

Exodus 1:1-2:10

Under Pressure

Theme: The apparently absent God is at work subverting the world's great powers to anoint a saviour for his people.

Aim: Be comforted – even in your worst trials God is not absent.

Headings:

We see the absent God when...

God inexplicably multiplies his people

God's people face down power without fear

God's saviour is miraculously preserved

In our school English classes the teacher, Mr Horwell, used to set regular tests, which we had to do in silence. We sat at large hexagonal tables and, should any of us take rather longer to complete the test than the others, five of us would round, like lions seeking out the weakest gazelle, on the sixth. Very quietly, so as not to let Mr Horwell hear, we would all lean towards the poor boy trying to write his final answers and start humming the words to that great hit by 80s rock group 'Queen': *Under Pressure*.

The pressure that five lads humming *Under Pressure* down your ears can create when you're trying to explain the significance of the jester in *Twelfth Night* or sentence structures in the poems of *Wilfred Owen* is quite astonishing and frequently resulted in someone totally abandoning their attempts to finish the essay at all.

It's a horrible feeling isn't it; someone putting an unfair stress into your life, making you suffer unjustly.

As we go on through the book of Exodus over the next few weeks we are going to see all sorts of people – Moses, Pharaoh, the Israelites and the Egyptians, under pressure and how they respond to that. And we are going to see the plans and purposes God has for people in the middle of those pressures.

But the big problem with this first chapter and a half of Exodus seems to be that God is completely absent. God's name is not mentioned when the Egyptians make the Israelites slaves and force them to build military encampments and toil in the Egyptian sun. God does not intervene with a miracle when the Israelite midwives are commanded by Pharaoh to totally subvert their profession by smothering children at birth. God does not part the waters when Jewish children are thrown into the Nile. In fact God is not mentioned at all anywhere in this passage other than to tell us that the midwives feared him. Fear him they might – but where is he?

This is a group of people that God has made promises to. Generation after generation of their ancestors – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph – have received God's assurance of his mercy towards them, his desire to bless them. And now look at the things they are facing...

The passage tells the story in such a matter of fact way that it's easy to miss just how much the people of Israel suffer. But let's just think, for a minute, about what happens in this story...

300 years before the birth of Moses they came to Egypt, seventy of them, half starved in a famine, seeking refuge and shelter.

But now the immigrants have become unpopular. The red top Egyptian tabloids say that the country is being overrun. The men in the bar of the "Pyramid and Spinx" pub say the Israelites are taking their jobs. Egyptian mums at their NCT classes are worried that Israelites kids are getting all places at the best schools. So a new populist government conveniently 'forgets' that it's only because of the Israelites that the Egyptian nation didn't starve 300 years ago and persecutes the Jews.

First they take away their pay and make them work for food vouchers. In fact, although Pharaoh doesn't explicitly say it, this was probably the first stage in his efforts at population control.

Take the men away to build cities and they won't be at home to make babies and quite a lot of them will die on site if we flog them hard enough.

Next Pharaoh tries to subvert the midwives. We don't know what kind of carrot and stick he used – usually with absolute dictators it's money if you do what I want, death if you don't – but we do know he tried to get them to kill the boy babies as soon as they saw their boys bits. The idea, presumably, was to simulate a still birth so that the mothers would never know. After all if word got round you'd pretty quickly find Jewish women wouldn't be rushing to phone the midwife when the contractions started!

And finally Pharaoh institutes wholesale national genocide. He has now turned enough people against the Israelites that he can ask them to kill Jewish baby boys without fear of a national revulsion. Probably covered with the religious cloak of making them an offering to the God of the Nile, the Egyptian king gets his people to engage in a massacre of the innocents.

Imagine being Jewish and living in Israel at that time. This country where you came as a refugee for protection and safety has become a cross between a work house and a slaughter house.

Imagine being Moses mum, or any one of the hundreds of other mums who must have done the same. Hoping against hope for a baby girl and then having to conceal your son. Imagine having to construct a remote hiding place for him, far from the house, a little basket on the marshes where you

could hide him when the search parties were coming. Imagine being Miriam, Moses' sister, seeing an Egyptian bathing party discover your baby brother; a fate certainly leading to his immediate death. Where is God?

