**Sunday 25 June 2017**

***Prayer before Worship:***

 *In the Northern Hemisphere it's the longest day,
though the heat of summer won't peak for a couple months.
Consequences are usually delayed. Insight always trails after revelation.
In the Southern Hemisphere it's the longest night,
which is always a promise that the light is coming back.
Everything has bounds. Darkness opens itself to the light.
In both hemispheres it's good to remember, easy to forget: no season is forever.
Yours isn't the only reality. Each moment, and the whole life you live is part of something greater. Solstice. Be where you are; you won't be for long.***Welcome**

**Call to Worship**

Leader: We trust in you O God, for you are forgiving and loving and good.
***Children: Please listen, for we need your help
All: You alone are great and do marvellous deeds, you alone are God.***Leader: Teach us your way, so we may follow you truly.
***Children: Heal us and put us back together,
All: For you Lord are gracious, and kind, tender and merciful. Hallelujah!***

**Songs of Praise** In Christ alone

 Here I am to worship

**Opening Prayer**

The winter deepens and the days are short but the warmth of God is around us and within us. We are indeed blessed. And so we join to pray.

Most wonderful God, our Parent and Friend,

  we praise you for the riches of love that enable us to come together

  in this house of prayer to celebrate your goodness.

Please lead our truant minds away from petty concerns to larger commitments,

  away from tiredness or apathy towards a sense of awe and wonder,

  away from self obsession to see your holiness and awesome beauty, your   humble power, and your unspeakable love.

We realise we never seem be able to thank, praise and enjoy you to the heights that we should,   but we do pray to be able give you the best worship that at this

  time is possible.

Today we make time to give thanks, but also to remember the reality of a world tainted by the shadow of sin.

Most loving God, your Son has taught us that none of our concerns lie outside your love, and no person is ever irrelevant or dispensable. Teach us the way of quiet trust, that placing all our affairs in your hands, we may live faithfully and lovingly, allowing your Spirit to guide our feet in the way of your peace. Through Christ Jesus our Lord, Amen.

**Notices**

**Birthday Basket**

**Offering and Dedication**

Loving God, we thank you. We thank you for your creation. We thank you for the gift of your son. We thank you for your presence in our lives. We recognize that you are greater than any of our attempts to describe you. We have come to a time in the service to say "thank you" with our economic resources — our money and our food. May everything we do in this worship service express gratitude — the songs that we sing, the prayers that we offer, the words that we read, the conversations that we have, and even these gifts that we now make to spread the good news of your son, Jesus Christ. May even these gifts be a gesture of “losing our lives” for your sake. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

**God @ Work** TIM Team

**Time with the children** Intro to Children @ Risk Prayer week -show pamphlet

**Lord’s Prayer**

**Song:**  Hey Stranger

***Children leave for Young Church programme***

**Powerpoint Reflection** Psalm 86: 1-10

**Bible Reading:** Romans 6: 1-11

**Prayer of Confession**

Let us pray.

Holy Friend, in you there are no shadows, no imperfections, and no regrets.

We wish we could say the same about ourselves, but it is not so.

We confess that in our secret lives there things which need dragging into the light of your beauty.

We confess that in our more open selves are some faults that we have come to treat as foibles rather than to confront them as sin.

We confess that in our hearts are unresolved regrets for hurts inflicted or opportunities wasted, yet our regrets readily turn to self pity rather than repentance.

So we come to you in simple trust, as we have done many times before

Seeking the same stream of mercy in which we have often bathed,

and that same spring of love from which we have slaked our thirst,

and that  same bread of life from which we regain our strength.

**Assurance of Forgiveness**

My friends, please do not let this moment pass as a mere formality.

God is merciful, and can be trusted right at this moment to forgive our sins

and cleanse us from all corruption.

For Christ’s sake, don’t carry old guilt one moment longer.

Let it slip from your shoulders and fall away into the abyss of God’s forgiveness.

In Christ’s fullness we have received love heaped upon love. Thanks be to God!

