

St Andrew's on The Terrace Sunday 13 May 2018 Easter 7 Emerging Church 4 'Including and Becoming' Mothers' Day

Readings for the Gathering Genesis 21: 1-21 21 Now God was gracious to Sarah as had been said, and did for Sarah what he had promised. 2 Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. 3 Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him. 4 When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God commanded him. 5 Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. 6 Sarah said, "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me." 7 And she added, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age." 8 The child grew and was weaned, and on the day Isaac was weaned Abraham held a great feast. 9 But Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking, 10 and she said to Abraham, "Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac." 11 The matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son. 12 But God said to him, "Do not be so distressed about the boy and your slave woman. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. 13 I will make the son of the slave into a nation also, because he is your offspring." 14 Early the next morning Abraham took some food and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar. He set them on her shoulders and then sent her off with the boy. She went on her way and wandered in the Desert of Beersheba. 15 When the water in the skin was gone, she put the boy under one of the bushes. 16 Then she went off and sat down about a bowshot away, for she thought, "I cannot watch the boy die." And as she sat there, she began to sob. 17 God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid; God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. 18 Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation." 19 Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. So she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink. 20 God was with the boy as he grew up. He lived in the desert and became an archer. 21 While he was living in the Desert of Paran, his mother got a wife for him from Egypt.

John 17:20-21 Jesus Prays for All Believers 20 "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, 21 that all of them may be one, God, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me

Contemporary reading The Impact of Fairtrade

Coffee-farming community Keto Tapasi, is an association of 3000 farmers in the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea. They've seen many benefits since selling their high quality coffee beans on the Fairtrade market in 2010. The organisation has farmers from eighteen villages and eight clan groups who come from different tribes and speak different languages. What unites them is a belief in high standards and seeing Fairtrade benefits reach more than 4,500 people locally. In its first year as part of Fairtrade, Keto Tapasi sold 8.5 metric tonnes of green bean coffee to its exporter, Monpi Coffee Exports. By the end the following year that had increased to 42.7 metric tonnes, and has increased every year since. Fairtrade Impact Keto Tapasi has used funds from the Fairtrade Premium it's earned to acquire 11 new coffee pulpers. Farmers have built a new warehouse to store coffee and can now hire a vehicle to transport coffee from members' gardens to the processing mill, increasing productivity and outputs. They plan to invest future Fairtrade Premium funds to tackle high levels of illiteracy among adults — the result of very long distances to the nearest schools and the price it costs to attend. This investment will mean it will soon be possible for more community members to have formal education. The organisation also has plans to improve current health services: by increasing medical supplies and generating greater awareness of the risks of HIV and AIDS and how best to manage these.

Reflection for the Gathering

When I was five I was taken to hospital with pneumonia. In those days there were rigid visiting times for parents. Other things were going on at the time in our family. So, this was made worse for me as

my mother couldn't visit me for some of my hospitalisation. There are many threads to that story. One is how well I fitted in (or not) as a longterm patient with other children in the ward. They already knew each other. They'd formed an exclusive bond with each other, but that did not include me, as it turned out. As an adult, I am realising that early trauma of being excluded has a lingering effect.

Hence my shock when first introduced to the story of this Egyptian woman Hagar, maidservant to the matriarch Sarah. In my world till then, only Abraham and Sarah were mentioned as the parents of a great nation on the strength of the divine promise. In any biblical narrative, (as I have said in the fourth Sunday study group), when you are doing a narrative critique on a passage you notice particularly who talks to whom and who is named. In the *menage a trois* of Sarah, Abraham and Hagar, all three are named. God or the angel of God however, speaks only to Hagar and Abraham, not directly to Sarah. This gives Hagar almost the same status as Abraham and a higher status in the story than Sarah – no wonder Sarah was worried! Learning of this story for the first time I was shocked that the hitherto perfect Sarah, matriarch of Israel, was in fact vindictive and cruel towards her maidservant and Hagar's son; Abraham's first born, surrogate son.

In case you don't know this legendary story... Abraham had been promised heirs but he and Sarah remained infertile for decades. So as was the custom of the time, Hagar the maidservant, at Sarah's bidding, slept with Abraham and bore him an heir. These children were regarded usually as not only the man's child but also were credited to the wife, in this case, to Sarah. However, as today's story shows, Sarah rebelled against her own arrangement. This is the second time she has asked Abraham to banish Hagar. The story is heart wrenching. It allows us a glimpse into the pain many present-day refugee women must experience even today as they watch their children sicken and die or suffer from war inflicted wounds or starve to death.

That we, in the main, only hear the triumphal progress of Abraham and Sarah and hear their credentials as Mother and Father of the Jewish race, demonstrates how the winners are the ones whose stories are told most. They are automatically included, automatically take first place and, one would think, automatically command divine favour. How important Sarah has been made in the Judeo-Christian tradition however, she might be included, but at this stage she hasn't become the woman she could become. Being included and becoming don't always go together.

In this story it is Hagar with whom God speaks and delivers her from her distress and keeps the promise with Abraham even though it had taken a more crooked path than the divine planner had apparently intended. Abraham and Hagar's son Ishmael too would be the father of a great nation. Legend has it that that nation is the Arab race.¹ So this tale of two mothers has long lasting effects.

It is important whom we include and whom we exclude. It is not just that we might overtly tell someone they are not welcome. We often set up a place or group so others don't make it 'in'. Last week the Brian McLaren interview talked about obstacles in the mainstream church for those who come to it new. Believe me there are plenty of obstacles for those who have been in the mainstream church for a long time! Sometimes it seems that the longer you are in it the more obstacles you can see! In streamlining tasks and settling into more comfortable routines, we can allow a rigidity which is unhelpful.

