

St Andrew's on the Terrace Pentecost 6 1 July 2018 'The Mamas and Papas of ancient times'

Readings for the Gathering Hebrew Bible

Exodus 2: 23-25

²³ During that long period, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. ²⁴ God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. ²⁵ So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them.

Epistle

Acts 7: 1-8

⁷ Then the high priest asked Stephen, "Are these charges true?" ² To this he replied: "Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Harran. ³ 'Leave your country and your people,' God said, 'and go to the land I will show you.' ⁴ "So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Harran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living. ⁵ He gave him no inheritance here, not even enough ground to set his foot on. But God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land, even though at that time Abraham had no child. ⁶ God spoke to him in this way: 'For four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated. ⁷ But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves,' God said, 'and afterward they will come out of that country and worship me in this place.' ⁸ Then he gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision. And Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him eight days after his birth. Later Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs.

Contemporary reading 'Women of the Torah Were Co-Founders of Israel' by Cynthia Astle

One of the great gifts of biblical scholarship is to provide a complete picture of how people lived during ancient times. This has been especially true for four women of the Torah – Sarah, Rebekah, Leah and Rachel – who are recognized as co-founders of Israel equal in stature to their more renowned husbands, respectively Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Traditional Interpretation Overlooked Them

The stories of Sarah, Rebekah, Leah and Rachel are found in the Book of Genesis. Traditionally, both Jews and Christians have referred to these "ancestor stories" as "the patriarchal narratives," writes Elizabeth Huwiler in her book *Biblical Women: Mirrors, Models, and Metaphors*. However, this label doesn't appear in the scriptures themselves, so directing the focus to the men in the ancestor stories apparently resulted from biblical interpretations down through the centuries ... As with many Bible stories, it is nearly impossible to authenticate these narratives historically. Nomads such as Israel's matriarchs and patriarchs left behind few physical artifacts, and many of those have crumbled into the sands of time. Nonetheless, over the past 70 years, studying the stories of women of the Torah have given clearer understandings of the practices of their times. Scholars have successfully correlated hints in their narratives with major archaeological finds. While these methods don't verify the specific stories themselves, they provide a rich cultural context to deepen understandings of the biblical matriarchs.

Parenthood Was Their Common Contribution

Ironically, some feminist biblical interpreters have devalued these four women of the Torah because their contribution to biblical history was parenthood. This is an unrealistic and ultimately misguided approach for two reasons..

First, childbearing was a productive social contribution in biblical times. The extended family was not merely a kin relationship; it was the primary production unit of the ancient economy. Thus women who were mothers performed a tremendous service to the family and to society at large. More people equalled more workers to till lands and tend flocks and herds, assuring tribal survival. Motherhood becomes an even more significant achievement when considering the high rate of maternal and infant mortality in ancient times.

Second, all of the significant figures of the ancestral period, whether male or female, are known because of their parenthood. ... "Sarah might not be well known in the tradition if she were not remembered as an ancestor of the people of Israel – but the same is certainly true of Isaac [her son and the father of Jacob and his twin brother, Esau]." Consequently, God's promise to Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation could not have been fulfilled without Sarah, making her an equal partner in carrying out God's will.

The Reflection

Almost a decade ago, I spent Saturday afternoon with a friend and her almost teenage daughters. We were sewing - the girls learning about construction and using a sewing machine for the first time. My friend said how nice it was. I was amazed, however, as she said it was good I was there as a grandmother figure for the girls since her own mother being in England deprived her daughters of one side of the family for such grand-mothering.

This was a shock! I hadn't really noticed the age difference between my friend and myself. I thought of myself as more her big sister than her mother! So, if you had asked, I would have talked about being an extra mother or aunty, not grandmother to her daughters! This sudden promotion was surprising as with Roger and I not having had our own children, we had not kept pace with the passing of the years. Suddenly, I was the matriarch!

What is it that makes a matriarch or a patriarch – a 'mama or a papa'? My Dad definitely made patriarch status – ninety-nine-and-a-half almost exactly to the day when he died, he partly made it by virtue of age. But also, he was the last remaining member of his family of six siblings. Being an accountant and community leader also added to the natural wisdom that can come with age, (though not necessarily.) His death has made me think more about patriarchs and matriarchs and their role in our lives.

Latterly Dad fully accepted the role of family patriarch. To our chagrin and embarrassment, he felt his advanced years had earned him the right to a few lectures on how things should be! He was the one person in the family who could command an almost full attendance of my 21 cousins. That won't happen again. They will gather in at least six different groupings as the children, grandchildren and great grandchildren of Dad's siblings gather under their own steam. My cousins are now the matriarchs and patriarchs of their own clans.

Becoming a matriarch or patriarch is a combination of seniority, wisdom, some skills and the willingness to accept the constraints and responsibility of gathering a family about you – to offer protection, guidance or resources, as well as a willingness to direct others' life journeys. (sometimes overtly and sometimes more subtly).

