

## **SERMON FOR SUNDAY 21<sup>ST</sup> JUNE 2020**

### **ORDINARY 12A**

**READINGS: Genesis 21:8-21; Psalm 86; Romans 6:1-11; Matthew 10: 24-39**

In today's language, Hagar was an abused woman. Her vulnerability and powerlessness were exploited by those with power and position. She was a foreign-born slave woman, and as a slave had no rights in the household of Abraham and Sarah. In the understandings of that time, her mistress, Sarah, was entitled to do with her as she pleased. And Sarah had decided to use Hagar to bear a surrogate child to Abraham when it appeared that Sarah herself would never be able to conceive and give birth to a child. Under their traditions, any child that Hagar bore as Sarah's slave would belong to her mistress.

Surrogacy then, as now, has many complications. It has never been a simple or straightforward way to resolve infertility, as all sorts of emotions, maternal bonds, identity issues, jealousies and hurts get in the way. In fact, even before her child was born there were problems for Hagar. For when she became pregnant to Abraham, she was foolish enough to boast about her ability to conceive, and then rapidly found out that her mistress was jealous and retaliated by treating her harshly. Abraham was complicit in this abuse, so Hagar had nowhere to turn for help. So, she ran away into the wilderness where she was found by an angel who gave her a promise from God that she would have a vast number of descendants, and prophesied to her about her unborn son Ishmael. The angel also instructed her to return to her mistress.

This seems to me a hard fate for Hagar, as she was returned to her abusive situation where she bore her son and began to raise him. When Sarah finally conceived and gave birth to her son Isaac, this brought additional complications for Hagar and Ishmael. For Ishmael was Abraham's oldest son, and therefore would normally have been presumed to be Abraham's heir, as children borne to slaves were considered legitimate.

However, Sarah's son Isaac was the precious son, promised by God and designated as heir. Sarah was determined that nothing would stand between her Isaac and his inheritance. She had been jealous of Hagar all along, and was now determined to get rid of her and Ishmael. And she didn't seem to have any compunction about putting their lives in danger; all she was concerned about was protecting her son's inheritance. Sarah demanded that Abraham get rid of them.

Sarah does not appear in a good light in all of this. She was demanding, vengeful, harsh and cruel. Abraham did show some concern for the welfare of Ismael, but he did nothing to protect him. He comes across as a weak man, complicit in his wife's cruelty. All along he did nothing to stop Sarah mistreating Hagar. He said, "She's your slave, do as you please," when he could have stepped in and told Sarah to stop. In other words, he abdicated his responsibilities to ensure fair treatment in his household.

When you think about this, Abraham and Sarah come across as rather tarnished heroes of the faith. This often seems to have been glossed over when they are talked about as exemplars of people of faith. But it is also true that they were sinful, ordinary people called to an extraordinary task, and sometimes they failed, and sometimes they acted very badly. The Old Testament does not gloss over this reality. And the story actually went from bad to worse.

This was because Sarah demanded that Abraham get rid of Hagar and Ishmael. Abraham was upset at this ultimatum, but then Abraham had a word from God in which he was assured by God that his son Ishmael would also found a nation, and therefore would be preserved. So, he, somewhat reluctantly, farewelled Hagar and Ishmael and cast them out of their encampment and into the harsh desert environment. He, at least, had some compassion and concern, but the reality would have been that Sarah would have continued to conspire against Ishmael and his mother, leading to ongoing family instability and fighting.

But we have to feel for Hagar, cast out of home and vulnerable. She wandered the desert with her son seeking water and food. But she was a foreigner, probably a city bred Egyptian, and she did not know how to live in the desert, nor did she know how to find food and water there. After all the mistreatment she had to bear, it now appeared that she and her son were also going to face a cruel death from thirst and starvation.

She was a woman of love and compassion for her child. In fact, her love for her son was so great that she could not bear to watch him suffer, so when they were near death, she placed him under a bush to die and crawled out of sight to await her own death. It was at this moment that she had a second encounter with God, who miraculously saved them from their fate. **God also, at this point, makes promises to Hagar that are equivalent to the promises made to Abraham. These are the promises of many descendants, and the founding of a great nation and people.**

She is given these promises despite the fact that she is not an Israelite, and therefore not one of God's chosen people. And despite the fact that she is a slave, not at all important in the human scale of affairs. And yet, God responds to her cries for help. God may have made promises to Sarah and Abraham that may have seemed to exclude Hagar and Ishmael; but God heard Hagar's cry, the cry of the oppressed one, and God granted her life and a future for her son.

This resourceful woman raised her son in the wilderness, found him a wife from among her people, and he became the patriarch of the Arab people of the desert country. His people also claimed Abraham as their ancestor, as the Arab people do to this day. But they also became the sworn enemies of the Israelites, a thorn in their side to this very day. The ill treatment of Hagar and Ishmael had very long-term repercussions.

