

## **Lent 2020 – Abraham – Week 4 – 'The Other'**

Reading – Genesis 21: 1-21

Let's just go through the passage and look at what's happening.....Then we'll ask ourselves a few questions.

God had promised Abraham a son and heir – now he has two!

Ishmael – son of A & Hagar (the Egyptian slave girl)

Isaac – son of A & Sarah (his wife)

When there was only Ishmael Abraham and Sarah seemed to be at ease with the situation – perhaps Abraham more than Sarah. After all Ishmael was his son – Sarah was not the natural mother but it was her suggestion that Hagar be a surrogate to produce a son and heir for Abraham.

Then along comes Isaac. Isaac means 'he who laughs' – remember Sarah and Abraham laughing at the thought they would have a son (at their age!). And they laughed with joy at his birth.

We read now that rivalries surface to disrupt the hitherto contentment. Sarah gets troubled especially when she sees Ishmael making fun of Isaac. (I'm the eldest and you're only a little 'un.) The matter of an heir raises its head – in the mind of Sarah anyway!

Culturally it was the eldest – the first born who would be heir and inherit everything on the father's death. There are two sons now – only one can be the chosen one. One son is what we might call legitimate and one illegitimate. This might seem very unfair to us – these days it would be an expectation that all children would get a share of the estate. Having said that in the farming world today there is still a practical matter in that only one child would expect to inherit the farm – farms need to be a certain size to work.

A choice has to be made – Ishmael or Isaac? Genesis has several similar situations – think of Cain & Abel / Esau and Jacob. Murder and intrigue to gain the inheritance!

Seeing Abraham being happy at two sons and not rushing to make a choice of his heir, Sarah gets proactive because she can see her Isaac being pushed aside by Ishmael – Abraham's first born. She demands that Abraham cast out Ishmael and his mother Hagar from the family and leave the way clear for Isaac. This upsets Abraham but then God wades in and sides with Sarah. He tells Abraham to stop being upset and do as Sarah says.

Abraham being obedient as ever to God does as he is told. Hagar and Ishmael are sent away with bread and water. These provisions run out and Hagar prepares herself for them both to die of thirst and starvation. Despite having ordered her expulsion, God hears her – Ishmael means 'God hears' – and provides water. He also gives an assurance that they will live and that Ishmael will father a great nation. In time this happens – Ismael ends up in Egypt with a wife and does become father of the Arabian peoples – as strongly acknowledged in Islam.

- What do you think about God's intervention in this?
- Are you appalled that God backs the casting out of Ishmael/Hagar?
- Do you feel for Abraham?
- God does not appear to be a supporter of the marginalized / the oppressed. He tells Abraham to banish his son and his son's mother; yet He then comes to their aid and provide for them and sets them on a new life. They may be 'unchosen' but God cares??

- Do only good things happen to chosen ones and bad things happen to unchosen ones? Jews were God's chosen people but look what has happened to them through history. The Jews became God's chosen people through Abraham – and God's promise to him. The O.T. is the storytelling which establishes the story of being the chosen ones. The story re-enforces this. One of the aspects of this is told in Abraham and Sarah's story. The tribe which Abraham started and continued down the years. Isaac's son Jacob having been given the name Israel so his issue (children, grandchildren, etc) became Israelites – God's chosen ones. They handed down the story of their nation. God didn't pick them because they were a remarkable group – they were ordinary. They felt a need to build up their importance??

One of the stories they used was that of elderly, barren women giving birth like Sarah, Rachel, Ruth, Hannah, Elizabeth. The Israelites were surrounded by other peoples who had various religions which all had fertility rites and rituals to promote childbirth and crop growth. The Israelites wanted to show that because they were chosen they could go one better and that their God was able to do what seemed impossible – produce children to elder, barren women. That's how powerful and generous our God is – can your god do that!!! There was nothing in Abraham at the start to make him and his offspring particularly different from other tribes around them but through the promotion and telling of their nation's story they could build up the nation's image and endorse the special, chosen, nature of Israel.

- Don't all nations do this? Think of our own nation. We're British for goodness sake! We had an empire that covered the globe! We don't need to be in European Community – we're a global force!! Etc, etc.....

Abraham's story and indeed the O.T. reminds us that we all came from the same roots. We are actually one human family. Yet, as happens, there are tensions / fall outs and we split up. The human story becomes one of exclusion and inclusion. Whose in whose gang?? Remember at school picking the football team .....My gang are the chosen ones – that gang is unchosen!!

- In our personal situations in life have we felt in or out?
- Can you see this in today's world situations?
- One example is Us in the West....Christians.....pointing fingers at Moslems....Ishmael's descendants/Abraham is a common father to us all..... those here and those who want to be here ...refugees. We can't take any more...they're all terrorists....etc. All those people who aren't us. They are 'them'.
- 'We ' is a word that includes and excludes at the same time. It says 'us' and 'them'.
- Who are the chosen and unchosen in our society... in our lives...in our church? The cliques and groups we form which include some and exclude others.