

## **Hagar's story by Rev John Castle**

A sermon given on Sunday 2023 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Genesis 21:8-21, Matthew 10:24-39

(Year A, Proper 7)

In last week's episode of the Abraham story we saw how Abraham offered hospitality to three strangers, only to discover that they were the Lord himself and two angels. The Lord promises Abraham that by this time next year Sarah will have given birth to a son, and Sarah laughs in disbelief. We then saw God's promise come true, and Sarah laughing with joy, as her son Isaac is born – given a name that means “he laughs”.

But today the happiness of the family quickly turns to distress. Two or three years have passed, and Abraham holds a party to celebrate Isaac being weaned. All is going well until Sarah spots Ishmael, Abraham's older son by Sarah's maid Hagar, laughing. The NRSV translates this “playing with her son Isaac”, but the word is actually “laughing” – the same word that was used when Sarah herself laughed, first with disbelief and then with joy. Jewish tradition understands Ishmael's laughter to be the laughter of mockery, which explains Sarah's outburst of anger. But even if innocent, it arouses Sarah's fear that the older son, Ishmael, will inherit Abraham's blessings alongside her son Isaac, who is the child God has designated as the one through whom his promises will be fulfilled. Abraham has to

face Sarah's unreasonable and vindictive demand that Ishmael and his mother be thrown out of the family. And naturally he is very distressed about this. You can sense the venom in Sarah's words as she avoids using the name of either Ishmael or Hagar:

“Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.”

It's not the first instance of conflict between Sarah and Hagar. In chapter 16 it was Sarah's idea to use Hagar as a surrogate mother so that Abraham could have a child, but once Hagar got pregnant she looked on Sarah with contempt. Sarah mistreats Hagar, who flees and has to be brought back by an angel of the Lord. Now Sarah gives Abraham an ultimatum: he must send Hagar and her son away.

The text doesn't say this, but I have to assume that Abraham cries out to God: “O God, what on earth shall I do?” And God tells him to listen to Sarah and do what she says. This may seem harsh to us, and of course any family breakup is a sad thing, but sometimes tensions within a family are such that they cannot be resolved, and separation is the lesser of two evils.

Abraham doesn't delay to obey God's instruction: early next morning he gives Hagar some provisions to keep her going for a while and sends her off with her son – and *his* son – Ishmael. But God has told Abraham that he will make a great nation out of Ishmael too, a repeat of the promise he made about Ishmael in chapter 17. So Abraham has to trust

that God will look after Ishmael and his mother – which is what we see happening next.

Now the focus of the story turns to Hagar and Ishmael. If you have been following Abraham's story closely, you will have noticed that Abraham was 86 when Ishmael was born, and 100 when Isaac was born. In addition, two or three years pass before Isaac is weaned – so on that reckoning, Ishmael must be at least sixteen.

This doesn't fit with what we read next:

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.'<sup>1</sup>

This assumes that Ishmael is much younger. The best explanation for this is that the book of Genesis has been compiled from a number of different sources, and the compiler has sewn together different versions of Abraham's story into a continuous whole, but without changing the bits that are inconsistent. This story about Hagar being sent away is clearly from a different source to the one that gives Abraham's age at different points. This sort of inconsistency is not uncommon in the Old Testament, and we shouldn't worry about it. What is important is to understand what the text we are reading is trying to convey.

And here we see a mother in despair, as her food and water have run out and she thinks it's all over for her and her child. So overwhelmed is she that she cannot bear to look on the death of her son. Again, you might question how realistic it

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 21:15-16 NRSV

is for a mother not to want to be with her dying child, but we have to take the story on face value – the narrator is trying to express how distressed Hagar is.

But where humanly speaking there seems to be no way, God can make a way. God’s angel speaks to Hagar, just as he did in chapter 16 when she was also in the wilderness after running away from mistreatment by Sarah. God hears the voice of the boy, and calls to Hagar,

‘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.<sup>2</sup>

Sometimes we can be so overwhelmed with our problems that we don’t see the help that is at hand – in this case a well or spring of water. The narrator goes on to say that “God was with the boy”, and Hagar brings him up and finds a wife for him. Later, in chapter 25, we are given a list of his descendants.

Hagar’s life has not been an easy one. She is Egyptian, but has been bought as a slave by Abraham to be a maid to his wife. This may well have been a much better situation for her than she experienced before joining Abraham’s family, but she is nevertheless dependent on Abraham and is at the mercy of his jealous wife. Happiness comes into her life as she becomes the mother of Abraham’s first child, but the breakup of the family leaves her alone and defenceless.

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 21:17-19 NRSV

But all along, God knows what she is going through and meets her in her need. In the episode where she runs away, she gives God a name: “the one who sees me”, and God gives her son a name – Ishmael means “God hears”<sup>3</sup>. He promises to look after her son and make a great nation of him – and today Muslims trace the origin of the Arab nation to their ancestor Ishmael.

The story of Hagar encourages us to trust God to provide for us and guide us, even when the situation seems hopeless. He hears our cries for help, he sees our distress. In the words of the well-known hymn, based on Psalm 34:

Through all the changing scenes of life,  
in trouble and in joy,  
the praises of my God shall still  
my heart and tongue employ.

O magnify the Lord with me,  
with me exalt his name;  
when in distress to him I called,  
he to my rescue came.

The hosts of God encamp around  
the dwellings of the just;  
deliv'rance he affords to all  
who on his succour trust.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 16:13,11

<sup>4</sup> Tate & Brady *A New Version of the Psalms of David* (1696)