Perhaps one or two people here have come from nations, communities or homes where things are as bad as in Exodus 1 and 2. If you're here today and your home is in Iraq or Nigeria or Somalia you may have seen similar state brutality. If you come from a home with an abusive parent you may well have feared for the life of your little brother or sister.

For most of us the issues are not quite so extreme but the questions none the less real. We watch the suffering of families in TV documentaries about children who are taken away to be child soldiers and we ask: where is God. We see the bosses at work picking off the most vulnerable members of staff to fire so they can shave 1% off the departmental budget. We see the relatives gather round the bedside of a distressed and confused elderly relative more interested in their inheritance than their comfort. We hear about the persecution of Christian believers, regular people going about their business, in North Korea, or Saudi Arabia or Yemen or India. And God seems, absent.

The apparent absence of God is a big problem. It's a big problem for us. It was a big problem for the Israelites 3,500 years ago.

By the time we get to Exodus 19 towards the end of this term we will see God make his presence known in some of the most awesome and spectacular ways you can imagine.

But here in Exodus 1 and 2 the writer of this book wants us to know, right from the beginning, that even when it seems God is absent, there are always telltale signs of his presence.

In the midst of the suffering, confusion and pain of the Israelites the God who promised to be with them IS with them.

And in these chapters there are three signs of God's presence. Three signs that, when they felt they could not see what God was doing to intervene and make things right, showed he was there. Three signs that, when we are perplexed and concerned about the apparent absence of God, can comfort us too.

In this story we see the absent God when...

- God inexplicably multiplies his people
- God's people face down power without fear
- God's saviour is miraculously preserved

1 God inexplicably multiplies his people (1:1-14)

Jacob and his sons first came to Egypt because there was a famine. A rag-tag bunch of 70 refugees made its way across the desert from Canaan and found relief in Egypt where, thanks to the dreams God gave their brother Joseph there was food.

But, even in Egypt, food was limited and the normal expectation would be that the population would fall in a famine. But not Israel. Their numbers grew and grew and grew. By the time of Moses there were probably around 1 million of them – perhaps 1 in 4 of the population of the whole country. You can see why the Egyptians, who were at that time extremely racist and viewed any sort of outsider with great suspicion would be nervous!

But what happened when they were oppressed? When all the things – hard work, poor health care, splitting families up – that you would expect to decimate a population were put in place?

The Israelite population grew! Have a look at v12: *But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread.*

More persecution: more of God's people. It's not just coincidence. It's a clear correlation. More oppression. More of God's people.

That probably wouldn't have surprised the more thoughtful Israelites. Because part of God's great promise that had come down through the generations ever since Abraham was that God would make them into a great and populous nation. So it wasn't surprising that God was keeping his promise. What was, perhaps, surprising was that God's people should grow most just when it seemed least likely.

But actually that's how it is right through the Bible. God's people expand very often at the most unlikely moments.

Since the coming of Jesus, God's people grow mostly not by having lots of children but as people who don't believe in Jesus come to trust in him. That's why if you are here this morning and you are not yet a Christian, or if you are here and you've only just become a Christian you are especially welcome. Because the main and biggest way we want this little bit of God's church, Christ Church Liverpool, to grow is the main way God's church grows – by people trusting Jesus for the first time.

And very often that growth happens most when there is persecution. In the book of Acts the church really started to grow when the authorities launched a great persecution. They drove the Christians out of Jerusalem and, as a result, the gospel went to all the cities round the Mediterranean.

This is what has happened in church history too. The church in China, which now numbers tens of millions of Christian believers, really started to grow only when all the Western missionaries were expelled. It exploded into life when Chinese Christians started being imprisoned, and even killed, for their faith.

But the growth doesn't have to be spectacular to show that God is at work. If you look around you at our society there is no good reason to become a Christian. It won't make you popular. It won't get you power. It won't make anybody think you are an upstanding member of society. It won't

even make people think you are good because Christians these days are viewed in the UK as believing morally harmful things.

Believing almost anything – any philosophy, any religion – is more respectable than being a Christian in the UK today. And yet still, around the country, people are turning to Jesus Christ. Why is that?

