

We reflected last week on Abraham and the promise that God made to him in Genesis 12. **“I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”** These words might leave us with the impression that life for Abraham would be easy and everything would go well. Some people have a similar view of the Christian life: that for Christians everything is easy or should be, and if it isn't then we cannot be walking correctly with God. Such views are completely wrong and badly distort the walk of faith. This morning we will consider how God sees, cares and works out His plan in our lives through the reality of our choices and life experiences. This should help us have peace about things as they transpire and give us a lead in what we need to do. It should give us an increasing faith as we look to God to see how He is working things out and how the practicality of His care is revealed in our lives.

We begin then, again, with Abraham. Today's account is not, at face value, so pleasant. It begins with Sarah watching the children at play. Her hand-maiden Hagar has now become her rival for Abraham's attention, Hagar's son Ishmael, the first-born of Abraham, is observed by Sarah mocking her son Isaac. Sarah's response, one not totally unexpected in a parent, is of anger and wanting to do something about it. In this situation it is Sarah, the wife, that holds the position of power. She is the wife of Abraham, whereas Hagar, albeit the mother of Abraham's son, was Sarah's own Egyptian maidservant whom she had given to Abraham to bear children as she was barren. At least that was the situation until blessed by God as we saw last week. Her son Isaac, was born to herself and Abraham, was the legitimate heir, even if younger. Sarah determines to have Abraham sent the mother and son away, to make them forever exiles from all they have known. She will tolerate no rival or challenge to her son's rightful heirship. Abraham, we are told, saw her request as 'evil'. No doubt Abraham loved his son and quite likely Hagar as well. Yet, even so Abraham did what his wife requested and sent Hagar and Ishmael away.

It is always easier to see things in blacks and whites, who does right, who does wrong. Yet rarely is life so simple. It is a greater foolishness to believe that there is no right or wrong, no righteousness. A society without rules and maintenance of its systems is on a fast, slippery slope to chaos and anarchy. How would we act in such a situation? On one hand Sarah might be seen as a good, pro-active and protective mother, ensuring the future and position of her child. After all she had given Hagar to Abraham to make sure that Abraham had descendants even though as wife she should bear the children. Children outside of marriage did not have the same intrinsic rights by lineage unless there was no direct heir. Sarah might also be seen as a pragmatist but one lacking in faith, unwilling to trust and wait on God and His plan. Much earlier we read in Genesis 12 and 15 that God had made His promises to Abraham. Abraham's descendants would be a great nation, as numerous as the stars in the sky.

On the other hand, we might be tempted to see Sarah as completely lacking faith and the evil of her heart reflected in her intent in getting rid of her rival and her son. After all when things didn't work out as she expected, or in the time-frame she wanted, Sarah took things into her own hands. Then later she scoffed at the Lord's promise that she would bear children within a year. Abraham was clear about his wife's action and intent. He was it as 'evil'.

Now we see the economy and wisdom of God. God unlimited by time or person and clear about His intent, knew how Sarah would respond and what she would do. Her faith may have been weak but it was there. When she had had her son she had praised and glorified God. But, like many, Sarah wrestled with her humanity. Instead of letting mistake build upon mistake (or sin build upon sin) God uses the situation to further His plan without destroying Sarah,

Hagar, Abraham, Isaac or Ishmael. God's design is always for good and here we see it being worked out in real terms.

Now Abraham was in that position that no man wants to be in – caught between two women fighting, having to make a choice. Abraham is highly distressed because it concerned his son Ishmael. What Sarah was asking was for him to give up this son completely and it didn't sit well with him at all. Like all wise men Abraham must have taken the matter to prayer. Certainly, matters great and small are to be presented before the Lord. God answers, clearly and definitively. God gives Abraham clear instruction but also a number of things that really needed some careful consideration.

Firstly, God tells Abraham not to be distressed about the boy and the slave woman. Probably not the easiest thing to hear. The language used is important. In God's economy the position of Hagar and Ishmael was not part of God's ideal plan. A plan that would have unfolded if Sarah and Abraham had trusted God and waited for His purpose, instead of going off to produce progeny through a slave. The responsibility for the situation, the sin in the situation if you like, belongs to Abraham and he needs to own it. Our actions always have consequences and often they affect others.

Secondly however, God's economy is such that human frailty is taken into account and accounted for in ways that still further God's plan. God sees all, knows all, understands the hearts and motivations of all. He knows our choices even before we make them knowing the end from the beginning.

