

Pentecost VI (A)
Genesis 21.8-21/Romans 6.1-11 /Matthew 10.24-39
St. Paul's Church, Halifax
22 June 2008

GOD'S 'POINT OF VIEW'

~Paul H. Friesen~

'Dark readings' said a friend of mine earlier this week, once she'd looked over the Scriptures for this Eucharist—'Dark readings': her description was appropriate.

Of course, we don't need to read Scriptures to encounter darkness. 'Hamlet!' said one young lady in my acquaintance, a few weeks ago—I don't want to see Hamlet: everyone's *dead* in the end!' She is a master of over-statement, but she knows about the darkness of our great works of literature.

And then there is the darkness of the most beautiful and innocent of creatures. A very young one, in a fit of envy, said of her sister who she loves dearly—to me, privately— 'When *she* dies I get her Game Boy' (that's an electronic toy if you don't know). Of course we all know the thoughts we're capable of, dark thoughts, even if they're sometimes funny. And that's without turning our thoughts to the violence and cruelty of others.

But why 'dark thoughts' today? Shouldn't the Scriptures uplift us—offer us cheerful thoughts to revive us after a hard week at work or home, get our minds? Don't we deserve better? Aren't we entitled to more?

Well, thank God that our Creator understands his creatures, and knows that instant happiness withers quickly. Thank God our Creator knows we need to pass through darkness *in order to* reach the light in truth. There is no other real way.

What a pity we all spend time so much energy trying to avoid the darkness rather than letting God lead us by the hand through it and out into the light, not just once, but throughout our lives. Half a dozen cheerful spiritual best-sellers won't help us like one evening meeting with God in our darkness.

This is true with every dark corner we go around during our life of faith, the life of faith we share with Abraham's clan.

So what about today's Scriptures? For any living person, half-awake, and with an ounce of human sympathy the darkness is not hard to find in the scriptures.

A slave woman and her child are driven into the wilds by a troubled but powerful woman with the reluctant support of her husband who thinks he hears God's approval. And in the Gospel, the Saviour of the world sings of God's compassion upon the sparrow. And then he turns and says that, by the way, he has come to bring a sword, not peace, so of course the members of any family he meets will turn against each other, and the true disciples will give up their life and pick up and bear a cross.

So how do we walk through this darkness into light? I think we need to hear the story of Sarah and Hagar and Abraham from the inside out, from the limits of their very human perspectives, before we can hear the divine voice that brings them all into the light, and encourages our own hearts.

First, let's think about Sarah—let's think with her. She is the wife of a Middle Eastern sheikh—the spouse of a man who went West looking for a better life and did very well. But she had been childless throughout her marriage.

Finally, the most important day of her life had arrived. Isaac, the child she had thought she would never have, turned three and the great feast she thought would never happen was celebrated.¹ Isaac was now a boy, on his feet and eating solid food, the delight of her mother's eyes, the only person in the world who could turn her sorrow into laughter.

But the darkness was not far off—Hagar, her servant was close at hand with her son, Ishmael. She saw that Ishmael was 'playing' with Isaac, and it sent her into a panic and then into a rage.

Actually, no scholar today can quite agree with another on what was taking place—what that ancient Hebrew verb 'playing' actually means. Was Isaac suffering a sort of school-yard bullying at the hands of his much older brother? Was Ishmael making fun of his much younger brother? Or was it simply that Sarah understood the threat of Ishmael to the future of Isaac? After all under Mesopotamian law, the world out of which Abraham's clan had come, the son of a slave-concubine like Hagar could inherit his father's—Abraham's—property. Was Sarah pushing for Abraham to divorce Hagar, and eliminate the problem?²

Whatever took place in that incident, we know it was tied into the bigger problem. This was a complication created by Abraham and Sarah on their journey of faith, a complication created by their impatience with God's

¹ This was the traditional age of weaning; Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), p.232.

² See Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), p.232; Victor Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 78-80; Richard Elliot Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah* (San Francisco: Harper, 2001), p.71.

promise that God would create a future for their clan by a child of their own.

They had agreed that Hagar's child by Abraham was it.

It had always been complicated—a few chapters before today's story, we hear that a few years earlier the pregnant Hagar had begun to scorn her mistress, Sarah, for Hagar was now no longer just a servant, but the mother of the Patriarch's son, his only son. And so Sarah had abused Hagar till Hagar had run away, and God had sent Hagar back.³

And now this, the darkness had returned not only to Sarah, but to Hagar, and to the whole clan. Hagar was forced out of the clan, with Ishmael, by Sarah's contempt, so strong she could even name Hagar and Ishmael, but only call them 'this slave woman and her son.'⁴

On the one hand, who could blame Sarah? Yet on the other hand we see how limited her perspective was. God's promised child had arrived for her, her very own, against all hope and yet Sarah was caught up in anger and fear as if God had never made a promise in the first place, and as if God had never kept it in the end. And we need to leave Sarah there, for God's healing hand, because the Bible has no more to say about Sarah's reaction, her limited point of view, her impact on the precarious life of two other human beings.

