

PENTECOST 3A 21062020 *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Genesis 21.8-21; Psalm 86.1-10, 16-17; Romans 6.1-11; Matthew 10.24-39

Genesis 21.8-21

The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. So she said to Abraham, 'Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.' The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. But God said to Abraham, 'Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named after you. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.' So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, 'Do not let me look on the death of the child.' And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. And God heard the voice of the boy; and 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; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

Matthew 10.24-39

'A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household! So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. 'Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven. 'Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

Both the Old Testament and Gospel readings today are difficult, challenging texts, and each deserves its own sermon or study. I hope my ponderings will stimulate your own, and encourage you to read and wonder about them later.

The story of Abraham and Sarah's inability to have a child is well known, and last Sunday's gospel told of Sarah's laughter when the mysterious messengers from God told her that she would have a son- in spite of her post-menopausal age.

Before this, Sarah had despaired of having children so she gave her Egyptian maid, Hagar, to be Abraham's wife or concubine. Poor Hagar had no say in it; she was a slave, a young woman with no power over her own life. Sarah was married to a wealthy man and although as a woman her power was limited, she still had more than Hagar.

When Sarah miraculously gave birth to Isaac she was happy; but she was not happy to see Hagar's little boy playing with her own son, Isaac. She was jealous and wanted her son to be his father's sole heir, so she told her husband to get rid of Hagar and Ishmael.

We are told that Abraham was distressed about this 'on account of his son'; note that he didn't seem bothered about poor Hagar. God spoke to Abraham and took Sarah's side, telling him to do as she said and reassuring him that Ishmael would be all right.

We read that Hagar, lost in the wilderness, ran out of food and water and prepared to die. She left her son in the shade of a bush and walked away, unable to bear to watch him die. This is heartbreaking stuff.

Then she heard the voice of an angel, reassuring her and leading her to water, so she and her son survived and he grew strong as, we are told, 'God was with him'.

Back in the 1980s a theologian named Phyllis Trible wrote a book called 'Texts of Terror', in which she unpacked four sad stories from the Hebrew Bible: the stories of Hagar, Tamar, an unnamed woman in the book of Judges, and the daughter of Jephthah.

All these women were used and abused, rejected, neglected, raped or murdered. Why did this writer choose their stories?

These are her words: 'As a critique of culture and faith in light of misogyny, feminism is a prophetic movement, examining the status quo, pronouncing judgement, and calling for repentance. (The approach of this book) interprets stories of outrage on behalf of their female victims in order to recover a neglected history, to remember a past that the present embodies, and to pray that these terrors shall not come to pass again.'

These difficult stories are not often told in church. We would all rather focus on Good News, on God's love, on stories of peace and joy and happy endings. But that does not do justice to the reality of life either in Biblical times or in our own.

There is currently some discussion about some of the men who established the British colony in Australia, whose names and achievements are celebrated and memorialised by statues and monuments, place names and road names.

Some of those people were involved in slavery or profited from slavery. Some were involved in massacres of Aboriginal people or inflicted great cruelty on them.

Whatever we think about those statues or names and however we feel about those colonial ancestors, surely we need to know the truth of our history. We need to understand that perhaps one person's hero is another's oppressor.

Abraham and Sarah are remembered as people of faith, from whom all the people of Israel are descended. But if we read their stories we find they could be cruel, they told lies, they didn't always believe what God told them; they were human, in that they were a complex mix of good and bad, faith and unbelief. The truth is rarely straightforward.

In today's reading from Matthew's gospel we hear Jesus speaking to the twelve about discipleship, just as he is about to send them out on their first mission.

Jesus warns them that they will meet opposition; if Jesus can be called a son of the devil, the same is likely to happen to them. He wants the disciples to tell everybody what he has been teaching them, to shout it from the rooftops. Jesus reassures them that God values and loves them, knowing every hair of their heads; but they will still be in danger. He goes on to talk about the family conflict that will inevitably occur, as disciples say and do things and live their lives in ways that disturb and anger their families.

These words present us with another difficult challenge, as Jesus states unequivocally that following him takes priority over family life.

Hang on a minute- how can that be right? Did he really say that?

"Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me."

Yes- he did say that.

Jesus' own family did not always understand what he was doing and came into conflict with him.

Most of us, perhaps, have not encountered serious opposition to our lives of Christian faith. Some of us will have family members and friends who think we're a bit weird because we go to church; some don't or won't understand that Sunday morning family parties don't suit us; maybe some of us have encountered tricky ethical situations in the workplace that challenge us. That's about as bad as it gets in Australia, so we might think this isn't an issue for us. My challenge to you and to myself is to prayerfully consider where our loyalties and priorities really lie. Can I cope with a challenge to my cherished beliefs about Bible stories and the people they describe? Can I open my mind and try to learn the truth of our history? Am I mature enough to look at myself and my values honestly and truthfully? These are some of the challenges of discipleship, and may God give us the courage we need for the journey.

The Lord be with you.