

Lent 2 17th March 2019 Saint Andrews, St Andrews (Josh Cockayne)
FREEDOM FROM THE PAST. FREEDOM FOR THE FUTURE
Passages: Exodus 2:11-3:12, Acts 7: 17-34, Matthew 2: 12-21

Last Sunday, Taylor started our Lenten sermon series by introducing us to the themes of freedom, prayer, and penitence in the story of Exodus. This week we'll continue this exploration by thinking about:

FREEDOM FROM THE PAST, AND FREEDOM FOR THE FUTURE.

I can't imagine there are many of us here who wouldn't wish for some kind of freedom from the past. As I discovered as a 16-year-old, my hair doesn't really grow down-wards, but more, outwards. To my school leaving party I rocked my mushroom hair-cut, with a luminous pink shirt, finished off with a pair of sleek sunglasses. Indoors.

I'm sure there are many of you who wish they could gain some freedom from their own disastrous hairstyle or bold fashion decision. Especially in an age in which everything is photographed, and laid out online for the world to see, there is no hiding from the past.

Maybe, what you think of when you hear 'freedom from the past' is that horribly embarrassing encounter when you wish the ground would've swallowed you up. The moment that you turn over in your mind as you try to sleep many years later. Perhaps you clutch to your past failures and mistakes tightly, living in the fear that one day, someone will know the person inside.

The past can be a powerful, frightening thing. And our memories are often a tapestry of success and failure, of happiness and misery, of pain and ecstasy, in which it is difficult to fully untangle the good from the bad, and the memories we cherish from those we would rather leave behind. Whilst our present and future is still being written, the past is fixed, immovable, and permanent, however hard we try to pretend otherwise.

As we continue our exploration through the book of Exodus, we pause this morning to reflect on this theme of freedom and the past. In the pages of this Biblical epic, we find the story of a man who, like all of us,

is marked and defined by the events of his past. The story of Moses has a great deal to teach us, I think, about how our relationship with the past.

The little Israelite baby who was drawn out of the water in last week's reading, is now the 'grown up' figure of Moses who will become one of the founding patriarchs of our shared faith.

Over the course of Lent, we'll encounter many of the different faces of Moses in the book of Exodus—the mighty leader, bringing the Israelites out of captivity, the 'friend of God' who acts as judge and rule-bearer of God's people, and the one through whom the covenant God made with Abraham would be renewed, and the tabernacle of God's presence constructed.

In our Old Testament reading for today, however, we are confronted not with a mighty leader and spiritual giant, but with an outcast, a murderer, a man filled with self-doubt on the run from the past.

Moses, the Outcast

The Moses we see in these passages is summed up well, I think, by his own admission in 2:22 that he is an 'alien in a foreign land' (in 12:22). Whilst at this point Moses refers to his exile in Midian, and, perhaps to his people's exile in Egypt, the label of 'alien' or 'outcast' rings true about Moses on a number of levels.

Although we are told frustratingly little about the intervening years between the rescue of Moses from the water, and his attack on the Egyptian in today's reading, it seems clear that Moses is given an Egyptian education (Acts 7: 22), something which was clearly the envy of many in the ancient world (1 Kings 4:30). Moses would've received training worthy of a St Andrews graduate (or whatever the equivalent might be). Perhaps, like some St Andrews graduates, he could count himself as a peer of future kings and world leaders? Regardless, he would've likely gained a privilege unique for an Israelite in captivity.

But yet, despite the benefits that this education would undoubtedly bring, Moses did not think of himself as an Egyptian. He did not belong in the classroom alongside future leaders and pharaohs. For he was not an Egyptian. Moses did not belong.

We see this nowhere more clearly than in his confrontation with the Egyptian in Chapter 2. Moses sees the brutal treatment of two Israelite slaves by this Egyptian, and he cannot stand to look at such injustice any longer. In seeing the hardship of *his* people, the Israelites, Moses takes matters into his own hands and kills the perpetrator of this brutal act. Although Moses's action here looks forward to the liberation and relief that God would eventually bring to his people, it is entirely ineffective. Moses is not acting in response to the will of God, but out of his own sense of what should count as justice.

Whilst Moses clearly does not think of himself as Egyptian, it also seems clear that, at this point, Moses is not a respected Israelite either. If Moses was raised with the luxuries and freedom of an Egyptian, this is hardly surprising—in hearing Moses rebuke the Israelites for their infighting in verse 13, the response: 'Who made you ruler and judge over us?' seems entirely appropriate. Moses does not know the thrash of the taskmaster's whips, the heat of the midday sun as he slaves for a Pharaoh he doesn't serve. He is not one of them. He is not their ruler, he is not even their peer.

Whilst at some point in the future, the answer to this question—who made you the ruler and judge over us, will be answered: 'The Lord God Almighty', at this point, Moses is again acting from a position of self-appointment, rather than calling. He is taking matters into his own hands and is rejected by the people with whom he belongs.

This status of outcast is made secure in Moses's fleeing from Egypt. Moses literally runs from the events of his past, from his education in Egypt and his people in slavery and runs to the land of Midian, where he finds welcome in a foreign land. So much so, that he eventually marries a Midianite woman and becomes seemingly content with his status as an outcast, someone who belongs to neither Midian, nor Egypt, nor Israel. The events of his past have resulted in this fixed identity which now dictates his present situation.