It's because even when God seems absent he isn't. God is at work inexplicably multiplying his people.

2 God's people face down evil powers (1:15-22)

Like so many dictators before and since Pharaoh isn't happy to let things go when his first strategy fails. If he can't reduce Israelite numbers as a by-product of his policy of forced labour he will have to resort to more direct methods.

The two midwives Pharaoh calls in certainly wouldn't have been the only ones there were. They are probably the chief midwives – if Pharaoh can get them to do what he wants they will pass on the new extermination policy to their juniors.

It must have been terrifying to stand in front of Pharaoh and hear those words. But the midwives, basically, completely ignore Pharaoh and deliver safely both boys and girls.

Why? Because they fear God. These women are more bothered about facing God's judgment than about facing Pharaoh's. They are more concerned to have God's approval and reward than the riches of the Egyptian king.

It would probably have taken the king and his minions quite a long time to discover that the midwives had taken no notice of the new Egyptian policy.

In those days boys and girls were dressed and wore their hair exactly alike for the first few years. Because they were trying to keep the policy secret the Egyptians could hardly go round checking the sex of babies being carried about by their mothers. So it was probably several years later when Shiphrah and Puah were called back before Pharaoh.

If they were afraid before can you imagine how afraid they must have been this time now they have been found out?

Pharaoh asks them how come this has happened and they tell him that in fact the Israelite women give birth before they even get there so there's no opportunity to kill the babies.

Now it's possible, I suppose, that this is technically true. Perhaps the midwives were deliberately avoiding getting to the mothers too early so that it would be obvious the boys were alive and there was no opportunity to smother them.

But it's not the real truth they tell is it? They don't say that the reason the male children are living is that they fear God more than Pharaoh and refuse to kill them.

It's not the most important thing is this passage but it is worth us pausing there just to reflect for about 5 minutes about truth telling.

Lots of Christians get all in a tizz about passages like this and others in the Bible where people lie and seem to be commended for it. King David pretends to be mad to avoid being killed by a foreign king. Rahab hides Israelite spies in her house and is blessed as a result.

But hang on a minute, some say, shouldn't Christians always tell the truth? After all the Bible says that God always tells the truth. And doesn't the Bible command us not to lie?

Well they are important issues so I think it's worth us exploring this a little bit together.

The Bible teaches, and Christians have always believed, that in most situations it is best to tell the truth. Most of the time, when people lie, we do so for personal gain. We might lie to get a job by pretending to have a qualification we don't have. That is wicked. We might lie to impress a girl by pretending to have done something heroic we haven't done. That is wicked too. We might lie to get someone else into trouble. That's a terrible thing to do

But there are some more complicated cases too. Sometimes we might tell the truth about what happened. But the reason we do that might be to get someone else into trouble. So telling the truth becomes wicked because our motivation is wrong.

And sometimes people don't deserve the truth. Imagine you lived in Belgium in 1941. You are a Christian. There are some Jewish people hiding in your house. You know that if the German authorities find those people they will be killed.

The German soldiers knock on the door. The Gestapo officer steps inside and asks you if there are any Jews in the house. What do you say?

There are Christians who say that you should just tell the truth and leave what happens up to God. Personally I feel that is a terrible kind of fatalism. I think that in that situation you are morally obliged to do whatever you can do that will stop those soldiers finding those Jewish people hiding in your house. And if the best way to get those soldiers off the doorstep is to tell a lie then I think that's what you've got to do.

Because those people are planning something so wicked that they have forfeited their right to be told the truth. That is the view the midwives take here – Pharaoh and his civil servants are behaving in such an evil way that they are not entitled to the truth.

Or imagine that you are smuggling Bible into North Korea and a border guard asks if there is anything illegal in your car. I think you are perfectly entitled at that point to tell a lie because the actions of the North Korean government in

denying their people access to God's words of life are so wicked that they have no right to be told the truth.

Now I want to say that, wonderfully, most of us are never going to be in such a situation. Most of us will never have to lie because the circumstances where a lie is justified are very rare. So we must never use this as an excuse for self-serving lies.

But if this may never happen to us why am I telling about it? Well for two reasons that are absolutely fundamental to who we are as a church.

