

SERMON: Sunday – 2 July 2023 – Rev Alistair Cowper

The Messiah you are looking for is Jesus

Genesis 21:8-21

Acts 18:1-4, 24-28

So here's the ancient story from Genesis.

A father has been promised a son despite his and his wife's old age.

After what seems like ages the son is born and the father throws a party.

But he's not the first son born.

There was another.

Conceived out of wedlock.

A desperate attempt to control the future and bring about the promise.

No party for this son only jealousy.

Sarah can't stand to see Isaac mocked by Ishmael.

She has Hagar and her son sent away.

Abraham is upset.

God reminds him of the Promise.

God expands Abraham's understanding of Fatherhood.

I have other sheep who are not of this fold.

Hagar is sent away.

To Beersheba - a place meaning seven wells or well of the oath.

But the well is dry.

And Hagar's ready to die.

God hears the cry.

And an angel brings a promise

And now a well appears

Was it there all the time

Now that eyes are opened

And Egypt beckons.

The story of family strife and rivalry and all that this can become, is clearly not just reserved for the storytelling of popular TV series such as Game of Thrones, Succession and even the relaunched All Creatures Great and Small.

Tension within a family makes for great drama but often it is something that many people can relate to from a personal point of view.

The Scriptures are full of the dramas of real life. It's no wonder that so many gripping TV dramas have a theme which we can find in the Scriptures.

The background to the story of Hagar and Ishmael is of course the fact that Sarah, being keen to supply Abraham with an heir, and going so many years

of being unable to birth an heir, gifted to Abraham Hagar as a concubine with whom he had a son, Ishmael.

Sarah, herself birthing Isaac in due time, became somewhat jealous after seeing the two boys playing together. She conspired to paint an unwholesome picture of the threat to Isaac's inheritance that Ishmael posed, and demanded Abraham send both Hagar and Ismael off into the wilderness. This, we read, is what he did.

Ishmael would have been on the cusp of adulthood at this time, a teenager. Sarah's inhumanity towards Hagar and Ishmael is a key feature of this text today as is the fact that Abraham allowed her demand to effectively go unchallenged.

It is worth mentioning here, that later, According to important stories within the Islamic faith, Abraham and Ishmael were reunited, - whilst on pilgrimage together in the wilderness, God invited them to build the Kaaba, which sits at the heart of the holiest place in Islam: Mecca, the metaphorical place of God's residence.

It sounds from the Genesis account that we have here the foundation story for a new people who, like Abraham and Sarah, and like us, belong to the One Good Shepherd.

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God tells Abraham that Isaac is the son through whom his descendants will be counted. But that God "will also make a nation of the descendants of Hagar's son because he is your son, too." (12-13).

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Likewise,

Jesus said, (in John 10) And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. (John 10:16).

When we think of the 'out-casting' of Hagar and Ishmael, we might consider how many families today endure the misfortune of fall-out and tension, sadly there are far too many stories telling of people being outcast, sometimes without any future reconciliation.

There can be all sorts of reasons why this might happen such as: personality clashes, inheritance, differences-of- opinion, unequal pulling together in the care of others and so on. Often what starts off as a misunderstanding and minor squabbling can become a more serious problem if matters are left unchecked.

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We do well to follow the advice in Proverbs 17:

Starting a quarrel is like breaching a dam; so drop the matter before a dispute breaks out.

Proverbs 17:14

Alongside this we have broken families that have become so because of the rejection of children by parents based on their disapproval of what they believe to be their child's choices about their way of life. Sadly, this can still happen to some family members who find themselves rejected by their own families who choose to withhold their love and acceptance because they don't approve.

But we clearly see in the story of this ancient family breakdown, that God provides for the outcasts.

As Hagar cries to God out of concern for her thirsty son in the parched wilderness, God provides not just the assurance that through Ishmael will be launched a great nation, but in a revelation of divine love God offers the provision of a well with fresh water.

This is deeply relevant within this story for it is a reminder that though the world sadly brings harm to the children of God, never is the love of God withheld or in any doubt.

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Ashley Wilcox points out that Hagar's oppression comes in familiar forms: nationality, class and sex. "Hagar is an outsider: she is a foreigner, she is enslaved, and she is a woman. Hagar's body is at the disposal of the people who own her; they can decide to impregnate her and then send her away to die without consequence."

Wilcox, Ashley M., *The Women's Lectionary* (p. 169).

We would do well to learn a lesson about how to treat others. Whether these people be our blood relations or strangers. To be human is to have the obligation of treating others with the same love that we would expect to be shown to ourselves.

The story ends with a move to Egypt, so symbolic of God's reaching out to those cast out. Egypt would feature greatly in Israel's future. Was it any surprise then that God had gone before and made a way.

For its in the movement of people to different places that we see God's love spread from people to people; the message transmitted from person to person.

Paul moves from Athens to Corinth.

Aquilla and Priscilla are expelled from Rome and end up in Corinth.

Together they make tents.

And share the Gospel

After a bit of much needed encouragement from other believers, Apollos arrives from Alexandria - Egypt - via Ephesus and goes to Achaia Province where Paul had been forced to leave.

So God's work continues through someone else.

The message?

"The Messiah you are looking for is Jesus".

It was the message then. And its the message now.

We are all looking for salvation though we might not all call it that.

We are all looking for peace and prosperity; for love, for joy, for meaning, for purpose, for identity.

And its all found through Jesus who is the Good Shepherd, the Christ, the fusion of the divine with the natural.

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Theologian Leonardo Boff describes it like this:

"The principal characteristic of human beings is our role as bearers of consciousness, of intelligence—in a word, of the spirit. The spirit infuses the whole universe from its very beginning, but in human beings it becomes self-aware and free.... Nothing shows the presence of the spirit in human life as well as love does.... When love is expressed as compassion, the spirit enables us to come out of ourselves, put ourselves in the other's place, bend over the person fallen by the wayside."

(Leonardo Boff, Come Holy Spirit: Inner Fire, Giver of Life, and Comforter of the Poor)

"The Messiah you are looking for is Jesus" is another way of saying that the way of Christ is to live with the Spirit of love and to live for love sake's.

Let us pray,

O God,

Good Shepherd,

Spirit Divine,

Thou who art love beyond all telling,

Saviour and King, we worship Thee.

Immanuel, within us dwelling,
Make us what Thou wouldst have us be.