



St John's Anglican
Cathedral, Brisbane

SERMON

**Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
25th June 2023**

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Genesis 21:8-21

Ps 86

Romans 6:1-11

Matthew 10:24-39

Messy families and God

*The morning I sent Hagar and Ishmael away,
the sun closed its eyes. Nothing shone
on the muscled back I'd oiled in the dark
of the tent, her back, that shouldered the skin
of water, sack of bread, our boy.
I watched until they shrank into ants
and the desert whitened.
I could have given away anything after that.*

Elana Bell

One of the things I adore about the stories that come to us from the Hebrew Scriptures is the way they record the complexity of human relationships. Just look at the dynamics that are unfolding in the story that has been and will be in our sights over the next few weeks.

Today's portion of the story begins with a party: Isaac is weaned. Here the word 'weaned' means more than ceasing to receive one's mother's milk; it conveys the sense that Isaac is now a person who can make his own decisions. The party mood is shattered when Sarah decides that she doesn't want her son, Isaac, to be associating any longer with Hagar's son, Ishmael. Both children are Abraham's.

So intrafamily politics sees Abraham having to make a choice. The heaviness of that choice is conveyed through Elana Bell's poem.

Many of us know what that sort of intrafamily dynamic feels like, and have had to make similarly traumatic choices; choices we would rather not make, but cannot seem to avoid.

By the time we get to the next Chapter, featuring the story in which Abraham feels called to sacrifice his son, Isaac, Ishmael, who was the elder of the two children, has been written out of the story. And so, we find Isaac being referred to as Abrahams' first-born son. Family history is being rewritten. Many of us will be familiar with that dynamic as well.

And taking just a moment to think about that latter incident; by the time Abraham is pursuing the idea of sacrificing his son, following what could be seen as his latest crazy passion, Isaac is over 30 years old. The logistics of getting him bound and on to the firewood defy the imagination. I cannot even begin to imagine the violence involved as an old man overcomes and subdues his adult son, subjecting him to the torture of a mock execution. Family abuse and the deforming of family by the following of crazy passions are also things you may have experienced.

As I said at the beginning of this homily, one of the things I appreciate about these stories is the believability of the characters. For me it provides a stark contrast to many of the hagiographies written about Christian saints who, more often than not, come across not only as flawless but also as miraculous. I have to say that the stories I find more useful are those that deal with struggle, self-doubt, and exploration, and the need to deal with life when things go wrong.

Their journey is my journey.

The believability of the characters takes on extra significance when one considers that these stories are intended to help the reader understand the ways that God interacts and works with people.

The compiler of the Genesis stories captures the Hebrew people's understanding of their origins, the interactions between God and their forbears, and the development of their identity as a people; as God's people.

The story even records the messiness of the journey. It includes details of the theological dead ends and of the complete misunderstandings that get embraced and defended, before being abandoned or reshaped as the people reflect on their lived experience. The recasting and reframing continue into the New Testament period and are still unfolding today.

All this helps me develop an appreciation of the way God works and for where God is to be found.

It suggests that God is in the mess and that God works out the divine purposes in and through, and even despite, the way we live our lives. This is because as St Theresa of Avila once said, 'God has no hands on earth, but ours...'

Let me make two comments about the implications of this.

Firstly, God working in and through the mess does not absolve us of responsibility. God's working in and through the mess doesn't mean that what we do or do not do doesn't matter. It is more a testament to God's tenaciousness. God is a God of workarounds, seeking to encourage the development of the Commonwealth on earth... as in heaven, and adapting to the vagaries of the way we respond. The project's best results occur when we work with it and towards it.

Secondly, the fact that God was working through the lives of characters like Abraham and Sarah and continues to seek to work through people like us, doesn't mean that the way life unfolds is part of God's plan or purpose. Free will means that we craft one another's lives in ways that often do not reflect God's love or the desire that God has for us to flourish.

God works with what we give into the process, our best and our worst, seeking to draw loving and generous responses out of us by being generous and loving towards us.

+ Amen.