

## Lent Compline Talk - Lent 2: Hagar and Sarah

In this series of short talks in our compline services we are looking at some of the women who figure prominently in the bible. Having thought about Eve last week, this week we move on in Genesis to the account of Sarah and Hagar. Before preparing this talk I was unaware that there are two parallel stories about Sarah and Hagar (perhaps because we rarely read right through Genesis) which suggests that the compiler of Genesis couldn't quite decide which to use and so played safe by putting in both, though this produced all sorts of anomalies. Sarah (or Sarai – it's not important) first appears in Genesis when God tells Abraham to leave his home in Ur (in what is now Iraq) and, via a stay in Haran (now a ruined town in southern Turkey), to travel south to the land of Canaan. The name Canaan is used for all the land abutting the eastern shore of the Mediterranean and including modern Israel and western Syria). There, God promises Abraham "I will make of you a great nation". Abraham, who Genesis says is 75 years old (calculation of years was very different then), therefore took Sarah his wife who was a similar age, Lot his brother's son, and all their substance and souls they had gathered in Haran, and went south into the land of Canaan.

At that time there was famine in Canaan and, in the first account, Abraham went further south into Egypt to live there – presumably he had heard that Egypt, with the Nile delta, had plenty of food but, as they got to the border, Abraham said to Sarah (in essence) 'you are a good-looking woman; these Egyptians – when they see you – may think to kill me and take you; so you must say that you are my sister, and I shall be spared'. And so it was: the Egyptians took a fancy to Sarai - Pharaoh apparently even considered taking Sarah as one of his wives or concubines, and she and Abram were taken into Pharaoh's court and showered with gifts and servants. But then, Pharaoh's household was struck with plague which they associated with discovering that Sarah was actually Abraham's wife. As a result, Abraham, Sarah, Lot and all their retinue were expelled from Egypt and return to Canaan. However, they take with them an Egyptian maidservant called Hagar, and this is her first appearance in the story.

Chapter 15 has Abraham complaining to God that, after 10 years in Canaan, he has no heir for all the riches he has accumulated because Sarah, at this point, is childless. In what might initially seem like a selfless act Sarah says to Abraham "The Lord has given me no children, so go to my maid; and it may be that I may obtain children by her". But note that it is Sarah who wants to obtain the child; Hagar is not asked what she thinks of the arrangement; her feelings as a servant are of no consequence. Abraham goes along with the suggestion; Sarah takes Hagar to Abraham; and Hagar conceives. The first written Babylonian law code of Hammurabi stated that a barren woman may offer her maid (*i.e* slave) to her husband to bear a son; the son can be adopted and becomes her son with all the status that brings. The slave girl, however, has to remain a slave. We think of surrogacy as something very modern, but this was in essence forced surrogacy – Hagar was a slave.

It is at this point in the story that things start to go wrong. Hagar feels that her status has improved enormously – not surprising given that great value that was placed on fertility – and she starts to look down on the infertile Sarah; tension develops between the two women and, when Sarah asks Abraham to intervene, he just says "Hagar is your slave– do what you like" at which Sarah treats Hagar very harshly and Hagar flees into the surrounding

wilderness of the Sinai desert. However, pausing at a spring in the desert Hagar is told by an angel to return to Abraham and Sarah, which she does, after which she gives birth to a son, Ishmael.

Next comes a short passage in which God tells Abraham “I am God; walk before me and be perfect. I will make a covenant between us; you will be the father of many nations” – this was the start of the covenant between God and the people who were to spring from Abraham and Sarah. At this, Abraham laughs because of his age and that of Sarah, but God promises that Sarah will bear a son, to be named Isaac – the origin of the Jewish people and the 12 tribes of Israel. When Abraham asks God, “What about the descendants of my son Ishmael?” (at this point Sarah had not yet conceived) he is told that Ishmael, too will be the father of a great nation. Next comes a curious visit of three strangers who are given ‘desert hospitality’ of feet washing and food during the course of which they ask after Sarah, and they too predict that Sarah will have a son which she overhears and laughs because, as the bible put it, she and Abraham were ‘well stricken in years’. So, in the story both Abraham and Sarah laugh at what God suggests and promises. I wonder how often I/we respond to what we perceive as a call from God with a laughing – “Oh, that’s impossible” – we should have more trust that God will provide the means even for what may to us seem impossible.

