Exodus 2:1-10

Our reading this morning from Exodus 2, is one of those readings that we take as being a nice story; one of those Biblical narratives that we read almost as a fairy-tale and is only pulled out of the bag on special occasions, such as Mother’s Day. But as with all of Scripture, when we dig a little deeper, we see just what a profound teaching is contained within these words, most especially about the value of children and our responsibility to nurture them into a sense of God’s destiny for them.

This is a teaching we can apply to our own children, if we have them but most certainly in how we nurture children within the family of the church at St. Andrew’s. So let’s look at this story in a bit more detail…

The man and woman are not named in verse 1 but we know from Exodus 6 and Numbers 26 that they were called Amram and Jochebed. They had a daughter named Miriam and then a second child called Aaron and then their third child was born – Moses. But, as so often in life, beauty and ugliness go hand in hand, grey clouds co-exist with sunlight, joy and desolation are constant companions. And the joy of new birth for Amram and Jochebed is marred by the devastating cruelty of the Pharoah.

The Israelites had grown numerically strong in Egypt and in 1:22, he had issued a terrifying edict: “Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live.”

So Jochebed gave birth to her child and we have this phrase in verse 2 that, unless we get into the meaning of it, we will misinterpret the rest of the passage. It says this: “The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him for three months.”

He was a fine baby. Does that mean he was so cute that she couldn’t bear to kill him? Was it the extraordinary power of a mother’s love that wanted to offer such protection? If so, who could blame her? What mother could hand her child over to such a brutal end?

But actually, there is something else in this verse and this act of Jochebed takes on a different meaning in the New Testament. In Hebrews 11:23, we read this: “By faith, Moses was hidden by his parents for three months after his birth, because they saw that the child was beautiful; and they were not afraid of the king’s edict.” So in Exodus, we read that he was a fine baby and in Hebrews, that he was beautiful. Is this a mother’s love offering him protection in the light of this? No – there’s more to it than that

In Hebrews 11, the Greek word used for ‘beautiful’ can mean ‘acceptable’ or ‘well-pleasing’ and, in Acts 7:20, where Stephen recounts this episode, he gives a bit more detail by saying that the baby Moses was “well-pleasing before God”. And so, when we are told in Hebrews 11 that we that the parents hid Moses as an act of faith, we see a more subtle dynamic at work. Could it be that they recognised something of the destiny of this baby? That they knew he was destined for great things under the guiding hand of God?

He was fine, he was well-pleasing - and that was more than a mother’s love and intuition. Here was a man of destiny, and the mother’s compassion and courage would help to form a destiny that would, quite literally, shake the world.

Is any less expected from all mothers? Don’t your children, our children, have a destiny to fulfil in the plan of God? We must never underestimate the role of the mother in the fulfilment of a child’s destiny…

We might look at a baby and think it cute and adorable. But there is something very different about seeing that baby as well-pleasing in the eyes of God: a child of destiny. And we must do all we can at St. Andrew’s to support mothers in their rearing of these children of destiny and, just as importantly, play our part in taking spiritual responsibility for all our children. The African proverb is right to say, “It takes a village to raise a child…”

But as we read in verse 3, Moses could not be hidden for long. So Jochebed got a papyrus basket, put the child in it and hid it in the reeds of the Nile. Now this is a really important verse and there’s two things I want to say about this, all of which relate motherhood to Christian faith.

The first is this, that Jochebed realised the limitations of the care she could offer and needed to let her child go. But here was a woman who, we know, was acting in faith, so she wasn’t abandoning her child to the whims of life in the mere hope that Moses would survive. No – this was an immense act of faith and trust in God on her part. She had recognised her child as a child of destiny and whilst it must have torn her heart out to leave him in the reeds, she did so knowing that God would watch over her precious child.

