

May I speak in the name of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

We had our god-daughter staying with us the week before last. We had a lovely time. She just joined in with all the things that we do in the course of the week, so she came to my yoga class on Thursday morning. Just in passing, let me say that it's not actually a very good idea to take a very bendy, young woman to a yoga class. She was on the mat next to me making me feel even more wooden than normal. Halfway through the class our instructor asked a question that I hardly noticed. She asked the class, "Who are you?" I didn't notice because I was concentrating on keeping my downward facing dog facing downward, but my god-daughter who had no such problem was very taken by this question.

She came out, and she was all flustered. "What did she mean who am I? What does it mean to be me? Who am I?" That's actually a question that's occupied philosophers for centuries. One of the characteristics of modern thinking is a dismantling of this traditional sense of self, which is why we often hear in contemporary culture the crisis of identity. It's not just my god-daughter, for whom the answer to the question, "Who are you" is not immediately obvious, which makes the reading set for today all the more relevant.

The theme, I think, which holds the gospel and that Old Testament reading together is identity. That's easier to see in the gospels where Jesus says to the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?", but it's a key question in the whole Bible. That in the gospel is the key moment on which the whole gospel pivots. Once the divine identity of Jesus is revealed, then the gospel takes a different turn and Jesus heads towards Jerusalem. I won't say any more about that, because I want to talk about the Old Testament reading, from the beginning of Exodus. We'll be staying in the book of Exodus and the story of Moses over these next few weeks on Sunday mornings as the readings are coming up in our Lectionary.

The book of Exodus is one of the most important books of the Bible. It provides much of the vocabulary and shape and imagery of the New Testament. The reason it's so important is that it's in the book of Exodus where the identity of God is revealed, and also the identity of his people is formed. What I want to do in this sermon is reflect on what that reading we had from Exodus says about the subject of identity.

First, let's think about what the book of Exodus tells us about the identity of God. As we go through the book of Exodus, we'll see that it's a great story of salvation and redemption. It begins in chapter one with the people of Israel in slavery in Egypt. We go on as we go through the book to hear how God raises up Moses, who leads them to the promised land. In the rest of the Old Testament God is defined by this great act of redemption. Over and over again we hear the refrain, "I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt." That's how God is named, that's how he's happy to identify himself.

We read in Exodus, I mean Leviticus, "I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt, so that you would be no longer slaves to the Egyptians. I broke the bars of your yoke and enabled you to walk with your heads held high." Do you remember how the ten commandments begin? "I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt out of the land of slavery." That refrain appears again and again and again. God is identified in Exodus as the one who redeems, the one who has acted to rescue his people from slavery. That's how God is to be known. Redemption is a technical word that's used in reference to the purchase of a slave's freedom. When a slave was freed, they were redeemed.

Before going any further I want to just pause and say something about how it came to be that the people of Israel were enslaved in the first place in Egypt. There's a clue in the opening sentence of our reading. "Now a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph." This is the selfsame Joseph we heard about in last week's reading, the one whose father gave him a colorful coat, or the amazing technicolor dream coat according to Andrew Lloyd Webber, the one who was chased out of his home by his brothers. He ended up in Egypt, and if you read the story in Genesis he ends up as prime minister of Egypt. Then as the story we heard last week in our Old Testament reading was when his family came to him because of the famine in their homeland. Joseph, who is now a high ranking government minister takes them in and says, "Well, come and live with me in Egypt, and that's how we'll survive this famine, as a family."

The passage that we have today picks up the same story of Joseph and his descendants, but 400 years have passed between the two. By this time, this new kind has forgotten who Joseph was, and the descendants of Joseph have grown dramatically, even to such an extent that they're now seen as a threat to

the native Egyptians. After hundreds of years of living quietly in Egypt, the descendants of Joseph come to be oppressed and enslaved. Now, we're talking about God's chosen people here. They might've been thinking to themselves, "Well, what have we done wrong? Has God forgotten us?" Those would've been legitimate questions. Indeed, there might be people here, many of us will have asked those similar questions. What we see in this story is that God hasn't forgotten his people. He did redeem them, but in his own time.

God was working his purposes out, even though it might not have looked like that at the time to the people of Israel. Perhaps with hindsight we can see the situation more as God might've seen it, by waiting 400 years the people of Israel emerged as a people and not just a family. One family became a mighty nation, and because they were slaves in Egypt they kept an identity different to the Egyptians. God was working in his own way and in his own time.

We should also note from this story that God was working his purposes out in and through his people, particularly in this story through the courage and cunning of several women. It's a story all about women, but two in particular step out: Shiphrah and Puah, the midwives. They don't enjoy a high profile in the Bible, but actually they play a crucial role; so crucial that if they hadn't done what God asked of them and instead followed the instructions of the king then the Bible would've ended at Exodus chapter one because all the people of Israel would've been wiped out. They followed God and not the king. We're not told if it was Shiphrah or Puah who spoke to the king, but I'd loved to have seen the face of the other one when one of them said to the king, "Well, you know Pharaoh, those Hebrew women are tough. Those babies just pop out before we can even get there."

What it shows us is how important in God's plans are the parts played by God's ordinary people. God works out his plan for salvation through his people. We all have a part to play. We need to show the same courage displayed by the midwives if we're to play our part in God's plan of redemption and salvation. Exodus reveals God as the God who redeems. That's his identity. That's how he's known to his people.

What about us? What does this story say about our identity? How do we answer the question, "Who are you?" I think it does. If God is the one who redeems, we are the people who are redeemed. We're not

enslaved in the same way that the people of Israel were, but this language and image of bondage and freedom lies at the heart of the New Testament. Saint Paul often talks about our natural state as one of being a slave to sin and in bondage to things that hold us back from being the person that God would have us be. I don't think anyone in my yoga class when asked, "Who are you?", would've answered, "I am a slave to sin". Yet Jesus himself says in John, "Truly I say to you, everyone who commits a sin is a slave to sin."

Jesus saw his mission as bringing freedom. He says, "If the Son sets you free, you shall be free indeed." I'm a big fan because I've seen it work miracles in the AA 12 step program. Step one in this program, as some of you know, is this: we admit we are powerless over alcohol. In other words, we were enslaved to alcohol. Now not all of us are enslaved to alcohol, but what word would we insert at the end of the sentence "we were powerless over ..."? Many of us go through life without facing the stark reality that we are all enslaved to sin in whatever form that takes. That's not the end of it. My identity in Christ Jesus is not that I'm a sinner, it's not that I'm a loser with no hope. My identity as a Christian is that in Christ I am a redeemed sinner. I'm not perfect, but I'm on the path to wholeness. I'm able to face up to my failings and not be overwhelmed by them.

In Christ Jesus we don't have to hide our faults and failures. We don't have to pretend we're perfect or imagine ourselves to be something that we're not, but neither do we need to be enslaved by the things that hold us back. We are redeemed. We are set free. In this Eucharist we remember and celebrate the redemption that Jesus Christ has won for us in his death and resurrection. We who know ourselves to be the redeemed gather to worship the one we name as our redeemer.

Amen.