

Sermon Archive 307

Sunday 23 August, 2020

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Exodus 1:8 - 2:10

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



The lockdown: the court found that it was unlawful, but also that it was justified. It was justified because of the urgency of the situation. The situation required decisive response. Then the court talked about how it ceased to be unlawful once it was written down in an order - so the jurisprudential tension was simply a passing thing. But there was a moment there, when we were living in a situation of unlawful justification.

There is a kind of "other side of the coin" also, isn't there? That which technically is lawful, but really can't be justified. The bad law. The state sanctioned injustice. The requirement that hangs over the people, but doesn't manage to move them.

To negotiate our way through these "this but that", these "yes but no", what comes into play?

-ooOoo-

The matter of the Hebrew midwives: here's just a little bit of faith context here - just to put paid to any misapprehension that these events are happening while God is speaking clearly. When the king who "knew not Joseph" arose over Egypt, the Hebrew people weren't spending a lot of time "listening for God". They had no scriptures - nothing yet had been written down, although there were probably a few oral stories circulating. But there was no organized way for telling the stories - synagogues didn't exist (no public worship). Ten commandments hadn't yet been composed. The promised land had indeed been given; but a while back that land had fallen into famine, so had been abandoned. Pretty much the only religious observance the Hebrews did was circumcise their newborn boys - but that must have, over time, begun to feel more like a cultural practice than a religious one. You can't really call this a story of people listening for God and responding (can you?) God wasn't really speaking.

Speaking, however, was the *king* - and in Egypt, when the king spoke, people treated it like the speaking of a god. Force, authority, power to direct the people.

Unfettered by silly things like senates, parliaments or magna cartas, what the king said, went.

Capturing some of this in his playful, lyrical way, for his operetta "Joseph", Tim Rice wrote:

*Pharaoh, he was a powerful man
with the ancient world in the palm of his hand.
To all intents and purposes, he
was Egypt with a capital E . . .
No one had rights or a vote but the king;
in fact you might say he was fairly right wing.*

From his position of extreme power, then, the King of Egypt issues an edict concerning the Hebrew people residing in his country. It goes to the Hebrew women working as midwives. The edict concerns male children born to Hebrew women. For some odd reason, the king seems to think that males alone are a threat to him. (He clearly hasn't thought that one through well enough - underestimating the amazing power of a motivated woman.). O well, in his utterly flawed belief that men alone are formidable, he orders the women he believes to be compliant, obedient, subservient, to kill all the baby boys. Because he is the king of Egypt, this is lawful (do you remember Richard Nixon saying "if the President does it, it can't be unlawful?"). In Egypt it's lawful. Is it justified? It is lawful, in this place, at that time, to kill a living, healthy baby because of its race. Quite lawful! But is it justified?

The edict fails to carry the midwives along. God isn't speaking through scriptures. God's not speaking through public services of worship. God's not yet saying "thou shalt not kill". But, because they are said to "fear God", these women have no intention of killing their next generation. Whether their "fearing God" is founded in a care for their nation, or whether it's something to do with a reverence for life, or whether the fear for God lies in their desire to nurture and protect the defenceless, or whether they just don't enjoy an Egyptian man telling Hebrew women what to do, we'll never know. But in their "fear of God", how ever that is located, this edict is for them something lawful, but unjustified.

They respond to it, give it their reply, by engaging in work that is unlawful: they secretly disobey - because they can. Unless the king wants to put guards on watch at every birthing stool, the people will do what they know is right. In the documentary (about Sydney's on-the-street response to the unfolding AIDS crisis

epidemic in the city), Bill Bowtell (Senior Advisor to the federal Health Minister), noting how that disease was transmitted, says *"sex, drug-taking, sharing of needles, takes place in bedrooms, back alleys, privately between people. Now unless you're in that transaction, as it were, you can't prevent it. So no policeman, no doctor, no politician is present when the risk of transmission is greatest. You have to rely on the common sense, the responsibility and goodwill of parties in the transaction. You have to persuade them to act responsibly"*. It has to sit right with the people. The people are moved by something other than law. Pharaoh was never going to be able to stop the midwives. He might pass his law, provide the people with something perfectly lawful, but if it doesn't seem justifiable, right in the minds of the people, it's dead in the water. The pretend king is speaking - but the will of the real sovereign is manifest in the unlawful but life-saving acts and instincts of the people.

Perhaps kind of knowing this, Pharaoh gives up talking to the midwives, and turns instead to the broader community. He tells **them** that it's their civic responsibility to kill the baby boys. We're not told how that went. I wonder whether, in the wider community, there were people who quite enjoyed being given permission to do vigilante work - given permission from the top to despise a particular race, lock the children up in cages, step on the neck of the person already fallen. Some communities have people who enjoy such permission. But we're not told any of that in this story.

What we **are** told next in this story is that life and birth and mothering carried on. Babies still were born. Into a world of "lawful but unjustified", a baby boy comes. Within a rotten law, a mother loves her child - so much - I love him too much . . . And she does her unlawful best. And we who hear her story can't help but feel she is justified in doing so. For what is better, more natural, more utterly justified than love? Breaking the law, she keeps him with her for as long as she can. When he's just too big to be hidden anymore, she makes him a little boat, and puts him in it. Keeping the letter of the unjustified but lawful edict of the king, she put the little boat into the Nile, releasing her child into whatever mercy might still exist in the world. Maybe he'll be found by someone else who's safer to practise the unlawful but justified - for the saving of life.

Into the story now comes the daughter of the king. She's Egyptian, of course - so "fearing God" is nowhere on her radar. But, we're told, her immediate reaction to a crying child is pity. She works out exactly what he is - a Hebrew boy - but sees tears and need. So she does what she can (and she can do much - she's a

powerful Egyptian woman!) to save the life of the baby in need. In doing this she does something unlawful. Is she justified? As a life-preserving disobedience opens like a flower right in the household of the law-making king, is she justified?

The story is told in scripture because the baby in question becomes the man who leads his whole nation from oppression into life. So the story suggests that her unlawfulness was totally justified. Justified because it led to life.

I understand entirely how important it is to hold governments to account. I understand how important it is, that nobody should be above the law. So I understand fully why it was important that a case should be taken to court to explore whether the first nine days of our country's lockdown was properly constituted and conducted. It's all part of proper checks and balances. And I think the finding of the court, while in some ways politically inconvenient for those who were trying, on the hop, to do the right thing, was helpful. It was helpful because it gave us moment to think about this whole matter of unlawful but justified. When measures are taken to preserve life, to give future to a people - particularly the vulnerable among the people - the whole idea of "justified unlawfulness" is helpful. Even when God is not speaking through scripture or public worship, even when a lot of the main characters do not "fear God", there is this general sense that the people know when things are justified. Law will not carry them to places to which they know they shouldn't go. I think that is something we deeply understand.

And maybe, given the trans-Pacific gloating over our Covid resurgence by an over-entitled law-maker, another thing we deeply understand from the story is that it's just stupid to argue with a woman who knows what's right and is busy saving lives. Around such a woman it's easy to look stupid.

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Well, that was a journey through a story of a man who was the law, and of women who were justified. It was a story of creative disobedience, God's will being done, and people being saved. I wonder what it will call us to be and do. That may be something we revisit in our prayers - but for now, we keep a moment of quiet.

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