

**Pentecost 5**  
**19/06/2005**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Genesis 21: 8-21**

**Psalm 86**

**Romans 6: 1b-11**

**Matthew 10:24-39**

**A very strange story: grace for the outsider**

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I had a good sermon developing last week. Should I give that as well today? Have no fear! But being attracted to the Genesis reading again it seemed necessary to say a few words about the background.

In Genesis Chapter 21 the casting out of Ishmael occurs in the context of the birth of Isaac, the son of promise, born to Abraham and Sarah in their old age. As we know, Abraham was promised heirs more numerous than the stars. But, faced with Sarah's barrenness Abraham did what Eastern Patriarchs normally would do. Rather than go into an IVF program he had a child by the serving maid, Hagar. He had an heir. Life would go on. And the cuts they were making to Medicare at the time were then irrelevant!

What follows is a very strange story. It is a picture of family conflict and disturbance, set in the context of divine grace. If you think your family, or one that you know, is becoming dysfunctional, have no fear. God was in the middle of this story, with two women, two children, and an aged patriarch all in competition with one another. Chapter 21 is complex, but it is also the second account of these events, due to Genesis being compiled from more than one source. Each of the two stories has many nuances and layers of meaning. There are more subtle comparisons to be made than we could easily explore. But let us tease out some of them.

Isaac's weaning party was the occasion for the conflict. Perhaps now that he was entering into independent life, Sarah wanted to make sure Isaac had the inheritance to himself. She demanded that Abraham cast out Hagar and her child. The few words in the story cover what would have been a long and tense conversation. The child is the fruit of Abraham's flesh. Hagar's son is his heir, but not the heir of promise. He loves his son and is sorely distressed over Sarah's demand. What is interesting is that God takes Sarah's side. Doesn't God believe in family values? Couldn't Eastern Patriarchs have more than one wife? It seems a bit like legislating to send single mothers back to work. The point is, that Abraham, who once again finds himself in a very peculiar situation, is called to trust the judgment of another, rather than the wisdom of his own heart. History is not in Abraham's hands, and while he casts Hagar and her son into the haunt of Jackals and place of dry pools, he is called to a desert of his own. He is called to be obedient to another, who watches over the affairs of all.

The crisis deepens and so does Hagar's distress. There is an interesting word play here. The child was named Ishmael, which means, "God hears", but this version of the story refers only to him as the child. There is silence over the use of the name. The only reference comes analogously when Hagar cries out, and God hears the boy. Some feminist theologians would make the obvious point here! But what is at stake is that God does not neglect this child, there is a promise for him too, and Hagar is called to care for her boy rather than abandon him. The prophet Isaiah may have had this in mind

when he wrote:

“Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you” [says the Lord].

What seems like a proclamation regarding motherhood points to something greater: God hears. God’s gracious care is active in the midst of the most harrowing and depleting of experiences, and it extends to those who live outside the promise. The pun on “God hears” and Isaiah’s proclamation that God will not forget has its point in the description of the sort of person Ishmael will become and the existence of the Bedouin people. This may be simply an explanation, but the theological point is this. The changing Bedouin population of the area may have lived outside the Promised Land, but they did not live outside the grace of God. God watches over history, and God watches over the outcasts. The promise to them may seem pale compared to the promise that brought Isaac to life, but they nonetheless exist within a promise of grace.

The world belongs to God, the earth, and all its people. The call to worship we use during this season captures a theme, which is good news for those who feel outside the fold: women, those who live in detention or hold Temporary Protection Visas, or otherwise live in a stateless zone. But this is also a word of challenge to those who consciously live as children of the promise: there is no room for elitism, narrow nationalism, or exclusive or discriminating attitudes which limit the grace of God, or sees it as serving our interests alone.

There is a connection to be made between this and something Paul says in the reading from Romans. When he speaks of the cross, Christ and the resurrection there is a typological link with the new life that came forth in Isaac where no hope of life could be expected. In the case of Romans the obedience of Christ and God’s life-giving activity is used by Paul to show that because God in Christ has done something for us, once and for all, we are in receipt of a gift which creates a new opportunity: a calling, to live a new life. God’s gift has moral implications. There is an imperative by which people of faith are called to live. By Baptism Paul means not just our immersion in water, but our participation in this new opportunity for life which has been won for us by Christ and gifted to us by God. When Paul talks about dying in Christ, all the verbs have the past tense. When Paul talks about the resurrection, all the verbs have future reference, and point to our hypothetical future, given to us in Christ, and entered into ever more fully through life in Christ. What this means is, that because of Christ’s obedience, the past that was held against us is gone. This eradication has occurred once and for all - the whole of humanity is in view here: children of promise, Bedouins, asylum seekers, politicians, single mothers, damaged children.... All have been offered new opportunity - a new future in which to participate.

This makes a difference to how we see the possibilities for our own life. Our obedience is sought, and not once but continually, as we grow up into the gift that is given. This is more than aspiring to an elusive ideal. It is to build life on a foundation that is given, where the past can no longer hold us back because the work of Christ for us can’t be undone. It can only be lived in, to the glory of God.

But what we see as being on offer, and the imperative it implies, includes the idea that all, potentially, share this opportunity. This affects how we see everyone around us. This affects how we regard the promises and benefits of life in every respect, for them, as well as for us. That is why we cannot hear this news as having implications for ourselves alone, or turn it into the basis for special privileges for those regarded as on the inner circle. We live in the light of God’s offer, which is for all.

The story of the casting out of Ishmael is a very strange story, but there is grace in it, and a challenge to the people of the promise. Paul wrote to the Romans about God's grace. We are asked to consider what it means that we have heard what he said. And we are asked to consider whether we have understood the implications it has for the way we live - and the way we regard others, now, and into the future. God give us the strength to live as we have been called to live, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.