**Song:** Let there be peace on earth

**Bible Reading:** Genesis 21: 8-21

Matthew 10: 24-39

**Sermon** Children @ Risk

**Song:** I the Lord of sea and sky

**Prayers of Intercession**

Holy One, We pray for the wanderers. We have been among them, seeking your path, wondering where to turn next. Wandering due to poor choices, or things beyond our control. Like the Hebrew people of old, we find ourselves in the wilderness. How will we survive? We pray especially for those who are grieving –especially the family and friends of June Hughes, bring a place of peace.

We pray for the discarded. We have been among them, not chosen for the team,
left behind by the friends, rejected by the one we loved.
Like Hagar with her child, we have wondered how we will live.
Where will we find a way to quench our thirst?

We pray for the lost. We have been among them, unsure of our direction,
unwilling to ask for assistance, or unable to find a guide.
Like the Israelites, lost for 40 years, we need your law of love to lead us.

We pray for the restored. We have been among them, at long last welcomed
in the place for which we longed, secure in our identity as your beloved children.
When we come into your home, et us share our joy tempered by the knowledge
that we would be nowhere without your grace and mercy.

And whether wandering, or discarded, or lost or restored, we pray for the children of our world –children who are vulnerable; children who are at risk.

God of unspeakable love, if you can use us to answer any of these prayers, or the prayers of our fellow Christians around the world, please take us, guide us, and use us to build your kingdom. Through Christ Jesus our Redeemer, Amen.

**Song:**  Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation

**Benediction and sung Amen**

Live purposefully, for God hears the voice of every child.

Live trustingly for even the hairs of our heads are numbered.

Live bravely, for fear of failure is overshadowed by the love of Christ.

And may the cool head of Christ Jesus guide you,

the immovable rock of God’s love underpin you,

the warm fires of the Spirit embolden you, today and always, Amen!

**Sermon**

*Oh what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive*

This story is a very human, tragic story, with the threads of divine action –God at work, woven through it. But it is also an awful story -of lack of faith, of bullying, of not so great parenting...and in light of this Sunday, of children at risk. It is a story about a couple –who have become idealised as people of faith, but were not always perfect –by any stretch of the imagination.

When I hear the story read –like we do in church –small parts of the story at a time, I don’t think I grasp the story as a whole as early readers would have... and I need to go back over it and grapple with all its intricacies.

And I wonder if it is the same for you?

How much of this story do you really understand?

So I thought we should start by going back through it as the bigger story of Abraham and Sarah... Let’s go back to the beginning so we know how the past impacts the present and on into the future for this central Old Testament couple, Abraham and Sarah.

We first hear of them when they are living in Ur of the Chaldees –ancient Babylon, or modern Iraq. It is when God calls them to go to the land of Canaan and promises prosperity and descendants. In obedience they leave their home and go into the unknown. At this point they are called Abram and Sarai and we hear that they are unable to have children. God promises them children, but they became old still with no children.

First they head to Haran, and stay there until Terah (Abram’s father) died. Then they head off again, this time to Shechem, in Canaan. By then Abram was 75.

Then there is a famine and they end up travelling south to Egypt. We know Sarai was very beautiful and about ten years younger than Abram, and we discover Abram then gets Sarai to pretend she is his sister, so he won’t be killed and her taken as a concubine for the Pharaoh. They do this, and Sarai was taken by the Pharaoh as a concubine... she was well treated and given much –possibly including the maidservant Hagar at this point. But then there are great plagues, and the Pharaoh finally discovers this was due to Sarai really being married to Abram –so he sends them away from Egypt immediately.

Then there is a whole other story with Lot which we won’t go into today...

And Abram and Sarai return to Canaan, where they live for another ten years, still childless.

