

June 21st 2026

10.30am Holy Communion at All Saints Oakham

Genesis 21.8-21, Romans 6.1b-11, Matthew 10.24-39

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

Our Old Testament reading today continues the story of Abraham and Sarah and the story it tells is not terribly pleasant. Over the last few chapters of Genesis, describing events that occurred over many years, God has promised, on several occasions that the couple would have a son, from whom there would be a multitude of descendants. But Sarah was barren, and past the age of child bearing. This wasn't the only thing going on in their lives. Abraham had the responsibility of looking after and providing for his large flocks and his many employees and slaves, as they journeyed around Canaan looking for pasture. At times there were violent skirmishes with other pastoralists. Abraham's nephew Lot was captured by one of the local petit-kings and this led to a large scale engagement with Abraham in alliance with other local leaders, At intervals there were further visions of God. There was also a somewhat mysterious meeting with the priest king of Salem, the later Jerusalem Melchizedek, who came out of nowhere to bring Abraham bread and wine, and to bless Abraham in the name of the most high God. But through it all Sarah remained barren, and no child came. Eventually, probably in desperation, Sarah gave Abraham her Egyptian slave Hagar, and told him to conceive a child through her – which would legally, if not physically and emotionally, be Sarah's. He acquiesced, and Hagar conceived. When she realised she was pregnant, we read that Hagar "looked on Sarah with contempt". Sarah for her part then began to treat her harshly, and Hagar ran away into the wilderness. But it wasn't only Abraham who had visions. In the wilderness, Hagar met with God, who told her to return to Sarah and all would be well with her unborn child.

She did so, and in due course the child was born and named by Abraham Ishmael – "God has heard". But still the visions, the word from God came. Sarah will have a child. But still she remained barren. And as we heard last week, when the pair entertained the three angelic figures, who again made the same promise, her attitude was one of cynicism and disbelief. Sarah laughed.

But the world didn't stand still. Abraham still had all the responsibilities of his flocks and herds and people. He had to cope with the events surrounding the destruction of the cities of the plain, Sodom and Gomorrah and all that that entails. They continued their wanderings, moving back into the Negeb towards Egypt, all the time bearing the pain of childlessness. Eventually, 14 years after Ishmael was born, Sarah conceived, and her natural son Isaac was born. His name means "he will laugh" and probably reflects Abraham's and Sarah's joy. But the past couldn't so easily be swept aside and tensions remained. These came to a head at the celebration of Isaac's weaning when Sarah saw

Ishmael and Isaac playing together, her jealousy exploded, and she demanded that Hagar and Isaac be sent away. Abraham reluctantly acquiesced, and sent them away into the desert, where, when their water ran out they came close to death, before another divine intervention that led Hagar to an oasis. And Ishmael thrived, and eventually married a woman from Egypt, his mother's own land.

This is altogether an unpleasant story of human frailty. We see Abraham, faithless in not heeding God's repeated messages, ineffective in his relationship with Sarah, unable to stand against her wishes; Sarah, equally faithless, but also scheming, cynical and vindictive; and Hagar, herself arrogant and ambitious and self pitying. Not a good environment for two boys to grow up in. And all alongside the responsibilities of everyday life and a background of inter tribal conflict, intercommunal tension and warfare.

So perhaps we should ask, what on earth is this story doing in the bible and what can be its spiritual worth for us? For me the answer is straightforward. It is there, because it records how things really are, and how they always have been. We can't draw exact parallels of course as we live in a very different society, but we see around us, and in us should we but admit it, the same human qualities as displayed in the story – faithlessness, cynicism, vindictiveness, arrogance and destructive ambition. And for many of us, our family situation is as complex as that of Abraham's, if not in the same way, and we know our own ineffectiveness in dealing with and coping with the situations we face. And life goes on through it all – we still need to meet the daily pressures on our lives, to do the shopping, cook the meals. And the world around us is still the same – we see ongoing violence and tension, the prospect of an unsettled future. The story of Abraham and his family is in scripture, because it reflects how things have always been, how things are and how things will be.

And yet for all this, the Lord appeared to Abraham, Sarah and Hagar in visionary form speaking words of reassurance, promise, provision. The priest-king came out of Jerusalem bringing bread and wine and blessing from the most high God. Despite it all God was with them, upholding and supporting them, not choosing one side against the other, but caring for both. And that is still true. In all our tangled relationships, our less than noble actions and emotions, as we try to meet the immediate demands life places on us, in the midst of an unsettled world, God is still there with us. But there is a difference.

In our gospel reading, which isn't meant to be directly related to the Old Testament reading, but is relevant in any case, Jesus talks about conflict, the conflict that his disciples can expect to be their lot, that Christians can expect simply by being Christians. Jesus of course was to meet this conflict personally and he knew the fullness of scorn, violence, vindictiveness and faithlessness, when even his family seemed to be against him. And he took it all to the cross, where he died bearing the weight of it all, for him and for us.

From the letter to the Hebrews

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to

sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

The story of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, horrible as it is, mirrors the reality of human experience down the ages. As we live out our lives hour by hour, day by day, conscious of our own failings, coping with tangled and difficult relationships within our family and in our society, with deeply worrying world events unfolding around us., Jesus our great high priest walks with us to comfort us, to challenge us, to forgive us, to bless us, a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek, who understands the human situation completely, having come through it himself. The appearance of God no longer confined to sporadic visionary experiences, but a day to day presence of a who understands all our needs, who forgives, gives hope. And the church offers bread and wine and a blessing to those who would receive it, a hope for the future.

And perhaps we see a little of the outworking of this hope at the very end of Abraham's life. Four chapters on in the book of Genesis we read

Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people. His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in .. the field that Abraham purchased from the Hittites. There Abraham was buried, with his wife Sarah.

Despite all they had been through, all that had been done to them, the two brothers were able to come together in peace to bury their father, Ishmael coming from a considerable distance to do so. Some sort of reconciliation perhaps. A little beacon of hope for us, as we try to navigate our tangled relationships in these very uncertain times. So

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.