So, in the churches emerging out of the ruins of Christendom, would the best thing to do be to just have open slather – allow everyone and anyone to join, or not join, to attend as regularly or irregularly as they like, to support the organization financially or not as they prefer. No rosters, perhaps! And, if

¹ It has been intriguing for the study group which meets on the fourth Sunday (anyone who wants to join is welcome) to hear the Islamic side of this story. You can hear the elevated position which both Abraham and Ishmael enjoy as progenitors in that religion. In this moment of impatience and impetuosity and accompanying pettiness and cruelty is born a millennia long enmity which the world is reaping still today

everyone is invited and welcomed on equal terms wouldn't that also apply to who took up roles in the organisation?

Recently I convened a meeting with people present from 2 different cultures. One was my white western culture and the other a pasifika culture. I expected the culture of the meeting to be western. But, it was the pasifika cultural group who had the grievance and they were looking forward to having the time and space to put their case.

All their speakers had been pre-arranged, chosen carefully for their standing and mana in the community and their expertise on the topic in hand. From the oldest to the youngest they delivered their material. In that culture who spoke first, second and third sent strong signals to their own people and to the western listeners.

In the same way in a religious group, leaders in the group are called and named and trained and invited to lead. Sometimes this naming and calling and training is informal. Sometimes part of the equipping is simply gathering experience and knowledge of the procedures. But also, the group decides sometimes in very mysterious ways, and at other times in very transparent ways, who they will allow to lead them; to whom they will listen.

I notice in fresh expressions of church which follow a neo monastic line, that they frequently solve this issue of what happens after you are included by re-using the old monastic divisions between learners or novices and those committed to the group (who in older terms would have professed themselves or taken vows of commitment). These divisions are applied differently but also intentionally – this intentionality may be lightly applied, or can be demanding in its requirements. The difference is mutual accountability

In the early days of the Church of the Saviour, Washington DC for example, members were asked to sign up annually as to whether they would be an active member or not. Active members were called on by the community as help was needed and they were expected to be available to that call. If you were starting a new job or moving house or having a child or taking on a new commitment outside of church, you didn't sign up that year for active membership so you could devote that time to other things. The next year you might sign on again as an active member when your personal life calmed down a little! It's like letting your 'yay' be 'yay' and your 'nay' be 'nay' – people were up front and honest about what was going on for them.

Also, in its early days, the church asked its members to give to a certain level, to attend to a certain level, to be part of a weekly group which developed a mission project while studying and praying together. As well, learning members were to participate in their School of Christian Living which offered a variety of fascinating classes. Each member was to take five of these classes. (Incidentally, many non-church members travelled from as far away as Baltimore to attend these classes, some of them people who had given the church up as a bad job.) These classes included that one on 'how to have difficult conversations', but also included orientation to the bible, introduction to liberation theology, social analysis and a course in Christian Community. The Christian community course mostly required reading, reflection and report back by the class and covered five themes crucial to preparation for becoming a carrier of Good News to the world – first, the need to develop an interior life if we are going to be people who are present to others, not distracted, second, the need to discover and exercise our own gifts, third, recognizing and developing disciplines so we can realise our full potential, fourth, the need to know ourselves so we will be people who are growing, and fifth, the need to become shepherds of others and cross the line between focusing more on giving than receiving.

Researching this for this reflection, it struck me afresh how idiotic it is to think that we can be an including and welcoming people if we are not also working intentionally on becoming the people we were intended to be. So often in these times we set the bar very low because we are tentative about

being church and are so grateful that anyone walks through the door we don't want to frighten them off.

People complain ministers didn't tell them about new discoveries from the pulpit, but I ask myself how much effort have I, when a member of a church, put in to finding out and reading, learning, experimenting and practicing in the Christian journey? Do I, I ask myself and ask you too, do we expect that somehow sitting on these seats for an hour plus on Sunday will be enough to prepare us for the difficult task of being Christian in this post Christendom world? How can we expect to make a difference in the world if we do not prepare ourselves so we become different people?

How can we be helpful to others if we have not looked within, discovered our own emotional baggage, recognized the triggers which plunge us unexpectedly into unhelpful behaviors and then inevitably find ourselves caught up in power battles, oh so politely of course.

Some of the emerging churches show great intentionality in these areas. The Rules and Rhythms of Life they develop focus on the inward journey which must accompany the outward journey for that outer journey to be authentic. They set an expectation of inner discipline and mutual accountability for those disciplines. It is ironic that these communities might ask for more from their members in a climate when fewer people want to have anything to do with religion or spirituality at all, except perhaps a mindfulness class from time to time.

Everyone *can* be included, if they will allow it, that is the message of Christ.

Then, once they enter a faith community and decide they want to stay, then they should expect to be called to cooperate in the process of becoming the person they can be and need to be. This is what is required for the emerging faith community to be vital, healthy and to flourish in our increasingly churchless world.

Elizabeth O Connor one of the original members of the Church of the Saviour from the 1940s, writes this:

There is no other community besides the church charged to keep a shepherd watch over the 'eternal child" [within each of us]. ... Surely the fulfillment of its shepherding, pastoring responsibility is the urgent imperative given to the Church today, but it cannot become a pastoring people until care, attention, and education have enabled those who bear the name Christian to set out on their own journey of becoming. This includes a self-conscious awareness that one's belonging to the Church is a belonging to a chosen people, who while in the world are not of the world. We blur the distinctiveness today in our eagerness to be "relevant" and not to offend those who are not of the Church. The charismatic power of the early Church derived from the experience of knowing itself as the bearer of a special message which still is that "the Kingdom of heaven is within" - the Good News, "you can be who you were intended to be." ²

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² Elizabeth O'Connor *Journey Inward, Journey Outward*, HarperRow Publishers, New York, NY., 1968, p. 103-4