God's promise to Abraham was that he would have numerous descendants. Here now the plan changes or becomes more specific. The people of the promise will be the descendants of Abraham and Sarah as God intended. The promise of descendants however will be carried by both sons. Therefore, both Isaac and Ishmael will become the fathers of great nations, numerous peoples as we know has been fulfilled today. Throughout history the descendants of Ishmael have been associated with the Arabic peoples, especially those of the north. Muslim Arabs consider themselves direct descendants of Ishmael and Abraham. Whereas the descendants of Isaac are the Jewish people and those who have interbred with a multitude of other cultures. Abraham then, has nothing to be concerned about in the longer-term picture. That is of course, apart from the personal pain of separation which one can only imagine at. But this too was a consequence of his sin, every bit as much as was King David's sin years later with Bathsheba and they would lose their first son. When we realize that Abraham recognises this, we might understand why he sent them away with such a meagre supply of provisions. Abraham wasn't acting evilly, he was simply intensely aware that they were no longer under his protection, his guardianship. They would be provided for by God.

We might consider then how unfair this must have felt for Hagar and Ishmael and indeed it was. Ignoring poor and incorrect scriptural translations that make Ishmael a nasty piece of work, their situation was essentially brought about beyond their control. But God had not left them totally unprepared even though they might have thought so at the time. In chapter 16 of Genesis we have an account of how Hagar, when she was younger and in response to nastiness from Sarah, ran away into the desert. Not that Hagar was without fault. Taking advantage of her pregnancy and Sarah's barrenness she had despised her mistress. One can imagine how that went. But when she ran away into the desert an angel of the Lord was sent to Hagar. She was told to return and submit herself to Sarah and that her descendants would be too numerous to count. Hagar did as she was told and called the Lord, **"You are the God who sees me."** Now she was in the desert again. How confusing that must have been for her. She knew the Lord and His promises but she also knew that her, or her son's actions, may have played a part in what transpired, but who would know? What had become of the promise God made to her. As the food gave out, she began to despair. Walking away from her son she was unable to bring herself to watch him die. She sat down and sobbed.

Again, we see how God sees and knows. We see how God intends to bring about good. Hagar's knowledge and faith is not strong enough in her walk so far, even though she has

experienced God's goodness, to carry her unaided through this calamity. Fortunately, God's compassion and understanding and the working out of His plan never fails. God has not only heard her cries, God has heard the cries of her son. An angel is sent to tell her of this and that God intends to make Ishmael into a great nation as He promised. As Hagar responds she sees water which she takes to her son. The narrative concatenates then to tell us that God remained with Ishmael as he grew up and that eventually his mother got him a wife from Egypt.

We might, and sometimes do, expect God to take sides but our ways are not God's ways. God sees the potential in each one of us and all of our weaknesses and strengths. He knows where we are at and particularly how we are impacted by the world around us. When we walk in faith, in fact even when we don't, God incorporates all of this into His plan for our lives. We have the ability to reject this, as Sarah and Abraham did, and this does not stop God working out what He intends. How much easier, how much better, when we follow His direction from the start.

In Jesus' words from the reading in Matthew's gospel we understand that ultimately nothing will be kept hidden. The best way to deal with evil is to expose it. Secrets are rarely for good. Jesus tells us to not be afraid of those who destroy the body but of the One who can destroy body and soul. That is, we need to have a righteous fear, awe and reverence for God. It is a mistake to see God as our pal who is there to do our will, or even to wander from the truth. This is what Abraham and Sarah did. Worth so much more than sparrows every human soul is precious in God's sight. And God, in His love, is able to redeem every person who responds to His love, regardless of what they have done. And further, he provides a better path in this life and the next to walk on. As this account of a man, two women and two sons reminds us, none of us are without sin. Our own selfish desires and ambition, if untamed by the Spirit and by faith, will lead us down wrong roads but even then, God's plan provides if we will respond in repentance and faith and accept it. We know, sadly, that some won't – even close friends, family, colleagues and neighbours. This may bring us into conflict and to a point where we can do no more. But it is reassuring to know that God never gives up on people and always provides a way forward if they are willing to see it.

Does this mean that we can walk in sin and God will sort it all out at the end. No, we cannot continue in sin. Yes, God will sort it all out but not in the way we might like personally. As Christians we walk with Christ. We accept His forgiveness, His redeeming action on our behalf, to cover our sin as our Saviour. Abraham and Sarah had accepted and looked forward to God's provision and destiny. But we also need to accept Jesus the as Lord of our lives – leading us, guiding us, moulding us, directing us. We need both Saviour and Lord in our lives so that we stay on track.

So, this morning we can conclude that God sees and cares, very much, in all the inequality, injustice, fickleness and frailty of human life. His perspective may be far different to ours. He calls us to do our part and stay on track. God cares, and what God can and does do in our lives is awesome.

Amen