Firstly because I want us to see that the Bible is not some ancient book that merely says "do this" or "don't do that" but actually deals with human life in a messed up world in all its complexity and variety. The Bible is relevant to the world you and I all actually live in.

And secondly because there are circumstances where lying is the right thing. And during your lifetime you will probably meet at least one Christian who has had to face that choice. Maybe you will meet a Christian convert from Islam who has obtained a false identity to escape being executed because they converted. And if we do not understand the subtlety with which the Bible addresses this difficult topic then we will end up standing in judgment over such people and, perhaps, over David, Rahab, Shiphrah and Puah.

Back to the midwives... These women had every reason to give in to Pharaoh. They would probably have been rewarded if they did. They were certainly likely to be punished if they did not. They were faced with one of the most powerful men in the world. And they took no notice of him because they feared God. And that was a sign that God was at work.

When you hear about a terribly corrupt corporation or government somewhere in the world it can seem like God is absent. But whenever you hear about a Christian taking on that corruption you can be sure that God is at work.

In your own workplace the way people are treated might seem totally unfair and you can wonder what on earth God is doing about it. But if you are standing against that injustice because you fear God then you can be certain that God is at work.

But the third, and by far the most important, sign of God's presence in this story is that...

3 God's saviour is miraculously preserved (2:1-10)

This, in way, is the nicest bit of the story. Through the initiative of both Moses' mother and his sister and the tender heartedness of Pharaoh's daughter (did you notice that all the heroes in this story are women?) the baby Moses is not only saved from the death that Egyptian law said he should have suffered but is brought up to the life of Egyptian Royalty.

It's a wonderful story. Moses mother obeys Pharaoh's law to the letter – she places her baby boy in the Nile! But the river is not the place of his death but the source of his rescue at the hands of an Egyptian Princess who does not share her father's taste for genocide.

In fact Pharaoh proves so powerless against God's plans for his people that not only can he not kill them but one of them ends up being adopted as his grandson! And his mother gets paid to be his wet-nurse!

But as we read the story we mustn't forget that Moses is just one child. And that although it becomes obvious later on that many other Jewish boys survived there must have been many, perhaps tens of thousands, of others who were drowned in the Nile.

And you wonder if it would be any comfort to those who lost children to know that Moses survived. Would it make their grief any less? Wouldn't it in fact seem like God was rubbing salt in the wound – as if he was saying "I saved this baby but not yours."

Well it might seem like that if it was the case that God rescued Moses because Moses was his favourite.

But that's not how it was. God didn't ensure that Moses lived because he didn't care about anybody else. Quite the opposite. God rescued Moses because he wanted to use Moses to save others.

God saving Moses was a huge sign of his presence not because Moses was a one off but because just as God saved Moses so he would save millions of others.

In a few weeks time we'll see that just as Moses was preserved from death by the water of the Nile he, in turn, led the people of Israel to safety through the waters of the Red Sea.

God shows us the rescue of the saviour as a sign of the rescue that will come to everyone who trusts him. That is why Christians make so much of the physical and bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead on the first Easter Sunday.

God didn't raise Jesus from the dead because Jesus was his favourite. He didn't even raise him from the dead because it proved Jesus is the Son of God, though it does prove that. God raised Jesus from the dead to show us the rescue of the saviour as a sign of the rescue that will come to everyone who trusts him.

Moses being drawn out of the water was a sign of what would happen to every one of God's people then. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is not a one-off event. Not at all. It is a sign of what will happen to every single one of God's people when Christ returns; what will happen to you if you put your trust for life and death in Jesus Christ.

Next time you think, as I often think, that God is absent. Next time you feel, as I often feel, that God is not doing anything

about suffering. Next time it seems, as it so often appears, that God is ignoring injustice, look at these signs.

Look at the way God is multiplying his people, all over the world, even in the most unlikely circumstances.

Look at the way God's people stand up to evil forces, not because we think we can win, but because we are moved by God to know it is right.

Most of all, look at the resurrection. Look at the way the Father gives life to the Son and know that there is absolutely no doubt that one day God will rescue you too from sin and death and disease and sadness for a perfect life with him forever.

Until that day never forget that even when he seems absent the God who is infinitely more powerful than any Pharaoh is present in our world.