Bad girls for God – populist racism disempowered

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Last week, we looked at readings that helped us challenge and heal the way some people dehumanize others. This theme stayed alive for me during the week when I read an article in the Médecins Sans Frontières magazine. An MSF volunteer in Ukraine met a man at an evacuation centre. He'd walked there with his two dogs and two cats. He said his animals had saved his life on that walk. "There were drones above my head, but they didn't attack me because they saw I had animals with me." Isn't 'humanity' fickle! Isn't enmity ridiculous! The drone pilots would kill a man, but not his cats and dogs!

This ludicrous dehumanizing comes up again in this week's reading from the Hebrew Scriptures. We're back in Joseph's story A few weeks ago, we saw him sold off by his brothers to slavery in Egypt. Later he'd call those brothers and his parents to join him there, saving them from a catastrophic famine along with his adopted Egypt. Today we've moved on about 400 years in the story. Joseph's descendants still live in Egypt. But from a clan of 12 households, they've become a numerous people. There's a new Pharaoh, and he sees foreigners in such numbers as a security threat. He doesn't care that they're the people of Joseph who saved his country from ruin. Hidden in the translation, he seems to call the Israelites a racist name; *'apiru.* It sounds like *Hebrew*, but it doesn't mean Israelite. Across the Near East, *'apiru* was a word that meant non-citizen, refugee, fugitive, fringe dweller. It's like one of the many phobic slurs around today.

400 years! Today's story is part of a grand historical sweep.

But unlike other grand historical narratives, it doesn't spend much time on the comings and goings at the palace. Nor does it tell of militant operatives running an underground resistance movement. No, we zoom in on five *women*. Inspired by them, I call this sermon *Bad girls for God!* We first meet two Jewish midwives who conspire to save life rather than obey the Pharaoh's order to kill baby boys. They conspire to pervert the course of *in*justice. Their names are Shiphrah and Puah. (Fair and Splendid) Then there are Moses' mother Jochebed, sister Miriam and the Pharaoh's daughter.

Midwives Shiphrah and Puah expose the Pharaoh's bigotry brilliantly; the mind that lies behind dehumanizing a vulnerable, innocent people. When the Pharaoh confronts the midwives with their failure to obey his order and kill the *'apiru* baby boys, their reply plays on his racism. When he asks, *Why have you allowed them to live*, they reply, *Because the* 'apiru *women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.* *(v.19)*

They play on his assumption that these foreigners – *'apiru* – are not like 'normal humans'. And this difference is obviously going to show in the way *'apiru* women bear children. The Pharaoh would never question a statement which implies that *'apiru* are more like vigorous breeding animals than human beings. And of course his other prejudices are that these *'apiru* midwives wouldn't possibly be smart enough to try to trick the Pharaoh with a lie, and they certainly wouldn't be brave enough to engage in real civil disobedience!

The Pharaoh digs himself in deeper and deeper, and in the process, exposes his own heart as the place of real sub-humanity. He tries again. If these *'apiru* boys *must* be spawned, then let's throw them in the river; drown them like the rats they are. Who's the real inhuman one? The story tells it all. And so we read on to the part we all know so well – Moses in the bullrushes.

We see baby Moses *drawn* from the Nile – *born again* from the river sometimes called the Mother of Egypt. A child 'abandoned' in a basket on the river according to the *letter* of the law, is drawn from the river alive in defiance of that law – but by an enemy! Death is turned to life. It's an image we remember at baptisms. It's also a parable of salvation history written from the perspective of the freed slaves.

One fascinating detail that I absolutely love is that his basket is called □□□□□□ (te.vah) – a word we'd normally translate as 'ark'. (Gen 6-9) Baby Moses' basket very rightly has its name from the vessel God told Noah to build; an ark to save life on Earth.

Do you need to be a slave to enter this story? Do you get included in the story – like the midwives and Jochebed and Miriam and the Pharaoh's daughter did – by being midwives to a new and risky rebirth? These women got under the guard of the regime and served God's purpose – ultimately to set a whole people free. Do we face anything like they did? Are there stories like this where we can join in with these women? Or are we meant to be more like the Pharaoh's daughter – privileged, and compassionate? Could one act of our compassion have such consequences?

We Australians also have stories of so-called *illegal aliens* and dangerous waters and vulnerable children. These stories are with us more than ever. I remember in the 1990's there were about 25m displaced people in the world. Now UNHCR says it's 120m – about 1 in 70 of Earth's people, each with a shocking story to tell.

The women of today's story show us that God's little people are called to subvert power that dehumanises. We are called to act in a way that helps vulnerable people who need safety and dignity to find it. Today's story challenges *our* Pharaohs when they turn bigoted stereotypes into '*truth*'; seek to discard their victims somewhere where people can't learn their real

names or hear their true stories; places like Gaza, Nauru, or Cox’s Bazaar. But today we learn that God does know their stories, and that we are to work to rescue them and help make their stories heard.

If we accept without question that dehumanised people and their stories get irretrievably locked away, this has spiritual consequences. We must respond to the love in the women’s defiance and be encouraged by their wit and their bravery. A three-month-old baby was hopefully entrusted to the river by his mother and sister, launched to a new future in a tiny ark *tevah* □□□□□□ and watched and prayed for.

An ark is God’s way of preserving the future against calamity. Our role in this sort of rescue mission today is to build arks – or even become arks ourselves – for the ones whose stories are systematically silenced – refugees, Aboriginal people, unemployed and homeless – and because of the Noah reference, our duty extends to rescuing endangered species and endangered ecosystems. This story calls us to be like the two midwives and the three other women, to turn fearful bigotry on its head so life may be honoured and preserved. Amen