

Sermon Archive 527

Sunday 16 March, 2025

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Readings: Exodus 7: 1-7

Romans 7: 14-25

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Last week it seemed almost simple. The problem of slavery in Egypt had been discerned by God, who'd heard the people crying. It had been shared with Moses, who'd begun to realise that he had a part to play in a solution. One open and compassionate God (urging intervention), and one listening person on the ground seemed like a really hopeful start on the first Sunday of Lent. Might we say that we were provisionally hopeful?

Enter early, though, the complications and barriers.

The first is Moses's pronounced lack of confidence. Quickly he realises that in order to advocate for a community, you're going to need to be good at speaking. If you're no good at speaking, you're not going to be able to describe the situation in a way that highlights the problem. If you're no good at speaking, you're not going to be able to persuade the key people to do what needs to be done. And Moses just knows he doesn't have a silver tongue. In chapter 4 of the story, he's said to God "I have never been eloquent. I am slow in speech and slow of tongue. I think you need to send someone else." Scholars have wondered in fact whether Moses may have been a stutterer or stammerer. He seems utterly petrified by the idea of speaking.

If I had been with Moses, I might have said "Moses, no, speaking isn't your thing. So why do you think God is calling you? Is there some other capacity that you have that makes you a legitimate choice - something more important than eloquence? Your passion? Your righteous anger? Your sense of sympathy for the oppressed - that maybe you've learned through the experience of others laughing at your stammer? Is it that you care about the people - you've certainly

*been convinced by the suffering that God's described. Are you one of those tragic 'true believers' whom God knows will never give up? Maybe God sees **these** things - that you can't see because you're hung up about the way you speak."* Maybe that's what I'd say. Anyway, God enlists Moses's brother Aaron to do the public speaking. As God augments the team to cover the weaknesses, complication number one, reasonably easily, is dealt with.

The second complication is more difficult. Here's a version of the story as it **didn't** happen. Moses and Aaron sought a meeting with the Pharaoh, who welcomed them. "Pharaoh", they said, "we know that you're nervous about the presence of the Hebrew people in your land. You would prefer, we think, for us not to be here. Well, we have good news for you. We **also** would prefer not to be here. We'd actually prefer to leave. Now, since you want us to leave, and we want to leave, it's hardly rocket science. Just let us leave, and we'll be on our way."

Pharaoh listened intently, and heard the good sense in what they were saying. He got one of his departments to put together some picnic bundles, and organised a farewell parade with streamers and brass bands. The Egyptians came along, sang "Auld Lang Syne", while the Hebrews sang "wish me luck as you wave me goodbye" - and off they went.

That was how it **didn't** happen. Unfortunately, Pharaoh suffered from something called a "hardness of heart", and refused to listen. "Hardness of heart" is an interesting expression. It's talking about a reluctance that comes not from the mind (reason, rationality), but from somewhere else.

Pharaoh could have drawn on reason to let the people go - there was good rational argument in favour of giving freedom. I guess there was also good reason for **not** letting them go - for instance access to a cheap workforce that was being quite productive. But Pharaoh isn't described as weighing up the rational options in his mind. He's described as having a hardened heart. It's about emotions here - superseding the realm of sensible decision. Does he get pleasure out of bossing Hebrews around? Is his ego fed by being feared? Has he got something against Moses that he won't let go? From the realm

of unresolved feelings, resentments, insecurities, comes the hardened heart.

I don't much enjoy thinking back to the times of civil strife that came to us at a time of managing Covid - and I apologise just now for heading into all that. It was a time where some of us believed in vaccination, and saw vaccination as a citizen's responsibility. But some of us ***didn't***, and lost our jobs because of it. As differing opinions got expressed within families, within circles of friends, within workplaces, within congregations and outside of parliament, many of us wondered why our reading of the situation (based on incontrovertible facts and basic political principles) wasn't convincing to others. We felt like it should have been as simple as sharing the facts, affirming the principles, and agreeing that ***we*** were right. But it proved more complicated than that.

I remember at the time hearing a psychologist interviewed by a deep state, fake-news journalist on Radio New Zealand. The psychologist gave a critique of how we form our beliefs. Part of it ***is*** assessment of facts as we perceive them, but part of it is trusting who we trust. Part of it is about our sympathies, our pre-existing unconscious biases, our solidarity with the tribes to which we belong. Part of it's about not wanting to lose face by changing mind in public (facing up to saying "I was wrong"). It's a complex matter - stretching huge distances beyond simple assessment of fact. And the Covid strife showed us just how great a distance that sometimes is. I wonder what we mean by the "hardness of heart" that Pharaoh had. It's certainly something other than his mind that causes him to dig in his toes.

-ooOoo-

I find the reading we heard from the Letter to the Romans both fascinating and sad. In it, we have Paul admitting that he knows what he should be doing. It's clear in his mind. But he is a creature of more than the mind. His life isn't about dispassionate acknowledgement of what is right, and doing it. It's a complete mess of knowing right but doing wrong - of understanding the situation, but setting it on fire. He calls his situation that of "being sold into slavery under sin". Slavery again! He would love to be free from it,

discerning only truth, doing only good. But he isn't free. His experience of life involves confusion of heart. Is this what is meant by "hardness"? If it **is**, then Paul would argue that being human is being susceptible to a kind of slavery to "hardness of heart". O, that we could be free!

-ooOoo-

Back to Egypt we go. Moses and Aaron are speaking good sense to Pharaoh, but it isn't working, because Pharaoh has hardness of heart. What is so unfortunate about it is not even so much that Moses and Aaron are frustrated for a while. And I say that advisedly, since while they are frustrated, their people are continuing to suffer. This is not a non-suffering holding pattern - so it needs to end. But what perhaps is even more unfortunate about the hardness of heart is that it's going to cause God to deploy a series of signs and wonders in the land. And the cost borne during these signs and wonders won't be borne by Pharaoh. It'll be borne by the ordinary people of Egypt. It is **their** water that will turn to blood. It is **their** armpits will suffer lice and boils. **Their** crops will be destroyed by hail and locusts. **They** will live in eerie darkness. **Their** firstborn children will die - all because their leader had a thing about not letting the slaves go free. It could have been avoided. How often, when governments suffer hardness of heart, is the greatest suffering borne by the people. And how often, how absolutely avoidably!

On this second Sunday in Lent, we realise that much of our dealing with slavery (as we meet it in our world) involves attending to hardened hearts. How does one, non-destructively work, as Christ might have worked, with the hardened heart? At the end of this season, as the heart of Christ goes free (soars to the heavens) on Easter morning, will Easter be presenting us with a vision? Slavery here and now, and the perception of an Easter vision . . .

We keep a moment of quiet.