

## Sermon Archive 299

Sunday 21 June, 2020

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Genesis 21: 8-21

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Let's follow a story along; and let's give ourselves permission to now and then step outside the story, just for a bit, to explore some possible parallels, before joining our characters again.

-ooOoo-

The story begins with a particular family unit, a married couple. Are they good, or are they bad? Well, given the skill of the narrator, we know it's not that simple. **He's** a mixture. He's brave enough to have left his old home behind, and to have gone on an adventure. But he's not so brave that when cornered, he won't just lie to save himself. He's a willing explorer of the word, pressing the edges of what he knows, but also he tends just to do what his wife tells him to do. He has deep feelings, but seldom honours them through his actions. **She**, in an equally complicated way, is both sensitive and cynical. She knows how to laugh - but also how to feel vulnerable and worthless. She knows the deep value of a child, yet also is willing to throw a child away. Are they good, or bad? No; much like real people, much like us, they are complicated.

What makes them of interest to the story-teller, what makes them different from everyone else, is that these people believe they have a destiny. They carry, within them, a promise. They believe that life is about being blessed, then passing on that blessing to the world. Complicated, human, they've been talking to God - and so believe in the future.

Let's step outside the story just now, into our world. We find, in our world, a movement of human beings, a community, a family unit, if you like. It's made up of ordinary human beings, who are much like any other people, but who believe they're on a journey with the One who gives a future. When they say creeds, they're inclined to say "We are not alone; we live in God's world; we believe in God who has created and is creating". While they, like Sarah, have their more cynical moments, and laugh

at great divine promises, deep down they have a hope. When they put their dead into their tombs, they keep their expectation ready for the third day. When they hear the wind, they wonder whether it might be the Spirit. When they see the face of a hungry person, they wonder "could it be HIM, and how shall we feed him?"

The world called these people "the children of Abraham". Some call them "the Church". Whatever we call them, they carry a promise, so have something, like a blessing, to give to the world.

Back into our story we go!

The story's next character is another woman. Coming from somewhere else, where divine promises aren't made, and where no one's reminded by the stars of how bright the future is, she joins, or is compelled to join, the blessed family unit's story. She gets picked up along the way.

She brings no possessions with her - because she doesn't have any. She brings no freedom, because she doesn't have any. She feels she fits into the world in a kind of subservient way - like she's, if not a slave, then at least a servant.

As she comes into the orbit of the blessed and blessing people, do you think she might be able to share in the blessing. Sometimes it works that way. We come across people who are generous to us, who improve our lives. And for God's sake, you'd think falling into the company of people who believe in the future, would be bound to be a blessing. As the story stretches out into the future, another character will say "come unto me, all who labour, and heavy laden, and I'll give you rest". He'll say "my peace I give you". He'll say "I have come that they may have abundant life". It's good to come into the company of those who believe in the future and have blessing to share!

Let's step out of the story again, into our world. A boy is taken under the wing of the church. He's taught how to light candles, prepare the jug of wine, put on his special clothes. He'll participate in the early morning theatre of the liturgy, playing the part of the altar boy. Like the incense infusing its scent into his surplus, so his service will infuse into his identity. Maybe he'll feel close to the mystery of God, a special help to the priest.

In the world, a woman comes to the church in Blenheim. She has suffered a miscarriage, and lost her baby. She comes for help and counselling from the local Anglican priest. She needs to share in the blessing. She needs to believe again in the future. Coming into the orbit of the family with the blessing, she will find

help.

In the world comes a Christchurch teenager - attending a Christian school. He's beginning to feel that he is not like the others in his class. He needs the resources of "the children of Abraham" to help him sort out who he is, to find a good place within his skin. Coming into the orbit of the blessed and blessing family, he will find help.

Back to the story we go.

It's not going well. The blessed and blessing family is manifesting all its worst character traits. The bravery, the adventurous spirit, the deep commitments, have all retreated. And taking sway in their place are the insecurities, the jealousies, the use of power by the masters over the slaves.

Having lost faith in the promised future, Abraham and Sarah use Hagar as a solution to their problem. Hagar is forced to be a convenient womb. She takes one for the family. And then, because there is fear and resentment in Sarah, and weakness of character in Abraham (even though there is also sorrow for the child of the one about to become a victim), Hagar is forced out into the desert, where there is nothing to support life. Rather than receive a share in the blessing, a reassurance of a future, Hagar and her child are used, then abandoned - put somewhere beyond where they can be heard.

I want to get out of that story - so here I go, leaping out of the plot, back into the safety of the world, where no one who's been speaking with God could ever withhold help.

The altar boy accuses the priest. No one believes him. The church hires lawyers to prove him wrong. The author of the church-initiated enquiry, running parallel to the court case, is thanked for his work, declared "of diminished capacity", and put into retirement. The altar boy, now a man, overdoses. No one heard him.

The woman in Blenheim is told that her abuser has resigned, so everything's OK. There's no need for her to speak of it anymore. No one heard her.

And the Christchurch teen, nurtured by his Christian school, now has nothing to do with church. Nobody within the church even tried to hear him. He must wonder about this thing called "church".

Back in the story, what happens next? Flanked by altar boys, and silenced women, weeping for those who are not being heard, Hagar just cries. We're not told that

her son, Ishmael (he has a name - and maybe his father's features), was crying. We are told that he was using his voice. So maybe he's shouting his rage at the sky. Is that what thirteen year-olds do when they're abandoned? No one is hearing him - it'd make you want to shout.

Here's the story's turning point.

*The angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him". Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink. God was with the boy, and he grew up.*

When the church fails to be the blessing it should be, when faith abandons people, rather than gives them a future, God hears, and reveals a well by which Hagar and Ishmael may live.

Is it perhaps a pious platitude, that God hears and cares? Does it make much of a difference? Relationships between Isaac's people and Ishmael's people are certainly going to be difficult for a long time - Israel and Palestine. And God caring hasn't changed the historical injustice that occurred. Except that the people of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, from now on, as they tell their story, will include the story of what was done to Hagar and Ishmael. The silenced people, for whom God cared, will now be referenced as the story gets told – be given a voice. Is this the making real of God hearing? As we hear, and understand, and apologize, is this God hearing? As we resolve to be a better source of blessing, a more committed listening community, is that “God listening”? As we work hard to find a new well, while the institution fails, is that God listening?

-ooOoo-

The story begins with a particular family. Are they good, or are they bad? More importantly, are they listening? Are they becoming part of the story of God hearing the woman and the boy?

We keep a moment of quiet.

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