

Reflection Notes – 25/6/17

- Geoff Stevenson

The Family that Perpetuates the Fighting!

There is an ancient story that is set around 3-3,500 years ago. It is an ancient story of wisdom, faith and religious origins. It is the story of Abraham, the iconic figure at the foundation of the three great monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Abraham and his wife Sarah were asked to leave their home in Mesopotamia, in the region of modern day Iraq, and travel to a new place that the God who offered this call would lead them to. In the story they pack up everything and leave their home. It is a wonderful story of pilgrimage, faith and a journey of discovery and becoming. The story obviously operates at various levels as it provides an archetypal story of human growth and exploration into becoming. It is a story that wrestles with the mystery and uncertainty of faith and how people might respond to a God who draws us into new experiences and awareness of self and the world and of the Divine in the midst of everything – but mysterious, elusive and uncontrollable. Abraham and Sarah went into the unknown with only what they could carry on the journey – and a promise!

Led into the wilderness and across their world, they followed the strange directions of faith until they found a land of promise – that was in drought! After venturing into Egypt to survive and engaging in various lies and deceits for the sake of self-preservation, they settle and the promise of this God rests upon them. They will be the parents of many nations – Abraham more than Sarah will be known as the Father of these many nations (one reason is that he has more children than she!). As they age and it is obvious Sarah cannot bear children she seeks to help this God fulfil God's promise by giving her husband her servant girl to bear him a son and heir to the promised covenant. Hagar is an Egyptian girl who waits on Sarah and she has a child by Abraham and he is called Ishmael. There is some anxiety about this event but things settle down and the issues are covered over for the time being.

After more time, God descends upon Abraham and Sarah in the form of angels (messengers) who provide the news that Sarah will bear a son in the next year. She laughs hard! She is old and so is Abraham! Whoever heard of such a thing? So when the child is born they call him Isaac, which means 'laughter'. There is laughter and noise in this household where there was only a childless wife. (It is interesting to note that through the Bible there are several barren couples who ultimately have children and these children become very important!). When the boy is weaned Sarah sees him with his half-brother Ishmael and his mother Hagar and they are playing (the word can also mean laughing). Sarah is angry, perhaps jealous, concerned... She tells her husband to get rid of Hagar and Ishmael and Abraham is torn, confused and upset. He talks with God who tells him to do as Sarah wants, that God will look after Hagar and Ishmael, who will become the father of a great nation. So Abraham packs some food and water and sends them off into the wilderness where they wander until the water runs out and Hagar fears they will die. She sits her tired son down and then moves off a bit as she cannot bear to watch him die. She cries out to God, who actually hears the child's crying and answers in the form of another angel who tells Hagar to get up and go to her son. God will look after them and Ishmael

will become the father of a great nation. Hagar ensures Ismael has a wife and he is the father of several sons. It is from Ishmael that the Arab people trace their roots and Islam draws its lineage back to Abraham, the Patriarch.

In the Biblical story there are several comments that are easily glossed over and Jewish traditions and stories connect many of these dots. Isaac is said to have visited particular towns where it is clear that Hagar and Ishmael have lived. In the traditions, Abraham visits Ismael's house. The first time he is rejected by Ishmael's first wife causing Ishmael to divorce her. The second unannounced visit Abraham is met and welcomed by Ismael's second wife and he blesses the household and his son's family. It is clear that Abraham loves both of his sons!

After Sarah dies, Abraham takes a second wife and her name is Keturah. Some traditions have it that Keturah is another name for Hagar, that Abraham went and found the mother of his first son and married her thus reuniting his family (he also had several other sons with her!). Whether these traditions have veracity or not, at Abraham's death both his first two sons are present at his funeral and share the responsibility of burying him.. The family that has mixed functionality and its share of rivalries and pathos, is united as one family.

This story and the unification of the children of Abraham is significant because it is the children of Abraham who are fighting violently today. The sibling rivalries of the Biblical figures are epic but not as epic as their ancestors today. In Palestine, 'the Promised Land' of the ancients, the offspring of Abraham, Jews from Isaac and Arabs from Ishmael fight each other. They hate one another. There is deep and profound mistrust, violence, abuse, revenge and retaliation, greed and the denial of human rights. The Middle East is rampant with such inter-family conflict and violence. The unified family of the Patriarch is at war and in such deep conflict that the divisions run deep and long.

It isn't only these Jews and Muslims who fight. The Christians have had their share of violence in past and present. Somehow, in the name of God, people believe they have the right to kill, abuse, rip off and steal, destroy and hate. Somehow the children of Abraham have learned how to hate and fight instead of love and be the light of the world through the grace of this God who invites us into a path of faith that nourishes our being, challenges us to move out of safety and secure places to grow and become. We are invited to give up and let go in order to find our lives and live more fully. This story comes from Genesis 21 but the themes are also found in our Gospel account in Matthew 10: 24-39. These stories affirm, once more, that God hears the cries of people and responds through history, through people who engage in the life of the Spirit and seek another path, another way that is grounded in love and justice. Cries go out and people suffer and little seems to change until we hear the cries of God whose heart breaks and we respond to the call to be people of compassion, spirit, love and are willing to live in the mystery of faith.

Whilst the damage of dysfunctional families can deliver wounds that compound over the years, grace and love can deliver healing and deliverance from the oppressive forces within and beyond people. Abraham is a fallen, often broken figure who falls but gets up and tries again. He grows, he feels, he lives and he learns to trust in the mystery of God. He learns faith and those who are born into his traditions do well to emulate Abraham!