

Dear Friends,

Exodus 1: 15-22

Do the midwives have a dilemma? Pharaoh who is a tyrant and a monster has commanded that they kill at birth any Israelite baby boy. It is not wise to cross a tyrant, those who do, don't last long. Are they agonising about what to do?

We are told about two midwives. Were there only two for a people so numerous that they are described as a nation, or are these two the leaders of the Union of Midwives, or do they represent many midwives?

We are given two names. The two people appear only very briefly, but the story teller clearly knows that they must be remembered. They are the kind of people who should have statues put up in their honour. Their names are Shiphrah and Puah. Shiphrah means "beauty" or "fair one"; Puah can mean "fragrant blossom" or it can mean "splendid one" or "shining". I like to think of them as "Beauty" and "Shining". We're not talking about anything so shallow as physical appearance, these women show us what it really means to be beautiful and to shine and that's not about what's on the surface, that's about what's on the inside.

The midwives don't have a dilemma, they are not agonising about what to do, they know that Pharaoh's command is wrong and they will not obey it. They are described as fearing God. That does not mean that they are frightened of God, it means that they feel reverence and awe before God, they trust God fully and are open to whatever God may want from them. In their work they see the miracle of life every day. They know that every baby is precious and they do all they can to struggle for every life. It is therefore useless commanding them to take life. They can't. If their commitment to life means that they lose their own lives, then, so be it. They are like all those key workers who keep going to work, doing what they do, even though they may be putting their health and even their lives at risk.

Troublingly for Shiphrah and Puah their disobedience cannot be kept secret. The presence of laughing, crying, living baby boys is the evidence that proves that they have defied Pharaoh. They don't have to wait long before there is the feared knock on the door. They are taken to Pharaoh. Pharaoh confronts them with their disobedience, "Why have you done this and allowed the boys to live?" The brave midwives look Pharaoh straight in the eye and say, "These Hebrew women are so strong and vigorous that they give birth before we even get to them. If we got there sooner, we would of course carry out your instructions, but we never get there quickly enough". There is something about them that even Pharaoh can't touch. He is furious. He demands that they do as he says and sends them away. They can't quite believe that they've got away with it.

Through the ages this story has caused a lot of problems for those who have commented on it. Their great concern is that Shiphrah and Puah lie. They are deceiving Pharaoh by saying that they don't arrive in time for the births, of course they arrive in time, they are good at what they do. Some have condemned them for

lying, others have seen this as an example of a lie that in the circumstances is justified. The story teller clearly sees them not as people to be criticised, but as people to be honoured. Indeed, God honours them. It says that God made households for them. Most often that is seen as God giving them the blessing of large families, but it could be that their name becomes honoured, they come to have a good reputation and a high standing amongst the people. They are looked up to, valued and respected for who they are and what they've done.

Sadly, Tyrants do not give up. If you close one door of destruction on them, they will open several more. Pharaoh has learnt that the midwives will not kill the baby boys so he turns to his own people. He commands them to join in with a search and destroy mission. "Go out, find all the Israelite baby boys and drown them in the River Nile".

Perhaps at a meal together with his family Pharaoh boasts about what he is doing. "The midwives wouldn't kill them, so I've sent the people to kill them". His daughter, the princess, observes her father. She sees his expressions. She hears his words. She says nothing. She doesn't join in with his laughter.

God bless you,

Tony