Then Sarai decides to take things into her own hands and convinces Abram to sleep with her Egyptian handmaid, Hagar. Hagar indeed gets pregnant, and then uses her pregnancy to be cruel to Sarah, flaunting her pregnancy... . Although Sarai instigated the situation, she is filled with jealousy and pain, and Abram lets her treat Hagar as she wants. Hagar is terribly mistreated, so runs away –but while away, God comes to her, reassures her, and directs her back to Abram and Sarai.

Back with them, Hagar gives birth to a boy who God tells them to name Ishmael, meaning God has heard your affliction.

Ishmael was Abram’s first born son. But Ishmael was not to be the fulfilment of the promise God had made to Abram and Sarai all that time ago. He was simply the product of impatience, of seeking to do things their own way. Abram and Sarai would have to wait a lot longer still.

When Abram was 90, God gave them new names –now they would be known as Abraham and Sarah. The father of many nations and a princess (cf. My princess).

And not long after getting their new names, we get to the passage we heard read last Sunday –of the three visitors to their tent who promised they would have a child –and Sarah’s laughter in response.

But soon after, Sarah did indeed finally become pregnant.

Ishmael was 14 years old when Sarah finally gave birth to Isaac, meaning laughter.

By the time he was 2 or 3, Isaac was weaned –this was time to celebrate as it meant that the child had made it through the very risky years of infancy.

And this is when we re-enter the story this morning.

At the celebration feast, Sarah sees Ishmael mocking Isaac.

You can imagine it –Ishmael had been the one and only son for 14 years... and now he was coming in second... having to share the love of his father. As the eldest son he should be the heir –and this young child put it all at risk. It seems unfair and unjust. Here is sibling rivalry at its worst. Some read this and argue that Ishmael was just playing with Isaac –I don’t think so... too often we let bullying be seen as “just children playing”..

And here, the mother bear nature comes into play – Sarah will not let her precious son be bullied by this big brother. She is so disturbed that she asks Abraham to send Ishmael away.

Abraham is horrified by the request –this is his first born son... but he also hears God telling him to do as Sarah asked. Abraham is really hurting over this decision. God makes it clear that it is Isaac not Ishmael who will fulfil the promise of covenant to Abraham and Sarah. But God also makes it clear that Ishmael too would be a father of a great nation.

And so Hagar and Ishmael are sent off –and they end up in a desert on the border of Egypt –we can assume that they were heading back to Egypt –Hagar’s home. The same direction Hagar had fled last time. She looks to Egypt for protection and safety.

Some argue this is a turning from God to earthly security, but that seems a big jump from the more simple understanding that Egypt was still regarded by Hagar as her homeland. And so we see her lost in the desert, with no food or water left to keep them alive.

Hagar cries out and God hears their hopelessness. God hears the crying of Ishmael as he comes close to death.

I am intrigued at the way Hagar cries out to God, but what God hears is the cry of Ishmael...

I am not sure how to take that –did God not really listen to Hagar. Or is it that when we cry on behalf of the children who suffer God hears the child too?

Anyway, then God opens Hagar’s eyes to see the precious well of water that would be their lifeline. And God remained with Ishmael. His life was a result of human distrust and manipulation, but God remained with him. He becomes the father of the Arab nation.

Two children –both with promises over them. Neither having done anything to earn it.

So that is the story so far...

It is a shocking story of human jealousy and callousness.It is partly about who is going to get what inheritance. It is partly about a conflict that seems to have no end.

And it is a story we are hearing from one side... we are hearing the Jewish or Israeli version –and yet we know there is also another version –an Arab version of the story... and somehow we have to hear the reality that God did not only bless one party in the conflict –Ishmael was also blessed –he too was promised that he would be the father of a nation –the Arab nation. That was a promise of God. Just as Abraham was promised that he would be the father of a nation –the Israel nation.

As I spend time with the text, I end up full of questions... as you may also.

These key characters who are synonymous with loyalty and faith, in this part of the story, are cast in shadow.

How did Ishmael’s mocking trigger such a reaction from Sarah and how did it tie in with the inheritance and status and Isaac surviving this critical stage of infancy?

Why the emphasis on Hagar as an Egyptian slave?

