Sermon preached by Revd Professor David Thompson on 23rd August 2026

Readings: Exodus 1:8 - 2:10; Romans 12: 1 – 8; Matthew 16: 13 - 20

'Then there rose up a newe King in Egypt who knewe not Ioseph' (Exodus 1: 8, Geneva Bible)

In the later 1970s I went to a conference on modern hymnody, at which Estelle White, the former nun who composed 'Moses, I know you're the man, the Lord said' was one of the speakers, and she introduced us who were there to this hymn and others of her compositions, and I fell for it. Later I was successful in persuading the Editorial Committees of *Hymns and Psalms* and later *Rejoice and Sing* to include it in their hymnbooks. It was one of the reasons why I decided to spend a few moments reflecting on what we make of this story from the Hebrew Scriptures today.

I have taken as a text some words, not in our OT reading, which sum up the root of the problem - a piece of regime-change, to use modern jargon. The English translation I have used is original, almost direct from Tyndale (though it is actually the Geneva Bible of 1560. We don't have any way of relating the biblical historical narrative to other sources, literary and archaeological, for the contemporary history of this period. But, in fact, the implications of this story are almost timeless.

By the end of Genesis, we have seen that Joseph, despite being sold into slavery in Egypt by his brothers, has reached a position of trust and responsibility in that country through his ability to interpret dreams. He reaches reconciliation with his brothers and invites his father, Jacob, to bring the whole family to Egypt, where he will look after them and ensure that they could buy food.

But changing times brought changing circumstances. There came a time when those in the Egyptian government forgot who Joseph was and what he had done to ensure its survival and instead came to see the Israelites as unwelcome immigrants. They tried a policy of compulsory family planning, which did not work. You may remember that China imposed a one-child policy on its population some years ago because of concern about growing population, which did not work either, and was abandoned. But we have alarming evidence in contemporary Britain of people who try to persuade us that our problems come from immigrants, and seem to be able to win votes from those who conveniently forget what we owe to those who have come here and work in our Health Service and other essential roles.

Rosemary and I did wonder whether a story about official plans to kill newborn children was an appropriate topic for an address aimed at children. My view was that it was no worse than one might see on the nightly television news, and I hesitate to censor Bible readings. It is an understandable concern, but the world is what it is, and today of all days we should hesitate to 'call out' (as I think the phrase is today) the sinful behaviour of those in authority, just as we should not use it to justify such behaviour, as has happened in the past. Nor should we be tempted to assume that the pity of Pharoah's daughter in any way serves to justify the cruel policy of her father.

Our other readings take us into rather different territory. Paul moves his readers into the kind of transformation of life to which the call of Christ moves us. Most important, it is not that we are called to transform our lives; that, in Paul's terminology would mean that the renewal of our lives was something that we achieved by our own actions (what Paul calls 'works'). Rather we are invited to open ourselves to the possibility of being transformed by God. For even at this personal level the one who accomplishes the transformation is God, just as God did when he delivered Israel from Egypt.

What it is important for us to do, is to acknowledge Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour. And that is the significance of our Gospel reading, which is Matthew's account of the exchange between Jesus and his disciples about who Jesus is. this is one of those exchanges which is in all four Gospels, but Matthew's is the one that contains the memorable response of Peter, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God'. But almost immediately Peter demonstrates the limitations of his understanding when he denies the possibility that Jesus could ever be crucified. Ultimately all the disciples faced the same problem, and lack of understanding. I found that the use of the Tutankhamun mask to illustrate what Moses might have looked like was a comparable challenge to my expectations as Peter found in Jesus's self-portrait of the destiny of the Messiah.

We used two different images for the Moses story in our reading. One was a modern image included in the Roots material to represent the baby Moses in the bulrushes, which was attractive because the copyright cost to use it was lower because of the source. But there was a flaw in it. [A. question as to what that flaw was received several answers, but not the one I was looking for.]. In my eyes, the flaw was that the characters, particularly Miriam, were white, which, although Hebrews and Egyptians are relatively pale-skinned, is most unlikely to have been the case. Although from one point of view it is unsurprising. it is one clue as to how white racism takes root in the western Church. There were more 'authentic' images, but these had heavier copyright costs. The other image I took from the current Tutankhamun exhibition in London of his death mask. Since our reading tells us that Moses was brought up by Pharoah's daughter, that presumably means he was brought up in the Royal family, and he is therefore likely to have been dressed more like Tutankhamun. That is also a shock to our expectations, which may help to explain why he did not always get on with his fellow-Israelites. I think we may under-estimate the effect that images have on us. For example, I have wondered how far public reactions to the possible early release of the two men convicted of the killing of PC Andrew Harper have been affected by the fact that they have often been accompanied by images of the two men concerned with a smile or smirk on their faces.

We face the same problem more broadly today in the way that Peter did. Have we got our understanding of Christianity right? Natural caution might tempt us to say, 'Perhaps not in every respect.' The publication of national A-level and similar results last week, and GCSE results this week may remind us that in the Christian life we are not expected to get 100% in every paper (not that the marks are still in percentages nowadays)! But, more fundamentally, are we going in the right direction or down a dead end? There is a sense in which the whole of our Christian life is devoted to an exploration of that question and its possible answers; one reason we gather week by week is to check out how far we have got, and whether we have any ideas and experiences to share that may help our companions on the road.

DMT, 23rd August 2026