

Gen 21 v 8-21

Psalm 86 v1-10,16,17

Matthew 10 v24-39

### A Troubled Family written by Sarah Ashton

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord. Amen

When John asked me to preach this sermon he said that it was not an easy passage but that he thought I might have some experience that I could include. I wondered whether he meant personal or professional experience, but didn't ask because it doesn't really matter. In most of our lives there will have been difficult times with personal relationships and we will all have found a way to cope or to support others through those times.

Our Old Testament reading describes a very difficult time in Abraham's life. God had promised Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation but he and his wife, Sarah, had been unable to have children. It was Sarah herself who had suggested that Abraham should have a child with her servant, Hagar. As Sarah's servant, Hagar, could be gifted to Abraham to ensure an heir. This was not unusual at the time and was even covered by marriage contracts which created an obligation to provide an heir by this method if necessary.

During the pregnancy, however, Sarah felt that Hagar despised her; she blamed Abraham for this and complained to him. Abraham told Sarah to deal with Hagar herself. Then Hagar ran away as Sarah mistreated her, only to be sent back by an angel of the Lord, with promises that her own child would be the founder of a great kingdom and that he should be called Ishmael. Once Ishmael was born we hear no more of the situation between Sarah, Hagar and Abraham.

Although it was the norm for men to have more than one wife at this time I should imagine that there were regular tensions between the women in the household, particularly when a slave has delivered the heir and not the wife.

About 14 years pass and Sarah gives birth to Isaac, who she now views as Abraham's true heir. In Jewish custom of the time, Isaac would have been weaned between the ages of 3 and 5 years, so this makes Ishmael in his late teens. Sarah is not happy with the way Ishmael is playing with or caring for

Isaac, accusing him of mocking Isaac. Mocking was thought to be a great sin. Of course, it would be expected that the older child should show responsibility towards his younger half sibling, but maybe he was aware that his chance of inheritance was now diminished.

Whatever the truth of the situation was, Sarah told Abraham to dismiss Hagar and Ishmael. It is not a request, it is an instruction. Although this is a patriarchal society, his wife has spoken and Abraham has a difficult situation to resolve, especially as, by the customs of the day, the arbitrary expulsion of a servant girl's son was frowned upon, if not prohibited.

Abraham is, naturally, distressed by this as Ishmael is also his son. As John White said in the first sermon in the series, family was everything and provided the only real protection a person had. Family groups were extended families, including the household servants, and they were close and supportive. Abraham had already trusted God and left part of his family, his family home and travelled many miles.

Now he has issues within his immediate family that are huge and are going to cause trouble in whatever way he tries to resolve the problem. But Abraham is a man of faith, and that is apparent throughout his story, and God speaks to him and tells him that he should do as Sarah asks, as both sons will have many descendants. This is not the first time that Abraham has been told that both his sons will have a future.

As is Abraham's way, his obedience to God is immediate and, probably, against his own initial desire (just as our response to Jesus should be obedience and not necessarily following our own desires). Early the next morning he sets Hagar and Ishmael on their way with provisions for their journey. Not an easy task to send your older son into the desert with his mother.

Maybe we can see it as an example of the tough love that parents sometimes have to show to help their children move forward, maybe we see it as a strong act of discipline (as I have said earlier Ishmael is now an adult and should know how to conduct himself). However we view it, Abraham listens to God and puts his trust in Him in choosing this way to resolve his troubles.

For Abraham acting on God's advice calmed the situation with Sarah and reassured him that Hagar and Ishmael would be looked after. He didn't have

the words of today's Psalm to recite as prayer as it wasn't written then, but he did call on God and was answered. V 16 of the Psalm says 'grant your strength to your servant and save the son of your maidservant'. These words could have been prayed by Abraham, with him being the servant and Ishmael the son of the maidservant.

Life in the desert is not easy for Ishmael and Hagar. The supplies that Abraham gave them are exhausted and Hagar believes they will die. Their crying is heard by God and an angel assures Hagar that Ishmael will be the leader of a great nation and then she sees a well where she could fill her water bottle.

Ishmael survives, marries and goes on to have twelve children and God watches over him. Muslims believe that their faith goes back to Abraham through Ishmael. Hagar's search for water in the desert is re-enacted each year during Hajj, which is the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca. Abraham does not know this part of the story; he has to rely on his faith in God that all is well with Ishmael.

Today's Gospel reading talks about conflict within families. Jesus came to bring peace, but when some in a family follow Jesus and others don't it can lead to issues. It takes strength of character and faith for one person in a relationship to follow God when the other doesn't. I have said before that Brandon only came to faith sometime after we were married. It was not a cause of tension between us as Brandon realised that my faith was what made me the person I was and am now. Today we share that faith.

When there is conflict in a family none of us know how things will turn out. Most families experience some sort of trouble somewhere along the line. Some families can resolve the issues themselves, some need some outside assistance and some families break down as a result.

Abraham had his faith to guide him and we have our faith as we move through our lives. When times are hard we need to pray, but we also need to work alongside God to resolve the issues. We need to show faith like that of Abraham, which can be tested to the limit, but if our faith stands the test, God will not desert us.

The Psalm talks about God being forgiving and good and abounding in love to all who call to him (v5). The Gospel reading states that we should be open about

our faith and not be afraid. It is our faith that will guide us through hard times, whether these are within our family or some other aspect of our life. It does not say that as a believer we will have it easy. In fact it is implied that having our faith could make some situations harder for us, but we must take comfort, as Abraham did, that God will show us his love.

As this is a third Sunday and a contemplative service I have three questions for you to consider

How has God helped you to resolve a difficult situation?

When times are hard, for whatever reason, do you turn to prayer and submit to God?

Who should you be praying for particularly now?