

22 June 2008

Genesis 21: 8-21

Matthew 10: 24

Sermon by Peter Blackwood

In a culture that loves conflict and thrives on division, it is a miracle of God that the Uniting Church ever came into being. Nevertheless, our unity does not call us to be at one with a culture dominated by oppressive self-interest.

Thirty-one years ago I was a student at the Presbyterian Theological Hall. We were part of the United Faculty of Theology. Fellow students were Methodist and Anglican and Catholic. One was Congregational. Suddenly, on 22 June I became a student of the Uniting Church Theological Hall. In the weeks that followed there were services of celebration in the church. Members of the first Assembly came home from Sydney where they had been at the big service in the Sydney Town Hall. They told of the excitement of the occasion – of people in cars honking other cars that had a UCA sticker on the back. Complete strangers acknowledging that they belonged together. I remember the parish service where three congregations from two denominations came together. I carried a banner at the Presbytery celebration in the Camberwell town hall a week later. Some ministers were sporting new white albs. Others were still in their black gowns, but the new blue scarf with UCA logo was everywhere.

We had a special service at the theological hall too. What was different about this service was that this celebration was not conducted by the Uniting Church but by our other partners in the United Faculty, Trinity Anglicans and the Jesuits. This was probably the smallest celebration in those heady days of our new beginning but it was significant because, more than any other service, it brought home to me what we had done. Other denominations were looking upon what our three denominations had done and they celebrated that a very important act of reconciliation had taken place, that barriers between Christians could be dismantled. It had been more than 70 years since anything like it had happened in Australia when different branches of Methodism had come together, and before that, different splinters of the Church of Scotland.

June 1977 did not mark the ending of that momentous journey. In a sense it was only the beginning of struggle to let go of past baggage, to get on with partners who carried different baggage, to learn to like each other (we already loved each other, we just needed to go that extra mile and like each other as well). And how we grieved. We grieved for our buildings and our hymn books and our quaint customs that we had thought were so important.

Why did we do it? It was surely not economic pragmatism. When negotiations for union were at their height, our churches were getting bigger. They were planning during the 300 strong Sunday school days. Why did we do it?

We did it because of what God is like. Our story from Genesis 21 is a very good one for knowing what God is like because it shows God against two good people at their worst. Abraham and Sarah were good people. They have been a model of faith for three major world religions. We are not just talking denominations here. We are talking Jews and Muslims and Christians who all acknowledge Abraham as an archetype of faith.

But we do not see Sarah and Abraham at their best in this story. We see the strength of Sarah asserting herself in a patriarchal society, and we would want to commend that. We see Abraham attentive to his wife's feelings and wishes, and that would have to be a good thing. But we also see the terrible thing they did to the slave woman Hagar and her son Ishmael, how they were turned out of the camp and sent off alone into the desert. The alien and the powerless – dispossessed again.

It is a poignant story of a desperate woman who is convinced her son will die. It is amazing that the bible tells this story, for it is a story told against Abraham who is a hero of faith. The bible is amazing this way, that it is quite comfortable telling of the foibles of its heroes. The boy will surely die but because of what God is like Ishmael lives to become the father of a nation. The bible tells the people who call themselves the people of God that their God raised up other descendants of Abraham who they would know as enemies by the time of Gideon.

Ancient tribes told their stories and those stories included how the hatred they had for one another was rooted in an ancient family feud, and in that story God reached out to save both families. God made great communities out of both families. God made both families to prosper. Why? Because that is what God is like. That is what God does. When warring factions work towards reconciliation, they may do it for mutual advancement, everybody wins, but it is difficult and painful, it is full of compromise and grief. But when we do it we surely get in touch with a memory of what God is like.

When we know this about God it makes nonsense of speculations about whose side God is on, or which nation or denomination or religion is most highly favoured by God. In a sermon preached six years ago to mark our 25th anniversary our then-President, James Haire, spoke of the scandal of Christian disunity. It is a scandal, he said, because it does not reflect what God is like and does not conform with Christ's prayer for us.

The scandal of the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael and God's rescue and nurture of them reminds us that so many human disputes are the result of ancient family feuds whose origins are forgotten but whose effect still lives on in peoples' prejudices that controls our attitudes and actions. It shows itself in the arrogance that claims for me and my race, me and my denomination, me and my religion, a superiority that God must favour me and my kind over all others – and that is not what God is like.

In the face of this call to unity and the celebration of our unity it is unsettling to be reminded of Jesus words about his being the bringer, not of peace, but of a sword. The Christ of God was to have been the prince of peace – Isaiah said so. This sword promising Christ sits uncomfortably – like Abraham and Sarah, heroes of faith doing unheroic deeds. But this is not a sword bearing Christ. Nor is he calling his disciples to arms. The sword is born against Christ and Christ's community. This saying of Jesus was told into a church that found itself in conflict with its prevailing cultures and this conflict cut across families. It is the way Christ called the church to be that brought conflict upon it. Walter Brueggemann¹ writes of the prophetic work of the church: "*The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.*"² The Church that Christ calls us to be does not proclaim the peace of the false prophets who cry, 'peace, peace,' while there are those who remain oppressed and the earth continues to be ravaged. The church is called to be what God is like, and the ways of God are different.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1978)

² *ibid.* p. 13.