Chapter 20 now starts the duplicate story. Abraham journeys south with Sarah and his household but this time tells king Abimelech that Sarah is his sister because Abimelech fancies her (an almost exact repeat of the earlier episode with Pharaoh) and it is only in Chapter 21 that Sarah conceives a son to Abraham in his and, indeed, her old age and gives birth to Isaac. At which Sarah again laughs, saying ‘God has made me laugh so that all who hear will laugh with me. Who would have believed that Sarah could have given birth to a child for Abraham? This time it’s a laugh of triumph.

Then comes a tragic part of the story, (which is again a sort of duplication) because, when Isaac was weaned, Abraham made a feast to celebrate, but at the feast Ishmael was apparently laughing with Isaac. Sarah overhears this and sees Ishmael as ‘playing at being Isaac’ so she again becomes jealous and goes to Abraham saying “Drive out this servant woman and her son away so that he cannot be an equal heir with my son.” The word for ‘drive out’ is that used for ‘putting away of a wife by a husband’. Once again Abraham is very grieved because Ishmael is also his son, but God tells him not to be grieved because “I shall also make a great nation out of Ishmael” So this time Abraham strips Hagar of her status as a secondary wife and hands her back to Sarah as a slave, making her son also a slave. This time Hagar is sent into the wilderness with only a loaf of bread and some water and with Ishmael her son who eventually takes an Egyptian wife and settles in the Sinai. For me, this account seems to be trying to explain the difference between the Israelites and the surrounding Arabic populations.

Genesis, like so much of history, was written by the conquerors; and therefore has an Israelite perspective. Hagar, as an Egyptian slave, is seen as someone whose rights and interests do not count over and against the claim that the ‘blessing’ was given to Isaac. Yahweh is shown to be so partial to Isaac that he forgets any question of justice when it comes to Ishmael. We all like to think that God is on ‘our side’ and thinks like us! Both sides often claim this in a war. Hagar is clearly seen as a possession, a disposable commodity. By

contrast, In the Qu'ran Haajar (Hagar) is identified as Abraham's wife and is honoured as a matriarch of Islam (which has a whole series of parallel stories to those in Genesis.)

In the NT Paul compares Hagar's experience as a slave with the Jews, enslaved by the old law, and Sarah and Isaac with the free heavenly Jerusalem. In mediaeval times Thomas Aquinas and John Wycliffe likened the children of Sarah to the redeemed; those of Hagar to the unredeemed. For us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the story (stories) of Hagar and Sarah raises complex ethical issues concerning inter-racial and inter-religious tensions. Elie Wiesel, a prominent Jewish writer, says that Sarah should have done better by loving both Isaac and Ishmael "If only she could have brought them together instead of setting them apart!" and he links this with the present Israeli/Palestinian conflict. Sadly, such conflicts are only too widespread in today's world: just think of various conflicts in Africa; in China between the Han and Uighurs; in Myanmar the persecution of Rohingya, in Australia and NZ the way white settlers treated the local aboriginals and Maoris. Unfortunately, one could go on and on.

We are surely called by Christ to redress such injustices; to restore the dignity of people scarred by such situations. So, I'd like to end these brief thoughts on Hagar and Sarah by going back to the point where God tells Abraham 'be thou perfect'. Virtually the same words are used by Christ in the Sermon on the mount "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect". What an impossible command! But we must, at the very minimum, work tirelessly to combat and redress the injustices of our own modern world and its many divisions.