

Genesis 21:8-21

Psalm 86

Romans 6:1b-11

Matthew 10:24-39

Life, lost and found

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr Peter Blackwood

One of the reasons we like to read and reflect on passages of Scripture is because readings from the bible comfort the afflicted. The trouble is that far from comforting the afflicted, much of Scripture afflicts the comfortable. One of the complaints we might want to make about those who chose the readings that are included in the three-year lectionary cycle is that they have not only included the bits that comfort. They have also included bits that afflict. The readings for this Sunday fall into that category. In his letter to the Romans, Paul wrote, 'Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?' Matthew writes words of Jesus, 'Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.' The story of Hagar and Ishmael is touching but it relates why future enemies of the chosen race were permitted to survive and flourish.

It prompts the questions, 'Why were these accounts recorded in Scripture?' 'What might have been happening at the time of writing these passages?' The same kind of questions may be asked of any story. Why tell it? How does the story connect with what is going on in our lives now?

The story in Genesis about Hagar and Ishmael was told to the tribes of Israel over many centuries but the first five books of the bible were probably written down in the form we have them in our bible today at a time of crisis, at the time when Israel and Judah were in exile in Babylon. Matthew's gospel was probably written after 70 CE when Jerusalem fell, and the temple was destroyed. Paul wrote to Rome at a time of lively philosophical and religious debate. Writings we know as Scripture today were written at times of crisis and upheaval. It might be argued they were written because of the times of crisis and upheaval of those who read and heard Scripture.

It needs to be noted that these writings did not just relate to a series of events without some interpretive comment. We can detect deliberate messages. Each writer writes about certain events but they are adding comment as to how their readers can understand what the events mean for them. Sometimes their comment flies in the face of what readers might expect.

An obvious example of that comes when Matthew has Jesus say, 'Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword...'. He goes on to spell that out in graphic and brutal terms – specific family members who normally would be expected to get on and have each other's backs are the very ones who will be set against each other – stabbing each other's backs. Did Jesus really say this or did Matthew invent this to make a point? There are some tests that bible scholars use to determine the likelihood of a genuine quote. One test is if an act or saying feels out of character or awkward, then it is more likely to be a true quote. Matthew tells us that Jesus, the prince of peace said, 'I come to bring a sword.' – very awkward. Another test for authenticity is if Jesus is turning an idea on its head like in the verse that concludes his saying about peace and swords and family members hating each other -

Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

Paul has a reputation for saying weird things that get people thinking differently about life and death. He has said that God's grace is more than a match for the world's evil. If there is more evil, then there is more grace. Well that's good. God's grace is very good. The best way to get more grace in the world, according to Paul, is to sin more, be more evil.

Paul comes right out and says it, 'Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?' Having asked the question, the competent debater sets out to answer. The response is extraordinary and unexpected. I would have said something like – if you have been in debt and someone pays it off for you and gives a bit extra for good measure how can you expect help if you go into debt again. Surely nothing wrong with that answer, after all, Jesus said much the same in one of his parables. The problem with that answer is that Paul has just said that God's grace knows no bounds so the debt would be covered again, wouldn't it?

Paul comes up with a gob stopper. Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? Certainly not. Why not? Because we are dead.

'Well, what sort of answer is that?' I hear you cry. How is being dead going to help? Well, if you are dead no one can harm you anymore. The worst that can happen has happened. What people think of you doesn't matter anymore. You cannot be frightened.

In the world of Paul, Christians had to live fearlessly to stay faithful. No problem, says Paul. You are dead, the fear of being debilitated by sin and death has passed. How can this be? Well, you are baptized. So? Well in baptism we have entered into Christ's death. The baptized die with Christ. That is what the symbolism of water is in baptism. That stuff can kill you. This link between death and water is more obvious in those places where total immersion is practiced. In the Uniting Church we have tried to make the water more visible by pouring it in generous proportions into the font. I can remember as a student participating in a baptism where the container for the water was like a little crystal butter dish. There was so little water that at one baptism the session clerk thought there was no water at all and went to get some. If he couldn't see the water from one metre away, how visible could it have been for the congregation. It is very difficult to feel threatened with death when you are being sprinkled with water from a butter dish. But Paul says this is actually what it is about.

'Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.'

Often baptistries are in the shape of a cross. I have pictures of baptistries and fonts designed to remind the church of graves and coffins.

Morbid? It would be if the symbolism stopped there. It would not symbolise the truth of the matter if candidates for baptism only went down into the water. But that is not the end of it. The baptised come up out of the water, dripping wet like one newly born. The newly baptised child is taken away from the font and presented to its new family, the church. That family promises to be a life-giving community. Within the family of the church the Christian is not immune from evil and death. There is no magic umbrella to protect us from the real world. But it is the company of the church that acknowledges the reality of evil and death but does not concede that it has the last word. More powerful and significant is the life-giving grace of God. If that is the focus of the Christian we don't need to fear all the other stuff.

Remember you are baptised and be thankful. In baptism you have died. Now you can live.

God breaks out of every scheme of logic with all the loose ends neatly tucked away. So we tell stories, stories ancient and new, stories of God and faithful people who, despite the complexities of life, trust the Lord of life to be faithful to his promises of life.

It is not a matter of God changing to our concepts, but of us changing to God's concepts. Of losing in order to find, of being bound in order to be free, of dying in order to live. That calls for trust in God. Jesus said, "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." (Mt 10: 39)

Bronwyn Pike is the Executive Director of Uniting, the church's social care agency. In the Religion Program on ABC radio in 2002, when she was Victoria's Minister for Housing and Aged Care, Bronwyn said:

I believe absolutely firmly that people's lives can be transformed in a relationship with Jesus Christ, and I think that we've tended to think that maybe people's salvation is only found in psychology or counselling and all of these things help, but true transformation is still there and available when people come to understand that by giving their lives away, they find it.
