

Sermon Archive 157

Sunday 18 June 2017

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: Genesis 18: 1-15
Genesis 21: 1-7

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



The Knox Church Wednesday morning Bible study group is sitting in a serious circle in the Committee Room. As is our regular spiritual practice, we're reading sacred scripture together. "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" [2 Timothy 3:16], so it's a pretty solemn business. The passage we're reading begins with much gravitas: the Lord appeared to Abraham by the great oaks of Mamre. Abraham is greeting three strangers, bowing down before them reverently. He is extending the formalities of welcome. He is doing everything with dignity - as we are reading our reading with respect. "Let me bring a little bread that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on - since you have come to your servant." So they said "Do as you have said."

Having made his dignified flourish of hospitality in the manner of a mannered Middle Eastern man, Abraham goes into the tent and says "help Sarah! Make me a cake".

At this point the serious Bible studiers of Knox Church let out a whoop of laughter. There's something wonderfully

comedic about a man making great flourishes and gestures, looking so rich and dignified, doing a Hyacinth Bucket, then realising (chop chop) he needs a cake. A typical self-aggrandising, kitchen-useless man - needing his wife to do the work! As the revered patriarch and matriarch emerge as scrambling, disorganised, last minute Darby and Joan, they suddenly look absurd. We serious studiers of the Bible let out a laugh, and it's a marvellous mirthful moment on a Wednesday morning in June.

Here's another bit of laughter. After the cake's been baked, Sarah's listening from a distance to the men eating and talking. She hears her name being mentioned. Her ears prick up. Are they complimenting her for the cake? That'd be one for the books! In fact, their conversation's nowhere near any part of the book shelf. They're talking about her having a child. Now, as scripture quaintly puts it, it was for Sarah beyond her being "after the manner of women". She's old and way past making babies. That these visitors could be so wildly divorced from reality - it's laughable! In fact, although she's meant to laugh just to herself, she actually laughs out loud - because the men hear her laughing.

At this stage, theologians often go off on deep reflections about humanity's inclination to laugh at the promises of God. But I don't think that Sarah thinks she's listening to a promise of God. I think she thinks she's listening to some stupid men making fools of themselves. Have they never heard of menopause? Are they really that naïve? Self-

important, useless men, eating cake that none of them could make, displaying such ignorance of female anatomy! Humanity's ridiculous. Sarah laughs out loud!

At this point something dark falls, like a shadow. Suddenly: what are you laughing at? Are you laughing at me? Has an ego been bruised? Is someone getting angry? Maybe. We're told that Sarah denies laughing - because suddenly she's afraid. Not all laughter is welcomed by strangers - and sometimes it can be dangerous. There's tension here - and the Bible studiers feel it. As the strangers retreat from the room (almost as if they're walking backwards), we feel the tension needs breaking.

We come to verse 5 of chapter 21: "Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him". Someone in the room says "Hey Abraham; sorry about your retirement" - and everyone dissolves in laughter! The tension needed breaking, and laughter did it well. The threat has gone. The baby has come. Abraham's retirement is ruined, and the smile is on the dial of the readers. The name given to the child is "Isaac" - which in Hebrew means "he laughs". The child is named after laughter. "Now Sarah said 'God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me'". And on a Wednesday morning, in a Knox Church Bible study, Sarah's word came true. We laughed with Sarah.

We laugh because humanity really is kind of absurd - the

way we strut and pose, the way we know we can't make
cake to save ourselves. We laugh because humanity, even
when it's trying to articulate something of hope and
promise, sounds like silly school boys who don't know a
single thing about girls. We laugh because sometimes life
brings so much tension that just needs breaking - fires in
towers, missile tests across the ocean, fear of terrorism.
(God help us break the tension!) And sometimes we laugh,
because even though we're Darby and Joan, and really very
silly, sometimes God places in our ageing hands a blessing
we never believed would happen - a future, a life to love, a
child called Laughter!

I pray laughter for each person here. I pray smiling. I pray
surprise at the wonderful gifting of God who is funny and
kind. May we laugh with Sarah, and become part of what
gives birth to something good.

Amen.