

So may I speak in the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now, if you've been here in the last few weeks, you'll know that our sermons at the moment are picking up the Old Testament, the Hebrew scripture thread on the story of Abraham, which is a big story that perhaps doesn't get the attention it deserves. But Abraham is a huge character in the Old Testament, and his story goes over many chapters. And for about six weeks, we're just picking up various elements of that story. Last week we heard about the promise that God made to Abraham and Sarah, that they were to have a child and even in their old age. And we've now skipped a few chapters from last week to this week, but the child has been born, his name is Isaac, and Isaac means "he who laughs". So, if you were here last week, you'll know why that name was significant, because both Abraham and Sarah laughed when they were told that of any ripe old age, they were going to have a boy.

I've just finished watching the latest Bridgerton series and I realized that like so many good books and so many of our favorite TV programs, Downton Abbey is another, the theme is the same. It's about the need for an heir, and that need for an heir is a literary device that's driven many books, films over the years. And it's the same that's going on here in this story of Abraham. The story is dominated by this promise of an heir, the need for an heir, if Abraham is to become indeed as God has said, "The father of many nations." But whereas Downton Abbey is of course a light, frivolous, made-up story, this is deadly serious. And the implications of what's going on in this story still resonate with us, down not just the centuries, but the millennia. Before I go any further and talk about the passage for today, I need to say something about what's happened in between the story we heard last week about the promise, that Abraham and Sarah would have a child, and where the story picks up today, because there's a lot has happened in between, much of it extremely unsavory. So, I'm glad not to be able to have to go into that. But in short, after God has promised Abraham and Sarah a child, nothing happens. Well, nothing happens on that front. God is silent for over a decade, and there's no sign of God making good on this amazing promise.

So, Sarah has decided to take matters into her own hands. She has an Egyptian slave called Hagar, and she says to Abraham, and I'm paraphrasing here, "Look, God's gone quiet. We are not getting any younger. Go and have a child with Hagar. We'll adopt her, raise the child as our own and that way you get to be your heirs, and you still have this chance to be the father of many nations." It was a cunning plan, but it wasn't God's plan. And it led to all sorts of problems, both in the short term and the long term.

But I don't think we should be too hard on Sarah. We've all had problems waiting. I'm sure we've all thought that things aren't moving quickly enough for my liking, so we need to nudge God along a bit. You get frustrated with God's timing. Sarah's problem was that she forgot that her time, her sense of time, was not the same as God's time. She wanted to rush God, but God had his own appointed time and Isaac was born at the appointed time. What's interesting about this story, well one of the many things that's interesting, is that all the main characters in it are flawed. This is a story about a great hero of the faith, Abraham, the founding father, as I've said before, three monotheistic religions, but Abraham's as much of an anti-hero in this story as a hero, the only consistent character in it is God. Only God acts consistently with the best intentions.

Sarah's act may be selfless, but it was also faithless. And Abraham allowed himself to be distracted from his part in God's plan, and he ends up settling for second best by having this child with Hagar. Yes, he and Sarah came up with a plan. They had a child, but it wasn't the promised child, and it wasn't God's plan. God's promise was that Abraham and Sarah would have a child together.

And at God's appointed time that did indeed happen. And Isaac has been born just before where our reading begins today. That's where our reading picks up, celebrating the birth of Isaac. And all that's happened since the passage we read last Sunday.

And what we see today is that things really kick off at a family celebration. And we all know how that goes. Sarah sees Hagar's son who was called Ishmael, and he's a teenager by this point in the story. She sees Ishmael playing with Isaac and she's consumed with jealousy. "Get this woman and the boy out of here,"

she says to Abraham. Though it distressed him, we're told, Abraham did as his wife asked. And Hagar and Ishmael are banished into the wilderness.

There are many lessons that we can learn in this story, but as I've mentioned, the one thing that strikes me is that the story illustrates powerfully that we're all flawed characters. Even the great heroes of the Bible, they all share in the same human flaws and foibles and failings that we suffer from. To quote from Paul's letter to the Romans, which we had read as our epistle today, "We are all enslaved to sin." Even Abraham. The only consistent character in the story is God. What interests me in the story is the way that God remains concerned about Hagar and her child, Ishmael, even though they're bit part players in the story, or they could be bit part players, they're not driving the main narrative.

The main narrative is about Isaac, the son of Abraham and Sarah. Hagar and Ishmael just could be allowed to drift out of the picture and the story could move on with Isaac, but that isn't how the story pans out. God's concern remains with Hagar, who's clearly the victim here, through no fault of her own she's banished into the wilderness, left to her own devices. And when she thought her son Ishmael was dying, she cried out to God and God answered her. And God made Hagar a promise that her son, Ishmael would also give rise to a great nation. And Hagar is the only woman in the Bible to whom such a promise is made.

And there's another significant and touching encounter between God and Hagar a few chapters earlier. And Hagar talks of God who she meets in this encounter as "The God who sees me," which is a beautiful way to describe God, the God who sees me, the one who sees me. God saw Hagar in her distress, the one who was outcast. God still sees us. God sees the marginalized, the hungry, the oppressed. God sees them. God is the one who sees.

And I can't talk about this passage without mentioning its importance in another tradition. As I've said, Abraham is a key figure in the three great monotheistic religions of the world. And this story, this passage, is very important also in the religion of Islam and the story features in the Quran. Because in Islam, the prophet Muhammad's lineage is traced back to Ishmael. He's seen as the heir of Ishmael and

Hagar and Abraham, which is why Abraham is a founding figure in the religion of Islam.

So, what are we to make of this messy story in which none of the characters are covered in glory and seem to be wandering away from God's plan? Well, I think it's a great illustration of the fact that God is consistent, that God's loving kindness and care for all his people remains the same, and his love for his people overcomes all the obstacles that we can put in its place, and that divine love extends to all people. This could be an exclusive story about how God's blessing was restricted to the line of Isaac, to whom the promise of the land was made. But it's not. It's a story of inclusion. God's blessing was on Isaac and Ishmael. There are no limits to God's love. No one, no people are outside of God's love and care and concern, which is illustrated for us supremely in the sacrament of baptism. For us, baptism is a sign of God's boundless love and grace and demonstrates how God's invitation extends to all people.

We don't expect Charlotte, or any candidate in baptism to answer any questions. There are no hoops to jump through because baptism for us is a sign of God's love and the unconditionality of that love. There's no test you have to pass to be baptized. Christ died for all of us so that those who are baptized, as St. Paul says in that reading from Romans, "Are baptized into his death and able to share in the power of his resurrection". That resurrection which overcomes the power of sin and death is what we share as we are baptized into his death and into his resurrection, and by his spirit, given the power to walk in newness of life. So may we be given the grace to walk with God at his pace, to walk in patience and in step with his appointed time. Amen.