What was Sarah really wanting?

Was God really wanting them to suffer?

Why would Abraham have not sent enough food and support with them for their journey?

Why is it we read of Hagar carrying her son –who is now a growing teen?

When she got lost, why didn’t she retrace her steps?

Did she really hope to get all the way to Egypt?

Why is Ishmael so passive? What has been left unsaid?

I struggle with God’s intervention... telling Abraham to do as Sarah asks... but I also see the mess that God is at work within.

And I tend to jump into the story and empathise with Hagar, but should I?

We know that Hagar left with minimal supplies - a wineskin of water and a loaf of bread,, and we also know that Abraham was known for his hospitality and not keen to send Hagar and Ishmael away. From all this it seems more likely that Abraham was only expecting them to go a short distance. He didn’t expect them to go off into the desert. Which then could lead us to assume that the shift from a short trip to a perilous journey was in the hands of Hagar.

We don’t know for sure, but perhaps, this is not just a victim here... but possibly the actions of another hurting woman, who is so hurt and full of hate, she is even willing to put her precious child at risk, as she seeks to go further, to Egypt.

I am also intrigued by Hagar’s removal of herself from Ishmael’s suffering... a bow’s throw away –that is quite a distance... my first reaction is horror at Hagar –what kind of mothering is that... and yet, it is all too real. I have felt that temptation when one of my children has been in hospital –I have wanted to run far away... and I have seen other mother’s do just that –refuse to remain close to the suffering of their child. It happens all the time –and who are we to judge.

But Hagar then gets to this place where everything is so tangled up with hurt, and perhaps she realises how lost she and Ishmael really are and she cries for help.

We cannot be sure what the various motives were. Through history both Sarah and Hagar have been depicted in a range of ways. Sometimes Sarah is the cold, overprotective, plotting wicked stepmother, and Hagar the hard done by victim, while in others Sarah is the saintly faithful chosen one and Hagar the one who wanders away from God or is the scorned woman.

In reality, I think both Sarah and Hagar were very human mixtures. As was Abraham.

Superficially there is this love triangle involving hatred, bitterness and revenge.

But it also has aspects of promise, of faith, of obedience woven through.

God was building a people... amidst the complications of frail humanity.

And God is still building a people, amidst the complications of our messy humanity

It is the ugly reality that God has messy humanity to work with.

But there is also the reality that God hears the cries of an Arab child expelled from his home... now that is feeling pretty close to a Syrian child, or an Afghani child... God hears their cries.

Amidst the conflict, amidst the jealousies, there is God listening to the cries of the weak. Jesus put it in a different way –are not 2 sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them can fall to the ground without God knowing. Even the hairs on your head are counted –don’t be afraid, you are worth much more than sparrows. Even the Arab child... even the children in New Zealand’s foster care system... they are all valuable and heard by God. But do we hear them?

It seems to me that there are many aspects of this story in which the children are put at risk. It is a really messy story.

The tangle of adult relationships that impact so hugely on the children.

This is sadly not unknown today.

I’m sure you could all tell stories of such things.

Parenting that gets clouded by our own sense of entitlement.

Power struggles in relationships.

Misuse of fertility.

Taking adult issues and involving children.

Adult conflicts in which children pay the biggest price.

Bullying amongst adults that gets repeated amongst the children.

And then wider issues of conflict over land that result in refugees and war.

And then when we add human impatience that leads people to do things in our own way, instead of waiting for God’s timing. When we do things that are not anything to do with God’s will at all, there is a sense that God steps back and lets this human drama play out.

But in the midst of all this tangle of hurt, especially in the suffering, God is present... pointing to the source of water. God is there.

And as the people of God, how are we too called to be present –present with the most vulnerable –the children at risk, here in our local community, in our country and in our world.



*Banishment of Hagar*, Etching. À Paris chez Fr. Fanet, Éditeur, Rue des Saints Pères n° 10. 18th century. Sarah is seen at the left, looking on.