

‘Suffering’

Sunday 25th June, 2017, Second Sunday after Trinity

Main text – Genesis 21:1-21,

also Matthew 10:24-39.

A year after welcoming the three visitors , and also welcoming the Lord God, (see Genesis 18 and the sermon on 18th June), Abraham, holds a baby born in his arms – Isaac – he laughs. And you can imagine the laughter that surrounded that house – a miracle baby – perhaps we remember or even feel as we remember the joy we had at the birth of a son, or daughter, maybe unexpected, maybe we had been told, unlikely...

Laughter in that house, the rejoicing as the baby boy is named and the days later circumcised, imagine the laughter as he is weaned – Isaac would have been 2 or 3 years old at the time... Isaac the son of promise, the resolution of anguish – as scholar John Goldingay says:

“this is a boy whose name speaks of laughter, whose mother laughs, and whose birth will bring a smile to countless people who hear of it,”

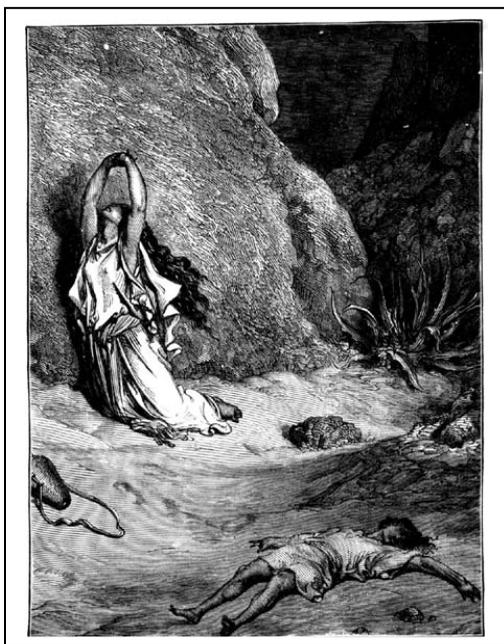
(John Goldingay, *Genesis for Everyone One, Part II, p39*).

Yet there is another laughter – another one laughing – whom she cannot handle – at the feast, Ishmael is seen to be, in our translation, ‘mocking’ but the Hebrew can be interpreted in a few ways – another translation says

‘playing’ and another ‘laughing’. Sarah acts to ensure Ishmael cannot interfere with Isaac’s place and future...

This sermon is really in two distinct parts but I hope it may form one whole...

My first reflection is upon the **suffering** we read and can imagine. Hagar has to leave. She is given water by Abraham and her and her 16-17 year old leave and they “wandered in the desert,” (Genesis 21:v14a). It gets to a point where the water has gone, and she puts the boy under the bushes. A teenager who has been so exhausted and weakened by the lack of water, he can only lie there and cry in pain. She cannot watch him die but she cannot leave him. She sits far enough way perhaps to wait until the cries and moans of pain have ended. Then God hears the boy crying – we know what happens.



Gustav Dore
(c19th French
Painter & Illustrator),
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But I want us to pause at v16 – the boy is laid down and she is crying. Let this passage and ones like it, be a spur, a reminder for our prayer for the millions today who are in a situation like this – in Northern Nigeria, in Yemen, in Sudan – who do not have the food or water they need, or face disease, mothers who today or this week face their children dying. Unicef say 21 children under 5, die every minute.

[Unicef figures \(2015\)](#)

That is horrific... Consider how many children will have died by the end of this service? I want to say – people of God, let this passage remind us to pray for those parents who face that potential loss this day or this week...

I also would like to say – where Hagar has a positive ending, a loved one is saved, there are many where there has not been such an outcome. Where a parent or a brother or a child has had to watch a loved one suffer and die. Where they have felt to be in the place of Mary and Martha, 3 days after Lazarus died, standing at the tomb, ‘no Jesus’, wondering – where are you Lord, if you had been here, my brother my father my child my girlfriend would not have died?’ (see John 11). It may not be a desert that person lives in, but in a personal wasteland of grief and sorrow.

When I read this text, I see that God is aware of what is happening to Hagar, he does not ignore her, he is not blind, and God cares. But that can create more questions than answers. If he cares why does he allow this?

For that I probably return again and again to the cross. I look at Christ – the Word made Flesh – and I see the one

who teaches about suffering in our gospel, the one who suffered. The one who was forced out by people, the one who was rejected. He suffers for us. And he experiences this pain. And in the Trinity which we celebrate, we celebrate three persons in one God, and so we see God the Father, who sees God the Son on the cross and so God the Father experiences loss and pain at seeing his beloved son suffer terribly and die. He understands.

But I also believe at times, theology may not be the answer for how we communicate. It can be simple human touch and presence.

For example, the period of Jewish mourning – Shiva – the mourners who sit with the family is called 'sitting shiva' – being with those who grieve those 7 days. *To be. To be present. To sit alongside in grief.*

In Kenya I saw a bereaved family, part of an Anglican church in Nairobi, how every night different members of the church would come and visit and stay, and her home group took on main support – spiritual and practical for the bereaved.