Abraham's problem was different. We read he was 'very distressed.' It's easy to imagine. Ishmael was his child, yet Sarah was the mother of his heir. Sarah and he had agreed that he was to have a child by Hagar, Sarah's servant—it had been Sarah's plan and he had co-operated without hesitation. So he was caught between two perspectives until he heard God's voice: 'As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.'

God promised that no harm would come to Hagar and Ishmael, but that they would flourish. Though God began by using Sarah's limited language—'the slave woman and her child'—the Lord concluded by making the covenant wider, not narrower.

The covenant the Lord had given Abraham was the unbreakable divine promise that Abraham's journey of faith would continue after his death. And the Lord had dealt with the complications of Abraham and Sarah by more grace rather than by less grace. The complication, the mess, was to be taken by God and made into something good—another nation, another people whom God would love and bless.

³ *Genesis* 16.1-16.

⁴ The observation of Jon Levenson in *The Jewish Study Bible*, ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p.44.

Abraham was not a 'dead-beat Dad', sending off his concubine and her child without support. He was still confused by God's widening grace, I think. But he was obedient to God's promise. His eyes were not opened as much as one might hope, but just enough.

Yet it is Hagar whose eyes really see the most. She is miserable, of course, and assumes that in her exile she will die, and her child. The biblical chronology of other *Genesis* stories, taken literally, would make Ishmael sixteen or seventeen years old at this point, not the size of child one would drop under a tree, as the story says, like a desperate parent awaiting the certain death of a child one has held in her arms. But we leave that problem aside with one of the story tellers of the great epic of Abraham's clan.⁵ The child in this story is still one young enough to carry, and the situation of he and his mother is desperate.

Hagar has nothing but despair and an under-fed child. She has suffered because she was made Abraham's concubine without her consent. She has suffered because the child of her mistress, Sarah, has arrived. She has suffered because her son Ishmael has become a competitor with Isaac for their father's attention and affection. And she has suffered because since her pregnancy she has looked down on her mistress, exalting over Sarah as Abraham's favourite because of her child.

It is all a tangled mess, the fault of all the characters in the story. And into this we hear God's voice. Hagar is too miserable to cry out to God. But God hears the cry of her child. God provides for her and her child and gives her a covenant: "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.'

St. John Chrysostom looked at these verses 1500 years ago and said: 'Even with her eyes open nothing was of help to [Hagar] before the visitation from on high.' Hagar's eyes were opened not just to see the water under her nose, but to the covenant love of God for her and her child.⁶

And that's exactly where we come in. We have no more perspective than Abraham or Sarah or Hagar, and need to open ourselves from the 'visitation from on high'. We are stuck in one part of our stories, in the midst of complications created by ourselves and others. This happens again and again during our spiritual journey, our life of faith. We don't 'get over it'. But we can come through the darkness and out into the light whenever we call on God to open our eyes.

⁵ We read that Abraham was 86 when Ishmael was born (*Genesis* 16.16) and 100 when Isaac was born (*Genesis* 21.5)

⁶ In *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Genesis 1-11*, ed. Andrew Louth (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), p. 95-99.

This is something like what the end of today's Epistle means, when the Apostle Paul says: 'You also most consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.' And this is something like what Jesus means us to hear when he said in today's Gospel: 'Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.'

To 'die to sin' and to 'lose our life' is to give up the assumption that we see it all, understand it all, know it all. The complications we enter and we make during our life of faith are too big for neat little summaries, or for the casual assigning of blame to this or that, or him or her.

To 'die to sin' and to 'lose our life' is to confess our sins, as we do every Sunday, to give up our narrow points of view, and then to receive God's grace in the signs of the bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ, the life of Christ. To come to the Lord's Supper is to hear the voice of the same God who opened Hagar's eyes to see the well of water, and opened her ears to hear the divine promise of hope for her and her child. God has no point of view but tells the truth:
there is no need to compete for God's grace. There is more than enough for all, for our whole lives.

Where do we find ourselves in the story—are we Abraham or Sarah or Hagar—or a bit of each? It matters that we find ourselves in the stories of the Bible. But it also matters that we give up our limited perspectives on why things have gone wrong in the pilgrimage of our life, our family, our parish, our country, and that we accept God's grace to create more life than we can ever give up—to accept that God can make meaning and create hope out of our messes. What light, and what joy, what hope that opens up for us.