

SUNDAY 27th AUGUST
St Mary's, Haddington
11am

Exodus 1: 8 – 2: 10

Romans 12: 9-21

Matthew 15: 21-28

A sermon preached on the occasion of the baptism of
Aila Grace Mackenzie

Back in 1981, an amazing thing happened on the island of Hoy in the Orkneys. A baby girl was born, the first on the island for 30 years. Her name was Lucy Rendall, and this was such a special occasion for everyone that the local poet George Mackay Brown wrote poem to celebrate called Lullaby for Lucy.

Here's what he wrote:

Let all plants and creatures of the valley now
Unite,
Calling a new
Young one to join the celebration.
Rowan and lamb and waters salt and sweet
Entreat the
New child to the brimming
Dance of the valley,
A pledge and a promise
Lonely they were long, the creatures of Rackwick, till
Lucy came among them, all brightness and light.

An amazing poem – I've left a copy on the glass doors at the west end. If you come and take a look you'll see that it's an acrostic: the first letters of each line spell out the child's name "Lucy Rendall."

What a special thing for Mackay Brown to do, and not only that but another local creative type, the composer Peter Maxwell Davies who lived on Hoy at that time, set it to music and it gets sung by choirs around the world. He wrote all sorts of wacky sounding music, some quite hard to listen to, but his Lullaby for Lucy was in the key of C major, the brightest and sunniest key. What else could he do to reflect the joy of that occasion?

The birth of a child has got to be one of the most powerful experiences known to us. I don't have any children, but every time I hear of a new born, and especially when we have children brought to us for baptism, it brings out such a positive gut reaction: for me it's a sign of new life, and fresh beginnings, a sign that despite all that humanity might do to muck up the world, there is hope in the fresh starts that we see in children like Aila.

EXODUS

I wonder if that was the kind of reaction that Pharaoh's daughter had in the story we heard Gordon read from Exodus?

I find that a really remarkable story that could really be any time and any place – I'm sure you can draw connections with events quite recent and close to home.

Here we have a situation where the influence of Joseph (that's the technicolour dreamcoat Joseph!) had ended after his death, and Pharaoh had decided that all of the Israelites who Joseph had brought in, and who had prospered along with the rest of Egypt, were to be stopped. His first plan of ordering the midwives to murder any Israelite male babies to be killed at birth didn't quite go to plan, as the compassion of the midwives kicked in. Seeing that this had failed, Pharaoh went even further and ordered EVERYONE in Egypt to do the same. What a horrible situation. So it's a massive

irony when PHARAOH'S OWN DAUGHTER finds wee Moses floating along in a reed basket, decides to save him and ends up having him looked after by his own mother and then become part of the royal family when he has grown up.

Pharaoh's daughter KNEW that this child was not "one of theirs" – he probably had a look of the Israelites. And still, she took the risk of committing an offence against the state.

MATTHEW

You might be wondering what Moses has to do with the last reading that we heard from the Gospel of Matthew. Well, all through that Gospel it is clear that the writer saw **Jesus as the new Moses**, coming to liberate his people from the oppression of a new kind of Pharaoh (the Romans in collaboration with the Jewish leadership) and to lead them into a promised land. Jesus was cast as in the mould of the great heroes of the Jewish tradition, not as some kind of outsider.

But there is a bit of a clash between the story of Moses and Pharaoh's daughter and what we hear of Jesus in this story from Matthew. Here we have Jesus appearing to be incredibly harsh – at least that's how it seems at face value. A Canaanite woman, a foreigner to Jesus and his Jewish heritage, and indeed representing the bitterest enemies that you can read about, for example in the story of Deborah in the book of Judges. She shouts out to Jesus in the street – she wants to get his attention, and doesn't just touch him or climb a tree to get a better look, she actually breaks social taboos and shouts at this teacher of the Jewish faith. But if we think of other stories in the Gospels, we might expect Jesus to immediately have time for her and to be sympathetic to someone from "the other side of the tracks." But not here. Why?

It's a puzzle, because Jesus uses a really terrible sounding phrase:

“I was only sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

It's pretty damning. **What do you have to do with me Why should I help you?**

The problem is, that like reading an email, we've no idea of what Jesus' tone was. Was it as condemnatory as it sounds? Was it sarcastic? Confused? Dismissive?

Hard to say. On the one hand, maybe it gives a reality check to Jesus the human being. He too could be tired, grumpy and short with yet another person who wanted a piece of him. Just heading up the road for some rest and here's some crazy woman shouting out at me, and a Canaanite too. For goodness sake.

On the other hand, Matthew could be reflecting the huge fights about how the Jewish Christians seemed to be breaking the traditional boundaries of Judaism by opening it up to gentiles – the whole world. By making the Canaanite woman overtly beg and profess her faith, maybe she stands for Matthew saying: no, we don't just make this a free for all, people have to actually recognise Jesus. We are not watering down Judaism.

And this story comes in the middle of Matthew's Gospel and needs to be seen in the context of the whole story that he tells. If you read to the end of the story you find that when Jesus appears to the disciples after his death, the message is “go out to everyone, the good news is for all, no matter where you come from.” It doesn't stay as a faith for only the select few, defined by birth and ethnicity.

It's our job to work out where this story fits in the bigger picture, not just of Matthew's Gospel but also in the wider picture of each of the four Gospel stories and the stories that they tell about Jesus.

PAUL

It's also easy for us to forget that the Gospels weren't the first stories about Jesus to be written. Because they're printed first in our Bibles, we think that they're the first chronologically, but they're not. Paul got there first, and so the letter to the church at Rome that we heard from this morning is actually more of a primary reflection of what Jesus and his life and teachings meant, whereas perhaps Matthew is a bit localised in his perspective. Paul was there decades before the others got put together.

What we heard in Romans this morning is an incredible manifesto of how to live against the rather limited scope of the Ten Commandments, for example. So much more relational. We can read this now and say, yes, this could be applied now, or at any time and in any place. It's like a pure distillation of all that is best in the life and teachings of Jesus that we catch glimpses of in the Gospel stories. I've printed this passage off and popped it in with the books we gave to Aila this morning – a reminder for when she's older of what some guy once said about where to get inspiration on how to live with others in the world.

Now I wonder if you felt a bit inadequate when you heard that passage. It does sound a bit impossible to sustain all the time, doesn't it? Well, I'm right with you on that. We're all in the same boat when it comes to human nature, and maybe as I suggested, Jesus too was as prone to lapses as we all are. He really was human, and that's life.

But we need something to hold up and say: this is what we're aiming at. This is what we are going to live by. Earlier we sang that great hymn "let us build a house where love can dwell." YES AND YES, but it's a house with porous walls and wide open doors and windows. The story of Pharaoh's daughter reminds us that race is no barrier to kindness and compassion. Matthew eventually tells us that Jesus was

for all. Paul gives a manifesto that is universal – there are no membership qualifications according to where you are born or your ethnicity.

Our challenge as the church, which we are given as we take part in baptisms is that we will nurture and encourage and help the growing members of our church family to find a way to realise Paul's vision. We are never passive onlookers.

So, welcome Aila, we are **for you** in the same way that **God is for you**. And you are a blessing to us, because you remind us that we are all invited, as George Mackay Brown said, to join the *celebration of life*. AMEN