

SERMON: 21 June 2020 – Rev Alistair Cowper

" One Flock and One Shepherd "

(Genesis 21:8-21)

There are so many connections that we could make with our own lives. May the Spirit of God speak to you and make the connections that you need to hear.

There is so much we can learn from reading and hearing God speak.

We are life long learners.

We never stop learning.

Jesus said so.

He called his followers disciples, which means one who is always learning.

He said students are not above their teachers, nor slaves above their masters.

He meant we'd always be learning.

So let's let go of our need to always be right.

I heard a radio programme this week when someone was being interviewed and they just kept refusing to be open minded about the topic they were discussing.

It was so infuriating. I had to turn it off.

So let's always be open minded and open hearted as we read the Bible and hear God's word.

Let's be life long students of life.

And so to the Ancient Book of Beginnings, the Book of Genesis and to the story of Hagar, the servant girl.

Hagar's story is the story of Israel - she is cast out of her home - exiled, just as happened to Israel;

she wanders aimlessly in the wilderness - like God's people, Israel did; she suffers real agony - she can't bear to watch her own son suffer and die - like Israel, the Suffering Servant;

she empties herself - symbolised in verse with the words her water had gone - in an effort to rescue her son -

she is the servant who suffers to let Israel live, who steps aside so that Isaac can prosper in Ishmael's place.

You can see the connections with Christ, who was despised and rejected, thrown out of the city, and suffers and dies, his life poured out - the servant who suffers to let, not just Israel live, but the whole world.

We need to go back to Genesis 16 to get the story of Hagar.

Sarah is married to Abraham and God has promised them an heir but Sarah is unable to have children.

She takes matters into her own hands and suggest Abraham has a child with her servant girl Hagar.

Which of course she does but as soon as Hagar has conceived there is real friction between her and Sarah.

Can you imagine what it must have been to live in that household?

Sarah blames Abraham - seems reasonable - and Abraham tells Sarah to treat Hagar however she likes - (6) "do with her whatever you think best".

Sarah mistreats her and Hagar runs away.

The angel of the Lord finds her and tells her to go back and submit to her mistress - to face the suffering - that is so Christ like isn't it.

And God tells Hagar that she will have many descendants beginning with the child she is carrying who she is to call Ishmael, because God had heard of her misery.

He will be a wild donkey of a man;
his hand will be against everyone
and everyone's hand against him,
and he will live in hostility
toward all his brothers.

Hagar is changed by this encounter and realises that the Lord is the God who sees her,

(14) I have now seen the One who sees me

Abraham was 86 when Ishmael was born, which means Sarah was 76. It would be another 14 years before the promise for Sarah to have a child of her own would come.

And perhaps then the problems really started.

Remember those verses about Ishmael living in hostility toward all his brothers?

Well its started on the day baby Isaac was weaned when there was a great feast to celebrate the birth of the promised heir.

Sarah is furious - again - and Abraham is distressed.

And again, Divine guidance is that Abraham should listen to his wife - always good advice.

So Hagar is sent away - and once again finds herself in the wilderness - where she can't bear to watch her son suffer.

But the God who heard her and saw her years before would hear her and see her again.

God heard Ishmael's cry and tells Hagar not to be afraid. God opened her eyes and she saw a well where she and the boy drank from.

God hears.

God sees.

All things.

God heals.

God restores.

All things.

The Lord is the stabilising influence in this story and every, story.

God hears.

God sees.

All things.

God sees what's happening and is working things out, even though it takes years to do so.

God hears.

God sees.

All things.

The Lord sees Hagar, encourages her, strengthens her to go back and face the world she was running away from, but now with a new hope that there are better things to come.

God strengthens.

God encourages.

All things.

The friction between Isaac and Ishmael.

God heals.

God restores.

All things.

The tensions we create between race, religion, gender.
God heals.

God restores.

All things.

All things.

In Christ.

Jesus said, in John 10,

I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—and - I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.

Ishmael and Isaac.

One flock and one shepherd.

People who are not like us.

One flock and one shepherd.

Outsiders and insiders.

One flock and one shepherd.

Them and us.

One flock and one shepherd.

Our broken and hurting world.

One flock and one shepherd.

No racism, no white supremacy.

No colonialism, no injustice.

Just the kingdom of Heaven.

One flock and one shepherd.

Let us pray:

Transforming God,

We turn to you as dwellers in a world which knows such pain.

We come knowing that your dream is for change which renews, change which enlivens, change which casts out fear.

In your mercy, we ask that you remember those whose lives are less than they could be and less than they should be.

Lord, hear us. Lord, graciously hear us.

Transforming God,

We see so many signs of a world in conflict,

where ethnic violence, raw greed and disdain for the poor and the weary result in huge injustice all around our tired globe.

In your mercy, we ask that you remember those who seek an end to their torment and their turmoil, yet do not know where to turn.

Lord, hear us. Lord, graciously hear us.

Transforming God,

You take pity on the lost and the lonely,
the marginalised and the oppressed, those women and men and children for whom change is nothing more than an unimaginable hope.

In your mercy, we ask that you remember those who are living in poverty, who fear they may be no more than a burden, who live lives which go unheard and unnoticed.

Lord, hear us. Lord, graciously hear us.

Transforming God,

Your great Love laughs in the face of our human selfishness.

Inspire people of good will the world over to be peace-makers in the presence of cruel tyranny.

Move your church to play its rightful part in making known the Good News of your Son, Jesus Christ,
whether in word or through action.

Lord, hear us. Lord, graciously hear us.

Transforming God,

We know that your Word to us is the Word of Life.

May we place our trust in your promises,

and live to bring you glory in our parish, in our nation and in our world.

Bless all who bear the name of Christ within them, so that we might learn to be his true disciples in this world of need.

When you made us, Father God, you left within us a quest – a search that brooked no resolving until it found its end in you.

But how can you be swiftly found if there be none to show the way?

So we pray, stir the embers of great fires within our people's heart.

In these days, let those who hesitate in the shadows of a calling, find the clear light of your directing.

Let those who would show the hand of love and service, behold the opening of a door.

Let those with a word to proclaim, find a voice, so that through every place and corner, all may know that the faith of our fathers still courses in the life's blood of our people.

So may the great awakening commence.

You have not finished with us in church or nation.

Indeed, by your grace, the best is yet to be and a new chapter is unfolding.

Bring us forward, Lord, and let the springtime begin.

All this we ask in Jesus' name,
the One who taught us to pray when we are together,

Our Father

Who is in heaven

Holy is your name

Your kingdom come, your will be done

On earth as it is in heaven

Give us today our daily bread

And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors

And lead us not in temptation

But deliver us from evil

For yours is the Kingdom, the Power and the Glory, forever

Amen