

Trinity 12

Sunday 23rd August 2020



Readings:

Exodus 1:8-2:10

Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, 'Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. 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.' Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labour. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labour. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them. The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, 'When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live.' But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, 'Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?' The midwives said to Pharaoh, 'Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.' So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, 'Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live.' Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him for three months. When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him. The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid

to bring it. When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him. 'This must be one of the Hebrews' children,' she said. Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, 'Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?' Pharaoh's daughter said to her, 'Yes.' So the girl went and called the child's mother. Pharaoh's daughter said to her, 'Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages.' So the woman took the child and nursed it. When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, 'because', she said, 'I drew him out of the water.'

Matthew 16:13-20

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.' Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Reflection

Today's Gospel is quite short but so crammed full of theology it takes a lot of unpacking. The core of the reading is that stark question: "Who do you say that I am?"

In the passage that precedes this one, Jesus has again condemned the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. They demanded that he gives them a sign and Jesus is incredulous that after all he has done they still demand further proof of his identity. Perhaps it was that that prompted his question; he is curious to know how he is regarded by the people of Galilee and whether they have made the huge leap of recognising who he really is. Some people think that he is an old prophet returned like Elijah or Jeremiah, but oddly some think that he is the recently deceased John the Baptist. As their lives had coincided that seems a strange conclusion, and John himself had been compared to Elijah. But whoever they chose, they were looking to an iconic figure from history. They were looking to the past - but Jesus was very much about the present and future.

Whatever the masses think of him, it is crucial that the disciples get it right for, as this passage shows, the whole future church will depend on that. It is of course, Peter who leaps in first - "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God," - and gets it exactly right. It is what Jesus wants to hear and he acknowledges that to say this Peter must have been given a divine revelation. He is on God's wavelength.

This earns Peter brownie points; for the moment he is top of the class, but it will not last long. He will soon blot his copy book as we shall see next week. But for now he gets a special title. This disciple is, of course, a Jew called Simon, but now, Jesus gives him a new name, Cephas in Latin - the name Paul used - and Petros in Greek. Both mean the rock. And in affirmation of his trust in this Petros, Jesus says that he is the rock on which he will build the church. So Jesus liked puns! The strength of this rock-built church means that even hell cannot prevail against it. It will remain as an eternal testament to the power of God in the world. Peter is given "the keys of the kingdom." I don't think that means that, as we see in so many cartoons, he stands with a huge bunch of keys at the gates of heaven unlocking

them only when he sees fit. Rather it means that the confession of faith he has made shows that he now understands what the kingdom is and what it takes to be a citizen of that kingdom; it means accepting Jesus as Lord. The words that follow, “whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven,” form the text by which the church justifies the priest’s ability to pronounce absolution. Though the priest may say the words – it is only God himself who can grant absolution; it is the priest’s role to confirm that God’s forgiveness is a reality and that we can know it for ourselves.

This passage shaped much of the thinking of the early Roman church, especially as they claimed Peter as their first bishop. But to my mind what is even more important is the pivotal moment it represents in the Gospel story. For Jesus, it is the moment he knows that the foundations are ready, the rock has been laid in place, and he can begin to build on Peter’s faith and that of the other disciples. He can now begin their further education and, as we see in next week’s Gospel, he now makes it clear that he is going to Jerusalem, and it is not going to be a joyride. Ultimately, he is going there to suffer and to die. And it is that sombre truth that Peter will find so difficult to stomach.

Peter may have made a world-changing confession of faith; he may be the rock; but that doesn’t mean that all his problems are solved. In the weeks that lie ahead that new faith will be tested to the utmost. And the question Christ put to him is one that echoes down the centuries. It is a question that each one of us must answer for ourselves and as with Peter, the whole of our future path depends on it – “Who do YOU say that I am?”

Amen

Prayers

Today’s Collect

Almighty and everlasting God,
you are always more ready to hear than we to pray
and to give more than either we desire or deserve:
pour down upon us the abundance of your mercy,
forgiving us those things of which our conscience is afraid
and giving us those good things
which we are not worthy to ask
but through the merits and mediation
of Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

Amen

Prayer for faith

Father, even the disciples that walked with Jesus needed to strengthen their faith. Jesus told them if their faith was only the size of a mustard seed, they could uproot trees and crumble mountains.

Lord, I need more faith like the disciples. Increase my faith and make me a mover of mountains.

Grow my belief in you alone so that I will be strong in the Lord and able to vanquish all my doubts. Lord, increase my faith! Amen

Prayers for those in fear

Lord, continue to sustain us through this time of trial and anxiety.
Be with all those who are fearful and worried for the future.
Bring us out of this crisis stronger and with greater faith in your loving kindness.
Be with the homeless and refugees who fear for themselves and their children,
Adrift and loveless in a lonely world.
Be with those who live with war and conflict,
In constant terror, and never knowing what the next day will bring.
We ask particularly at this time for the state of Yemen and especially for its children.
Amen.

Blessing

May God the Father, Judge all merciful,
Make us worthy of a place in his kingdom.
And the blessing of God Almighty,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
be among you and remain with you always.
Amen