What faith that took on her part: the Nile is no gently flowing stream; it is a dangerous and fast-running river, infested with crocodiles and the dangers of the river currents are ever-present. And as those of us with older children will know it can be a really traumatic experience to let our children go and make their way in the world. Perhaps we have spent 20 years nurturing, caring, providing, watching over them, and then the day comes when they walk out the front door with a rucksack on their back, a smile on their face and a few quid in their pocket. And we need to let them go and face the crocodiles and the currents. We are not abandoning them: we are letting them go, fully trusting that their God will watch over them and keep them safe. It really hurts to let go - but that is part of parenting, that is part of the mother’s love and faith. Our children are men and women of destiny: we need to let them go, in the care of God, and discover that destiny for themselves…

But secondly, this papyrus basket is really important because the Hebrew word used to describe it, ‘tebah’, is only used twice in the Old Testament. One time is here, in Exodus 2 and the other occasion is that it is the word used to describe Noah’s Ark in Genesis.

Just as the ark would carry the people of God and the animals through the tides and currents of life and bring deliverance and the beginning of a new destiny for the world, so Moses’ basket would carry him through the tides and currents, protecting him from the crocodiles, so that he could grow into maturity and fulfil his destiny as a Deliverer.

The tebah of God – whether an ark or basket – protects the children so that they will grow into their destiny.

Mothers – and all parents – must have the courage and the faith to place their children in the tebah of God, the loving care and protection of God so that they can fulfil their destiny. It demands courage and great faith.

I’m sure the ark looked frail and vulnerable as the storms lashed around it and certainly the basket would have looked frail and vulnerable too. Perhaps the situations and lifestyle choices we see our children walking towards appear frail and vulnerable. But, in faith, we believe they will be secure under the protection of God.

And so the story progresses and the baby is taken by the Pharoah’s daughter: another brave act in the light of her father’s edict. But Miriam, Moses’ sister, had been watching what was happening from the riverbank and she offers to get a Hebrew woman to nurse the child. Wouldn’t this have been a brave act too?

Have you noted the exalted role of women in this story? Jochebed, the Pharoah’s daughter and Miriam are all brave, courageous, faithful women, through whose actions God brings deliverance to his people Israel. Today is a day when we rightly honour women and the part they play in the plans of God. Scripture is full of examples of women and mothers who have played a crucial role through their faith, courage and parenting skills, developed in the trust of God.

And here’s the beautiful postscript of the story that means so much to us on Mother’s Day. Jochebed, who had felt the pain of handing her child over to God as an act of faith eventually got her child back again. Such was the faithfulness of God to her, for her faithfulness to God.

We entrust our children to God but we never lose them; he will bring them back to us and even though our children may not be with us physically as they make their way in the world, the work of a mother, the work of a father is never done. The nurturing, the caring, the courage and the faith is a lifetime’s work, a lifetime’s privilege.

You and I are co-workers with God in our rearing of children to help them become a people of destiny. That is true of all of us who are parents but just as true of us as a church. We have a Christian commitment and responsibility here at St. Andrew’s to put children at the centre of our mission and pastoral care. It is the biblical way; it is the imperative of God.

In the Old Testament era, and in the New Testament era too, children were understood to be a sign of God’s blessing on a community. Children were revered and honoured as living, breathing proof of the presence, power and blessing of God on the community. I do not see that it is any different for us today. Over the coming few years, we must be absolutely committed to developing our work amongst children and developing support networks for parents as they seek to raise their own.

And the promise of God to us as we undertake that ministry, the promise of God attested to over and over again in the Scriptures, is that our children will become a people of destiny who will bless our community and the wider world. The formation of that destiny begins here, in this church and most especially through the faith, courage and care of mothers.

So today, we celebrate mothers for what they are doing in showing love through the rearing of children but also for what they are achieving in fulfilling God’s destiny for this community and the wider world. We celebrate mothers, we thank God for our children and we anticipate the raising of a new generation of faithful Christians: God’s people of destiny.

Amen.