

TRINITY 11 Proper 16 Year A

My husband has often over the years provoked argument - an occupational hazard for criminal defence lawyers - by claiming that the Welsh were the first slaves of the English.

Oppression by cruel and grasping forces runs throughout human history. At the beginning of the OT Book of Exodus we hear of the hardships of the ancient Israelites enslaved by the Egyptians.

I was struck by these words by Nancy Hastings Sehested, an American Baptist pastor and preacher, published in a collection of sermons by women in the early 1990s. 'We live under powerful forces that run through our lives, telling us how to live, what we need to live. We live under a creed of power with phrases like growth at any price, profit at any price, competition at any price, limited liability... Our institutions exist for the life and health of the institution - where once they existed for the life and health of the people in them...We are living under Pharaoh's rule, under Caesar's ways, under the *Pax Romana*...'

In all the dramatic global events of the past 30 years, it can seem as if nothing has changed. And when you listen to the experiences of the ancient Israelites recanted in the Book of Exodus and other parts of the OT, it seems nothing has changed in 3 millenia. We hear much talk these days about the coming of a new world order. Graffiti recently photographed in Hong Kong reads: There can be no return to normal because normal was the problem in the first place.

As Christians, how are we to live with the realities of oppression, in our own lives and in the lives of our neighbours, locally and globally; how are we to understand this Old Testament God who intervenes in human history to liberate the enslaved?

In prison, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor and anti-Nazi dissident, spent much time reflecting on the theme of redemption in the Old and New Testaments. He realised that Christians have tended to turn upside down Old Testament stories of God's saving actions in history. We have made redemption mean something that occurs 'on the far side of the boundary drawn by death...in a better world beyond the grave'...In the Old Testament the Israelites clearly understood redemption to refer to something here and now, a deliverance into this very time and place, not hereafter.

And this is true of the story of redemption in the New Testament too. Christians follow Christ into the forsakenness of the world, rather than away from it - otherwise, this world would be simply written off. The world is the arena of our salvation. Christ's redemption, according to Bonhoeffer, is not redemption from 'cares, fears, longing, sin and death' but instead living 'life on earth in a wholly new way'.

At one time or another, each of us fills each of the roles in the story of Moses in the bulrushes. We have been enslaved by someone else's fear. Each of us has been the maidservant, because in every need or ministry somebody has to wade into the muddy water to pick up the basket. We all have some of the resources of Pharaoh's daughter, set to watch over someone or something as vulnerable as a baby floating in a basket in a river.

St Paul, the architect of the early Christian movement, understood profoundly the necessity for human agency in the work of salvation. This reality is expressed beautifully in the idea of the Body of Christ - one body, many parts, members of one another, each with different gifts according to the grace given to us. 'For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another'.

As we orientate to this fast-changing world in the months/years ahead, let us be open to the graces we are given, as individual members of Christ's body and as a Christian community in this place.

In an essay on the politics of belief, the Methodist minister and activist, Colin Morris, writes: 'When people say, 'O God, do this, do that, do the other', by what agency do they imagine this will be done? Bolts of lightening? Magical interference with the natural order? Somewhere there is a human spirit and a human heart that is prepared to incarnate God's will and purpose in a given place at a given time. It is a quite extraordinary act of faith - not our faith in God (our faith in God waxes and wanes this way and that) - but of God's faith in us. This is a truth that invests every human encounter with significance'.

