposes. I don't believe that God has our lives mapped out for us, but I do believe that God has an intention for us – that God is working through us, through the circumstances of our lives, to fulfil things that may be beyond our imaginings.

When we were baptised, we were given a work to do. It's called ministry, and the purpose of this ministry is to continue Jesus' servant ministry by witnessing to God's reconciling love and bringing in the kingdom of God. In other words, we're here to make a difference – to be agents of God's transforming love – to be instruments of healing and new life, of peace and justice.

We tend to minimise the impact we can have, so I invite us to think about the story told in the first reading. Here are some women who took some seemingly small but compassionate and courageous decisions that influenced the course of human history. These women were prepared to defy one of the most powerful leaders of the time, and by their acts of disobedience, God was able to save a people from oppression, even annihilation.

The closing chapters of Genesis tell the story of Joseph and his family. Sold into slavery, Joseph eventually became second only to Pharaoh in Egypt and saved the nation in time of severe famine. He, his family, and his people, were rewarded for their service, but then, as the Book of Exodus opens, we hear of the rise of a new Pharaoh who knew nothing of Joseph and what he had achieved. This new Pharaoh was doing something that politicians have done down the centuries – that they do today. He identifies a scapegoat to blame for whatever current problems plague society. There are always identifiable groups who seem different to the mainstream – groups who are liable to become scapegoats for our fears. This time it's the ancient Israelites. They had achieved most-favoured immigrant status in Egypt, but now they're fingered by a Pharaoh as possible terrorists, "Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land."

Pharaoh tries three different strategies to stem the growth of the Israelites. First, he forces them into slave labour. Yet, the more the Israelites are oppressed, the more they multiply. So, Pharaoh resorts to darker means. He tells the Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, to kill all the Hebrew baby boys that are born, but not the girls. Ironically, Pharaoh sees no threat from Israelite females, yet it's females who begin his undoing. The midwives' vocation is to bring new life into the world. Pharaoh demands that they deny their vocation and kill. In the Bible's first act of civil disobedience and nonviolent resistance for the sake of justice, the midwives refuse to obey Pharaoh's order. They lie to the authorities, breaking the law for the sake of justice and life. They explain to Pharaoh, "the Hebrew women just give birth too quickly before we can get there!"

In the process of saving infant lives, the midwives protect the birth of a special child who will become the eventual leader of Israel and will lead the people to freedom. As we see repeatedly in the Bible, God uses what the power-hungry Pharaohs of the world consider as low and despised, as instruments to shame and overthrow the arrogant and the strong.

Frustrated in his efforts, Pharaoh ratchets up the pressure, commanding all his people to throw every Hebrew boy that is born into the Nile – “but you shall let every girl live.” Having discounted the females as no threat to him, three more women come to the fore, challenging Pharaoh’s commands.

Some of the famous women in the Hebrew Scriptures are named and described in some detail, such as Ruth and Deborah. But at this point Moses’ mother is anonymous, though later we learn her name: Jochebed. She, like the midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, are the unsung heroes whose courage and compassion change the world, but whose identities are virtually unknown. Few of us are like Moses or Deborah, but there are many among us who are Jochebeds, Shiphrahs, and Puahs.

Now, Jochebed sends her son floating down the river in a basket, and by chance (though the narrator sees God’s hand at work), Pharaoh’s daughter is bathing in the river when the tiny basket floats by. Moses’ sister, Miriam, anxiously watches. She sees as Pharaoh’s daughter recognises Moses as one of the Hebrew children and, instead of obeying her father’s orders, assures his well-being and eventually adopts him as her own son.

It’s a story loaded with irony. Pharaoh allows the Hebrew girls to live because he sees them as no threat. Yet women of different cultures and generations come together to change the course of history through their courageous acts of civil disobedience. Each said, “no” to injustice. Each said, “yes” to compassion. I doubt if they thought they were changing the world. But they were, simply by being faithful – by following the dictates of their hearts and heeding the call of conscience.

We can never know the impact a small but compassionate act can have. It’s the butterfly effect – the idea that a minute localised event can have large outcomes far away. A small act here can create significant and unforeseen ripples across time and space to affect the lives of countless others.

Who knows what effect you can have this week on others – what influence you’ve had in the past. The comment made in passing, the email you sent, the time you spent with a stranger, the deed you performed, the challenge you offered, the stand you took.

The things we do this week – our actions and words, decisions, and choices – can ripple out with unforeseen consequences, which can be for either good or for ill. The question isn’t whether, but what. What will we do this week to make a difference in the world? Some of these actions may be big, bold, and brave. Most will be seemingly small, hardly noticeable. Yet, they all have the potential to ripple out, affecting countless lives. In this story it’s Shiphrah and Puah, Jochebed, Miriam, and Pharaoh’s daughter. Who might it be this week? Paul, in the second reading, says that we all are members of the body of Christ, each with different gifts, yet all one in faith and with the same potential for God to use us to change the world.

So, I wonder, how might you act knowing that what you do this week could change the world?

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