I remember the story of a lady who had lost her son, in the UK, and members would come and go and say 'I'm sorry' and leave again. But there was a lady from the Caribbean who came and visited, and sat down, and said nothing, and the lady said nothing, and then after a time the lady from the Caribbean hugged this lady and held her, for a long time, until the tears came the crying came, and she was with this bereaved lady, being present, showing that love of Christ, bring a few drops of comfort.

I tell these stories to maybe to suggest when people are in bereavement, deep loss, we do not want them to be alone or leave them alone in their desert...

My second part, to draw out some further points, I need to take us back to Genesis 16 briefly. Abram and Sarai have had the promise of descendants and land for 10 years, and still they wait. Sarah, due to impatience – understandable but still lacking faith - then suggests that Abram can have her servant – Hagar – who is Egyptian – as a wife and hopefully have a son through her. Abram agrees. Hagar becomes pregnant. When she is pregnant she despises and mocks her mistress – Sarah. Sarai complains to Abram seeking action in her injustice. And Abram, well he passes the buck, and says it is up to her. It says ‘Sarai ill treats Hagar’ and Hagar flees. She flees into the desert, near a spring where the Angel of the Lord finds her – this is striking, first time in OT that the Angel of the Lord, a theophany of Christ, appears in Scripture and it is in this situation... - the angel of the Lord, asks her to return to Sarai and submit, and the Lord promises –

she will have descendants too numerous to count –

that she is to call him Ishmael because ‘the Lord has heard of your misery’ for Ishmael means ‘God hears’.

Hagar then gives a name to the Lord – You are the God who sees me, because, she said, “I have now seen the One who see me.’

And in that experience the well / spring where she was, became known as Beer Lahai Roi which means 'well of the Living One who sees me.'

Hagar cried, again, in a desert, years later, as her teenage son is approaching death. Genesis 21 : God *heard* the boys cries. Ishmael, as we just said, means 'The lord has heard of your misery' and again God hears. The angel of God says to her "Do not be afraid God has *heard* the boy crying.'

God's character being restated...

Then he reminds her of what he told her years before – "I will make him into a great nation.'

And then it says: God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water, from which she fills her waterskin.

And yet even that well – brings back those other memories of that other well, 'Beer Lahai Roi' where she met the Angel of the Lord 16 years before, a well which, because of her, became known as "well of the Living One who sees me.'

These echoes say.

Our God does not change.

She may have forgotten but he had not changed.

He still could hear he could still see even if she could not.

And while she may have forgotten – understandably – the promises about her son – God had not forgotten and would not allow the actions and desires of Sarai to stop them.

In suffering...

Is that one of the strengths we can have? Is that one way we can strengthen others? I believe so. One of the wells we can gain strength from, is the character of God, the promises of God – there may be promises directly to you or me, or it may be promises for all God's children. But as we draw on these promises and hold to that character of our Lord, that can encourage hope within us, it can give us help to pray. In psalm 86:v1 "*Hear O Lord and answer me for I am poor and needy.*" David prays – is this when he is king or on the run from Saul we do not know – he keeps on praying, though the answers have not come. He has kept trusting that God's character has not changed even if the situation isn't as it could be or should be.

The promises of God can be worked out regardless of the actions of others. We see that in the great promise of Romans 8:28 –

"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him who have been called according to his purpose"

– not he works for the good of those who are super holy or those who are priests etc etc, he works for the good of

those who love him – his children – in all things – no matter how bad or what it is he can work for good. He is working out his purposes. He does not cause all those things but he works in those things.

I said, he did not cause all those things. There is suffering that comes through our own choices, the actions of others, and suffering through this creation. But there is suffering that comes directly from the obeying the word of the Lord, or doing what he asks of us. We may have seen that in our lives. We can see that in the lives of Christians across this world who choose to believe and trust in Christ, yet knowing it may will mean in some settings being rejected by their families or even worse. Our God is a good God but not a safe one as Jesus reminds us in Matthew 10 – as we seek to live out and express the gospel, a Christ shaped life, it will eventually clash with the views of community or society as we seek to assist the poor, the needy, the unloved, the outcast, as we seek to stand up and out against sin. Jesus promised us that following him would eventually get us into a fight... But in these too, the Lord works for good.

In suffering, our example is Jesus



We take bread and wine in Holy Communion, it recalls great suffering, yet even in that chaos, when many did not know what God was doing, he was doing what his higher plan always intended. Only later did the disciples realise this and what that plan truly was about – new creation, a revolution, freedom, defeat of sin, flesh, the devil.

Suffering. Hagar disappears off the pages of Scripture. It was not through Ishmael that land was promised, or a covenant or that the Jewish people would be formed. That is the last mention of Hagar and rarely is Ishmael mentioned again after Ishmael and Isaac together bury their father. Yet God hears, he sees, he cares, in this case he intervenes in Hagar's life, he will keep his promises. She

may not have mattered to Sarah, but she and Ishmael mattered to God.

And God invites us, as people face loss and devastation to be his hands and feet and words to others, to show he too cares, sees, hears, and keeps his promises...

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen.