

Sunday 21 June – Third Sunday after Trinity

Sermon by Harold Toms

An audio recording of the sermon from St Luke's will be available after the service at [Sermons \(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk\)](http://Sermons(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk)

For the past few weeks our Old Testament lectionary readings have been following the story of Abraham. Two weeks ago, from Chapter 12, we heard about God calling Abram (as he was then called) from his family home in Ur to a distant promised land. Last week we had the mysterious visit of three strangers and the prophecy that Sarah would indeed bear Abraham's child and how Sarah laughed when she heard this prophecy because she was well past the years of childbearing. We heard also the story of the fulfilment of that prophecy in the birth of Isaac, whose name literally means "laughter" as Sarah again laughs when she has this miracle child in old age. This week we hear something of the story of Abraham's other son, Ishmael, whose birth comes between the two previous readings. Abraham and Sarah did not believe that they could have a child at their advanced age, so Sarah gives Abraham her Egyptian slave, Hagar, as a kind of second wife. She does conceive and has a son, Ishmael, but it does not go smoothly. Sarah seems to have second thoughts about the wisdom of this idea and becomes jealous of Hagar who, pregnant, runs away from her cruel treatment into the wilderness. The story, in Genesis chapter 16, has strong parallels with today's reading. Hagar is sought out by the Lord and receives her own promise that her son will also be the father of a great nation. Hagar also receives a great blessing from the Lord in that she is permitted to give a name to the Lord, something few Israelites ever gets to do, she calls Him "El-roi", which means "the God who sees".

But clearly Sarah's jealousy does not go away and as Isaac grows and is weaned she sees Hagar's son playing with him. The word used for "playing" derives from the same root as the name Isaac and could be translated as "laughing with him". This seems to provoke Sarah and she demands that Abraham cast them out, which he doesn't want to do, but God tells him that it's alright to do and God repeats the promise to Abraham that He had earlier made to Hagar, that her son will also have many descendants and become the father of a great nation. So, Hagar and her son are cast out into the wilderness with just a skin of water and some food, presumably not much of either as she couldn't have carried both food and water for much more than a day or two.

I have always found this story of chosen-ness, together with other similar stories in the Old Testament of one child being favoured over another rather troubling. You might think of Cain and Abel, and how Abel's offering is accepted but Cain's is rejected, or how Isaac favours Jacob and rejects Esau. Later on, we have a similar story when the Lord chooses David from among the sons of Jesse to replace the rejected Saul as king of Israel. It is worth stopping to consider why these stories and indeed that of Ishmael were chosen to be included in the Bible at all. Some people interpret this as a kind of narrative of election, a thread running through the Bible in which some are chosen and some rejected, leading to ultimately the elect who are the Church, Jesus' continuing body here on earth.

But a more careful consideration of these apparent rejection stories show something quite different. God remains present in their lives, in fact, of Esau, Jacob declares:

“seeing your face is like seeing the face of God” (Genesis 33:10).

God is not only present to Esau, but Esau though non-chosen, reflects the love and presence of God to his chosen brother Jacob. Ishmael and Esau are more closely related too in that Ishmael becomes the father-in-law of Esau. These stories, then, serve as an important corrective to notions of chosen-ness and election among the people of God. Our chosen-ness as people of faith does not mean that we have a monopoly on God. It does not mean that God's love and care is limited to us. What is striking about Isaac and Ishmael is that God makes the same promise to them both. They would each become a great nation. They would both experience God's presence and blessing. The difference between Isaac and Ishmael, then, is not so much chosen-ness, but calling. Isaac and his descendants were called to the task of being the means through which God would bless the nations. They were to model what a faithful relationship with God looks like, what it means to live out God's will for his creation. They were to show and tell God's love for the whole world, and ultimately, to participate in God's redemptive work by being the people through whom the Messiah of the world would come.

It is striking in the story we had this morning that Ishmael is actually never named, only referred to as "the child" or as "Hagar's son". In the original Hebrew his name only appears in a sort of hidden way in verse 17 which reads:

"And God heard the voice of the boy" Genesis 21:17

Because Ishmael's name means in Hebrew "God heard" and it is the only time in the whole story that Ishmael's name appears, as if to emphasize the meaning of that name - God hears. God hears the cries of the outcast and abandoned. God hears and has compassion. These narratives are in Genesis to remind us of this. God loves the Hagar and Ishmaels of our world. God hears their cries, sees their suffering, and brings about their redemption. This is the gospel story. And the invitation for those of us who are God's people is to attend to, bless, and embody God's love and care to those outside of the community of Christian faith, particularly to those who are the most vulnerable. Just as God loves the Hagar and Ishmaels of our world, so should we.

Amen.