It is ironic that later in the history of Israel, God will rescue the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. But first God rescues an Egyptian from oppression in what becomes Israel. In both cases God rescues the oppressed from almost certain death, and leads them through the desert to the future God has planned for them. God will do something great for them out of their oppression, but it is also clear that the repercussions of the oppression will continue to be played out on the stage of history long after those who were involved are dead. It will, in fact, haunt the history of Israel, who have made a powerful enemy in Ishmael's people, the Arabs who will in time become Moslems.

This story resonates with a lot of the issues that have been in the news over recent weeks – truth in history telling, slavery and other forms of oppression, and how we view the legacies of people of the past especially when there were aspects of their behaviour that was reprehensible.

This story seems to stack up fairly well in the issue of truth telling. Unlike some of the accounts of history that are currently being critiqued (like Australian colonial history), in this story the misdeeds of the powerful, and the oppression of the vulnerable are clearly stated. There is no whitewashing or justification of bad behaviour. Clearly, we sit very uncomfortably today with the idea of Hagar being a slave, but slavery was taken for granted in those days. Most of the slaves were probably taken into slavery when their countries or tribes were defeated in war. Many of the people of Israel will themselves experience being slaves. That is no justification for endorsing present day slavery, but clearly it was a fact of life in those days. What we can clearly see was that even by the standards of that time, Hagar and her son were exploited and badly mistreated. And we can see that the 'so-called' heroes of the faith Abraham and Sarah behaved very badly.

This raises that contemporary issue, that of how we view the legacies of people of the past (and present) when they have great achievements but also had personal moral flaws and/or have done things we find unacceptable. We live in a time when people are wanting to tear down or deface statues of people like Captain Cook and Winston Churchill who are perceived by some to have caused harm, and also to rewrite the historical accounts. Some of this movement has validity. There is no doubt in my mind that, for example, much of Australian history has been written from the perspective of the conquerors without including the perspective of the indigenous people (and sometimes completely ignoring their existence and suffering at the hands of the settlers). But some of this movement, I think is misguided, in that it wants to put onto people from the past current understandings that they wouldn't have shared. And often it fails to understand that humanity, by its nature is flawed.

Philip Yancey wrote a book 'Soul Survivor,' subtitled 'How Thirteen Unlikely Mentors Helped My Faith Survive the Church' in which he talks about thirteen of his heroes/mentors of faith who helped him understand how to be a Christian after he had become disenchanted with the Southern Baptist church he was raised in. What he discovered as he researched his book, was that all his heroes had flaws as well as gifts and graces and achievements. He struggled with how to reconcile this, but realised that his mentors, like us all are sinful people in need of God's forgiving grace. But he was also very clear that the Gospel comes with high ideals, so that bad behaviour cannot be justified by appealing to God's grace. As Philip Yancey said, "The gospel presents both high ideals and all-encompassing grace."

Paul put it this way, "So you must consider yourself dead to sin and alive to God in Jesus Christ." For the forgiveness of sin although freely given is not a cheap option that takes away the repercussions of sin. For our sins, like Sarah's and Abraham's sin have the capacity to cause long term problems. It is far better that we seek to live prayerfully and under the guidance of God, in order to live wisely and well relationships with others.

As Christians, aware of our own sinfulness, we understand that no one will ever be perfect, and that even great heroes will act badly at times. But we also need to be aware of those who get hurt when others act badly, so although we seek to be forgiving and forgiven, we also have a duty to call out wrong behaviour especially when it impacts on others, especially the vulnerable. And we do need to be sensitive in how someone's life is commemorated – as far as possible telling the whole truth, not just the bits about heroism or achievement.

But going back to the story, there is another thing that needs to be remembered. It is that God loves and cares for all people, but has a particular concern for the oppressed peoples of the world. This is shown in God's care for Hagar and Ishmael after they are cast out into the desert. And we who are called to live out God's love in Jesus Christ, should be concerned for those who are currently oppressed and suffering. Therefore, we should not ignore refugees and asylum seekers wherever they might be, whether in Syria, Lebanon, on the Thai Burma border, or indeed in detention in Australia and PNG. Nor can we ignore the hungry, the homeless, those struggling after bushfires, or with droughts, or those suffering from racism and prejudice. This is a real struggle for us, for the needs are great and never ending, but we must do our best to respond.

For our calling as followers of Jesus Christ is to be the people who carry God's message of love and care to our community, and to be the people who are alert to those who are crying out for help. On this anniversary Sunday, let us think about those we could be reaching out to help and encourage, and those who we could invite into sharing in the community of faith. For God who rescued Hagar and Ishmael from their oppression and gave them new life, longs to bring new life to those who are oppressed or in need or in despair or believe themselves unloved today. May we reach out in love to them, in the name of the One who reaches out to us in love. Amen.