The feeling of belonging nowhere and to one is something I imagine all of us have at some point felt. Those first few weeks and months in a new job, new university, or new community can be filled times of crippling self-doubt and the feeling of ostracization. As an Englishman in Scotland surrounded by Americans, I know this feeling only too well. For our past and the identities which we claim for ourselves-- Englishman, Academic,

Yorkshireman, Middle-Class, Christian-- whatever these may be, determine how we relate to our present and our future.

Indeed, one of the most effective marketing strategies employed by businesses today is to sell us a sense of belonging—if we buy the right kind of computer, wear the right kinds of clothes, drink the right kinds of coffee, then we will truly belong. What we buy can often be an attempt to mask our own sense of alienation and our desire to fit somewhere.

This sense of belonging we find in our own identities is often superficial. In fact, the New Testament is keen to stress that we are all in some sense ‘aliens and exiles’ (1 Peter 2:11), who’s true identity lies in God. If this is the case, it should be no surprise to us that we feel excluded, unworthy, or unimportant.

Moses is called

What is reassuring to me, is that God calls Moses regardless of his past.

Not only does God call Moses, but he calls him from his place of outcast. Moses’s encounter with God does not take place somewhere religious or somewhere set apart as Holy, it doesn’t even take place amidst God’s people. Working as a shepherd in the foreign land of Midian, on the mount of Horeb (a place literally called, ‘wilderness’), Moses encounters God in a wildfire in a barren desert.

The encounter with God is fascinating on a number of levels, but I think it can reveal something to us about the way in which we relate to ourselves, our past and our identity. Moses’s freedom from the past comes not from *forgetting* or *erasing* from where he has been, but from shifting his attention, from telling a different story.

When God tells Moses that he is the one to lead the Israelites out of slavery, the response is less than positive. Indeed, we see the words of a man marked by his past failure, and his identity as alien and outcast.

Moses responds to God, five times protesting that he cannot be the man for the job, he is not equipped to lead God’s people. And Moses is entirely right. In fact, we have already seen that his attempts to take matters into his own hands have so far failed—he knows that he is not

accepted or respected, so how could he possibly be the man to rescue Israel.

God evades Moses's questioning. He doesn't say: 'your superior Egyptian education entitles you to lead my people, nor does he say, I have seen your sense of justice and I want you to destroy the Egyptians'. If Moses is looking for affirmation, what he finds instead is a shifting of his attention, away from his past, whether good or bad, towards the person and work of God.

The freedom from the past which God offers to Moses is not a wiping of the past, but a shifting of his attention. Each time Moses refers to his own inadequacies, his incompetency, and his past, God responds with the affirmation 'I will be with you.' I will be with you.

The stories we tell, determine the people we are. Every family has those stories, which become enshrined into folklore, whether that be the time Granny fell asleep at the dinner table, or the ill-fated holiday spent camping in torrential weather. These stories help to shape our identity and our sense of belonging—it is in the shared stories of family holidays, and ridiculous Christmas presents that we find our family identity. In fact, psychologists tell us that there is a clear connection between the richness of the stories we tell to our children, and their capacity to remember the past.

As the Israelites developed their own sense of the past, these stories—of Moses's encounter with God, of the midwife's heroic rescue, of the Passover and exodus, begin to constitute their identity. We begin to see that freedom from the past cannot possibly mean forgetting—if anything, for the Israelites, freedom from past is bound up in remembering, retelling, and reliving. But there is a distinct shift in attention too. For as we see the character of Moses slowly shift and develop, we see his attention move from his own past and inadequacy and onto God's promise that 'he will be with them'.

Many centuries later, we see the results of this in action. In our New Testament reading today, we saw Stephen reliving this story of Moses. When faced with the accusation of blasphemy by the Sanhedrin council, and before his eventual execution, Stephen's response is not to plead

innocence, but to tell a story. This is the story of God's deliverance, which begins with Abraham and Moses, and which culminates in the story of what God's Spirit is continuing to reveal today. Stephen writes himself into the story—here is one more outcast, one more person unworthy to stand in the presence of God, but one brought into the God' saving work. God will be with us.

What story do we tell? Where is our attention placed?

Freedom from the past is not found in our forgetting, but in our accepting the truth that we are all, like Moses, like Stephen, aliens and outcasts. But yet, we are outcasts, invited into this narrative of God's saving work—like Moses, we protest 'But I cannot possibly be welcome' and God responds, 'I will be with you'.

As we continue our worship together you may like to take the slips from your bulletin which have 'freedom from the past' on one side and 'freedom for the future' on the other. Before we come to communion You may find it helpful to write all of the things which exclude you on the side labelled, and all the ways which God invites us to be part of a different story on the reverse.

We are invited to tell a different story by sharing the Eucharist together. Here we are invited to eat and drink together and reminded that what unites us is not our nationality, or our worthiness, or any identity we place on ourselves – we see in the brokenness of Christ in the gifts and bread and wine, the one who is 'God with us'.

Questions for discussion

1. What stands out to you from this week's readings on the theme of 'past' and 'future'?
2. What are the identities you place on yourself (e.g. nationality, career, religion)?
3. How do you relate to Moses's self-description as an 'alien in a foreign land'?
4. What do we learn about (a) God, and (b) Moses in the encounter at the burning bush?
5. Why do you think Stephen recounts the story of Moses in his defence to the Sanhedrin in Acts 7?

6. How does being part of a bigger story change the way we relate to the past?
7. Using the slips of paper (Freedom from the past on one side, Freedom from the future on the other), spend time reflecting the ways in which we might begin to 'tell a new story'.