Gen 21 v 8 – 21 Matthew 10 v24-39 Ps 86 v 1 -10, 16 -17

Hagar's Story written by Sarah Ashton

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

Today, we live in a society where relationships within families can seem complex. Separation and divorce lead to families being split, with children spending time between two households and having step-parents and step-siblings. Blended families take time, patience, trust and understanding for relationships to work. All families have difficult days, weeks and months; no two family scenarios are the same and none of us know what is around the corner. Whatever the situation, they all involve us making choices and then having to live with the consequences.

Our Old Testament reading is a real family dilemma. Last week we heard how Sarah was promised a son and Isaac duly arrived. Isaac is not, however, Abraham's first son. This is where we meet Hagar. Hagar is introduced to us several chapters earlier (Ch 16), as Sarah's Egyptian maidservant. It may be that they had acquired her when they fled to Egypt to avoid the famine (Ch 13). Abraham was probably a wealthy man and had many servants and therefore his wife having a maidservant would be expected. Sarah had long been promised a child by God, but she felt her patience was being tested too far and that God was not honouring his promise. Ancient documents, including old Assyrian Marriage Contracts, say that where a male heir is needed the husband may sleep with his wife's servant to solve the problem. Here Sarah makes a choice and tells Abraham to sleep with Hagar, hoping that she can build a family through her servant.

However, when Hagar becomes pregnant her relationship with Sarah breaks down, as Hagar dislikes Sarah. Sarah complains to Abraham about this, but he says that it is her problem to solve. Sarah becomes most cruel towards Hagar and Hagar runs away. While she is resting beside a well in the desert, an angel of God appears to Hagar and tells her to return to Sarah and to submit to her; he also says that she is to call the child Ishmael and that she will have many descendants. God has reached out to an Egyptian woman here and offered her

comfort, direction and hope. Even when we are at our lowest ebb in life, God sees and is there for us.

Hagar does return and Ishmael is born when Abraham is said to be 85 years old. Years pass and Ishmael is now about 14 or 15 years old and Isaac is fully weaned (which happened between 2 and 3 years of age). The boys are playing together but Sarah sees Ishmael mocking Isaac and her temper takes over. She cannot bear to think of Isaac having to share his inheritance with Ishmael. Sarah insists that Abraham gets rid of 'that slave woman and her son'. No longer does Sarah think of her as a servant but she is a slave in her mind. Abraham is distraught as Ishmael is his biological son. God speaks to Abraham to reassure him that Isaac is his line of succession and that he should do as Sarah asks.

Abraham responds promptly to God and sends Hagar and Ishmael off early the next morning with a good supply of food and water. We cannot know how Abraham felt about this but his obedience to God is not to be doubted. Hagar is soon in the desert and her water supplies are exhausted. Ishmael does not have the strength to go on and she has him sit in the shade of a bush while she moves a little further away as she fears he will die and she cannot bear to watch this. Hagar must have felt that God had deserted her. When she had run away, he had sought her out, made reassuring promises and persuaded her to go back to Abraham and Sarah. Now history was repeating itself, but this time she was thrown out and had nowhere to go back to. In her despair she hears God's angel again, who reiterates that the promise that he will make Ishmael into a great nation. She must return to him and lift him up. Then God opens her eyes and she sees a nearby well, where she fills her waterskin and takes it to Ishmael to drink.

If the Psalms had been written (but they weren't for another thousand years), I think Hagar would have identified with Psalm 86 'Hear O Lord and answer me for I am poor and needy'. 'You are my God, save your servant who trusts in you'. V16 is particularly relevant: 'Grant your strength to your servant and save the son of your maidservant'. Maybe the author of the Psalm had this Old Testament story in mind when he wrote it.

The Jewish and Christian story of Hagar ends at this point, which makes it sound as if the promises God made to Hagar did not materialise. Muslims have a slightly different version of the story of Abraham and Hagar, but Abraham still leaves Ishmael with Hagar in the desert and Hagar runs frantically between two hills to find water to sustain them. This is now commemorated by Muslims when they undertake Hajj, their pilgrimage to Mecca as they re-enact Hagar's trials. Muslims believe that one of Ishmael's descendants is the Prophet Mohammad, who later received the Qur'an as the holy book of Islam.

What can we take from the story of Hagar?

She is a woman of faith. Although she was an Egyptian and a servant, she respected Abraham as a man of faith and embodied his faith in her life. The worship of one God was new to Abraham and was certainly alien to the Egyptian system of worship. When she ran away, the angel reassured her and she went back to Abraham and Sarah, in obedience to God. It is not easy to put yourself in Hagar's position: a servant carrying the master's child, as requested by the wife, who is now regretting her choice and doesn't want to live with the consequences as she is jealous and feels let down by Hagar's pregnancy. Somehow Hagar rises above the situation she finds herself in and raises her son with Abraham and Sarah for many years.

Hagar is a woman of patience. God's promises don't materialise overnight, just as Sarah had discovered. She has to be patient as she brings Ishmael up with Abraham and Sarah and have faith that one day he would be the father of many. I can't imagine that all was sweetness and light between Hagar and Sarah, especially as she is downgraded in terminology to a slave before Sarah finally snaps. I suspect that Hagar had to bite her tongue regularly and carry on for her son's sake. It is not recorded that Hagar railed against God at any time in her trials, but it is recorded that he sent an angel to her when she was in need.

Hagar is also a woman of perseverance. She stays true to both Abraham and God for the sake of her son. Living as part of Abraham and Sarah's family once Ishmael was born, would have brought its challenges, living with a delighted Abraham to have fathered a son and a disappointed Sarah because that son was not hers. When Sarah decrees that Hagar and Ishmael must leave, no argument from Hagar is recorded; she accepts what Abraham has to say and goes, with Ishmael, into the unknown taking only the supplies which Abraham has given her.

Hagar's faith, patience, and perseverance are interwoven but are constantly there when she faces difficulties in her life; challenges that are not of her choosing but she knows that through it all God will provide for her in her hour of need.

In our Gospel reading today Jesus is telling his disciples that they need not be afraid as God will guide them and protect them as they are precious in his sight. He reassures them that although they may suffer physically, their souls are safe. Just as Hagar felt secure in God's promise, it doesn't mean that times won't be tough and decisions made that we don't like and have no control over. We need to know that if our faith is strong and true God will hold us in the palm of His hand. We have this reassurance from Jesus who lived 2000 years ago, that's 2000 years after Hagar. If Hagar could be so faithful without additional teachings that we now have, how much stronger should our faith be?

Points to pray on

Hagar was strong in faith. Help me Lord to maintain my faith through the trials of life.

Hagar was patient. Help me Lord to be patient with the situations and people that I interact with.

Hagar persevered. Help me Lord to persevere and stand for you when people let me down.