

2023-08-27 ... 10am Morning Worship Sermon ... Mrs Jane Rylands

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

Few of us will know any book or series of books better than we know the Bible. The longer we have been coming to church the more times we will have heard it read to us and the more viewpoints we will have heard about what it means. If we add in time spent either on our own or in a group studying bible passages our experience of it is super rich – although sometimes perhaps we switch off because it seems very familiar!

If we're paying attention though, we can draw more and differently from it because of its richness and because of what we're going through in our own daily lives, and what is going on in the world. Perhaps you have found that your understanding has changed as you've got older.

Our Old Testament reading was the beginning of the story of Moses and we're going to hear more of that over the next few weeks. I'm not going to comment on it today except to remark that following on from a batch of strong women of faith last week we have another group here – the midwives honoured for their obedience to God by being named – Shiphrah and Puah; Moses's loving and resourceful mother and his caring and quick witted sister; and perhaps also Pharaoh's daughter who presumably had to stand up to her father to keep Moses.

One of the things Moses has in common with both Peter and Paul is that though chosen by God to be great leaders of God's people none of them have perfect back stories, each of them grows into a clearer understanding of God as they live out their lives practising being one of God's faithful followers and in their growing understanding of what God wants from them as they converse with God. Paul speaks from experience when he tells the Romans to, 'be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect'.

As I was reading today's passages I was also reading the autobiography of Eve Arnold, one of the great photographers of the last century. She had once begun keeping a travel diary for her young grandson with the question '**What do your hang on the walls of your mind?**' What a great question!

She explains that when she first became a photographer she would collect favourite images that she filed away in her imagination to bring out and examine at moments of stress or moments of quiet. **As a Christian, what do you hang on the walls of your mind?** What images, what examples from the past of your life or from the bible, do you store to contemplate on when times are tough or when you have time for thought? What will help you to test what is God's will, that which is good and pleasing and perfect?

Eve Arnold talks about her only 6 weeks of formal education in photography. Only six weeks but tough ones because of the high standards of the tutor. She describes how the class began with 60 members but only half the group were able to stay the course. She says the ones who left wanted a formula, words of wisdom on how to achieve success in a hurry. Those who completed the course learned that in creative work there are no prescriptions, no facile answers, there is only concentration and hard work.

Being a follower of Christ is not dissimilar. Paul would have us think and he would have us act out our gifts. There isn't a formula because each of us is an individual with a unique set of skills and a unique story within which to use them.

Eve was an early member of Magnum Photos, a co-operative of photographers started by giants in the field including Henri Cartier-Bresson. She talks about how important her membership was to her: it provided a measuring stick against which to gauge work progress, more important she says, it gave members a sense of belonging. The group was in various stages of professional maturity, they would show their work to each other, the young avid to learn and the elders generous with their time and their criticism.

It sounds very much like how church should be for Christians with the added benefit that beyond the quirks and foibles of the members, even one who is the Rock that is Peter, unlike for a secular group the church has the one ever unchanging head, source and way that is God.

Eve talks about how it was like for her as a beginner photographer amongst such greats, wanting to be great herself, earnest in her self-criticism. She says she became mired in theorizing and increasingly frightened of going out to photograph. Being a Christian, doing Christianity, can be like this I think.

When someone pointed out to her that even the greats produce imperfect work as, like everyone else, they are dealing with the messiness of life, she came to realise that the only way to stop all the details and learning becoming a great jumble in her mind was to take things day by day and enjoy whatever that day brought.

She says those were 'yeasty times'. Jesus once described the kingdom of heaven as being **'like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.'** (Matt 13:33)

This week we hear how Peter got his name and was to be the foundation stone of the church. Next week we will hear how his journey of understanding is not complete as he gets it wrong.

As we are church here in Whitchurch, part of the worldwide church, we will sometimes get it wrong but perhaps one of the things we hang on the wall of our minds might be Paul's instruction to keep thinking and to keep doing ...

.... As we go in peace to love and serve the Lord

In the name of Christ,

Amen