

Proper 7 Year A

At first glance this passage from Genesis seems cruel and unfair. It starts out with a celebration because Isaac has been weaned. But trouble is on the horizon. Sarah feels that Hagar is mocking her. She sees Ishmael and Isaac playing together and fears a threat to Isaac's future. After all Ishmael is the eldest son and, by custom should be Abraham's heir. So, Sarah takes matters into her own hands and demands that Abraham cast out Hagar and Ishmael. Abraham is distressed, of course. God speaks to Abraham and reminds him that Isaac is the one through whom his offspring will come and the promise be fulfilled. God also assures Abraham that he will make a great nation from Ishmael as well.

So Abraham listens to Sarah, gives Hagar a skin of water and food, and sends her away from Ishmael. They run out of water and the future looks tragic. Hagar cries out to God and God intervenes. He shows Hagar a well from which she fills the water skin and gives Ishmael a life-saving drink. God is always with Ishmael as he grows up. Ishmael lives in the wilderness of Paran and becomes an expert with the bow. Hagar gets a wife for him from Egypt. "God choose to work through complex situations with imperfect human beings on behalf of the divine purposes". (New Interpreters Bible Commentary) Abraham obeys God's command and trusts in God's promise leaving the future of his sons in God's hands. God is the God of the outcasts as well as the elect. His saving acts are not confined to those who think of themselves as 'the people of God'.

At the end of Chapter 5 of Paul's letter to the Romans, he says "where sin abounded the grace of God abounded all the more". In Chapter 6 Paul seems to be arguing with someone who thinks that because God's grace is greater than our sin, we are free to sin because forgiveness is assured. Paul responds "shall we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? BY NO MEANS". To continue in sin presumes on God's compassion for us.

Paul goes on to explain why this is so. His proof relates to our union with Christ in our Baptism. In the early Church adult baptism was the norm. A person seeking to become a Christian was expected to leave his past life of sin and embrace a new way of living. To this end, the candidate was instructed for a period of time and was baptized at Easter. He or she had already given their life and commitment to Jesus before their baptism. Some churches still do this.

I was baptized by immersion in the pond of a Quaker summer camp. It's a very effective visual experience. You go down under the water after first declaring your faith in Jesus Christ, and are raised out of the water to newness of life. Our old self was crucified with Christ in the sacrament of baptism. Then we were 'resurrected' with him as we rose from the water to new life. Paul says "but if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him". God acts by the Holy Spirit through the water of baptism to free us from sin. We now have the freedom to live a new life.

These are hard words from the Gospel according to Matthew. Jesus is telling his disciples that following him comes with a cost. Our commitment to Jesus should count more than career, wealth, security, personal comfort, country, politics or even family ties.

Matthew is writing to Christians who were suffering because they expressed their faith publicly. They were witnesses who traveled the known world giving testimony to the good news of Jesus'

salvation. As a result of their courage many people were converted and the Church grew. Matthew encourages the evangelists by saying that they should not fear those who can kill the body but not the soul. God cares for them so much that he values their lives more than that of many sparrows. Our job is to acknowledge Jesus in our lives by not being afraid to speak up, to take risks and face opposition.

Our values are different from the surrounding culture: non-violence, concern for the 'least of these', and letting go of the obsession with getting and accumulating material possessions.

If these words from Matthew about witness, persecution and martyrdom bother us, perhaps we have made faith too tame and risk free. Do we trust Jesus with our future?