Churches have matriarchs and patriarchs too! Sometimes these are a benign influence. In other situations, they exert power and control in negative ways, preventing the natural changes needed in an ever- changing world. I have seen both at work.

Modern day nations have matriarchs and patriarchs; women and men who humanise our history. They're usually known nationwide; they stand out for what they've achieved; they're people to whom, when they speak, others listen. They don't necessarily hold your political views, but may have earned the right, probably through public service, to be consulted or interviewed when there's a big happening in the nation. One clue might (or might not) be who have our NZ Governors General been in recent years? What names spring to mind as I describe these qualities? Talk with your neighbour about whom you consider to be NZ's matriarchs and patriarchs; the ones to whom New Zealand looks up – living or dead. Have a think and a chat.....

I was talking with those same two girls on Friday. In their history assignments they'd come across two famous New Zealanders – could we call them a patriarch and a matriarch? – Archibald Baxter and Sylvia Cartwright?

In the Bible readings today, we see the top three patriarchs of Israel being used as symbols for leadership and perhaps holiness; and used to evoke common national roots.

Scholars now argue the Exodus narrative was written down centuries after the event when the kingdom was more settled with time and space for writing history.¹ They believe the history was written following a particular view. In this worldview, the Exodus narrative was crafted as a nation-forming moment in time. Until then a somewhat disparate diaspora of slaves in Egypt, the Hebrews united, we are told, under the leadership of Moses and Aaron and Miriam as they escaped the rule of Pharaoh.

But, the Exodus narrative looks back even further. The few verses we heard from Exodus chapter 2 caught that. The reason the divine Being they believed to be the only one true God acted in the redemptive way they narrate here, was that there had been, they believed generations before this enslavement, a pivotal covenant. This had been put in place with first Abraham, then renewed with his son Isaac and then his son Jacob. It was Jacob who had moved down to Egypt to live with his most successful son Joseph, (the lad with the coat of many colours – you'll remember the musical if not the actual Bible story!). Making covenants with God ran in the family!

So even the so-called nation-forming event of the Exodus (or exoduses - scholars think there was more than one exodus) had an antecedent, the impetus which drove Abraham to start his long journey to the land of Canaan.

We see the same foundational story serving its purpose centuries later again - as the young Stephen faces his accusers in the first century after Christ. Stephen is a young leaders of the fledgling Christian church and he's on trial for his life. In his defence he reminds the Jewish court of their common roots.

All Jews knew well the story that Abraham lived with his father in Ur, "approximately midway between the modern city of Baghdâd, Iraq, and the head of the Persian Gulf, south of the Euphrates River."² Abraham senior moved the family to Haran,³ in south east Turkey, a massive journey by foot with family and livestock, of not far off 1000km. It was from Haran that Abraham, after his father's death, moved south over 640km to Shechem in the area we now call Israel. A big story, with big journeys, much like the ones we tell about our Scottish or English or American or Maori forebears making their journeys all the way down here to almost the bottom of the planet.

Just like some of the family stories we tell, there is a mix here of fact and legend. Stories can be told down a family for generations and then proved entirely wrong. Other stories can be hidden and then suddenly be revealed. Or, as in these ancient stories, the actual story is honed and refined to make a point to those who follow after by adding symbols which point to a particular interpretation.

In Acts 2, Stephen is delivering his spiritual credentials in that speech of his. He is reassuring the Jewish authorities that this Jesus he is following is of the right tribe, is kosher, to be trusted. He is using the patriarchs as a beginning, common point of reference. He doesn't know yet this will enflame rather than reassure. He dies a horrible death through stoning, (a death watched by the soon-to-converted apostle Paul.)

¹ Etienne Charpentier, *How to Study the Old Testament* SCM Press Ltd, 1981

² <http://history-world.org/ur.htm>

³ Pronounced 'here-in'

The contemporary reading reminds us that this one God whom the Jewish people followed was the God of Abraham **and** Sarah (**and** Hagar, the God of Isaac **and** Rebecca, and the God of Jacob **and** Rachel (and Leah). The reading reminds us that early matriarchs made their valuable contributions in different ways from the methods in which women contribute today. Their roles as daughters, sisters, mothers, wives and grandmothers should not be written off as unimportant. That was an arena in which they had great influence. Patriarchs benefited from their mothers' and grandmothers' character as well as their DNA. There's an interesting little verse at the end of Exodus chapter 24 as Isaac seeks a wife to carry on the dynasty: "Then Isaac brought her into the tent and took Rebekah and she became his wife and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death"; indicating influence mothers might have had on patriarch-sons.

At this distance we cannot be sure there **was** an Abraham, an Isaac and a Jacob, but the nation which began the Judeo-Christian religion definitely had **some** men and women there at the beginning. These stories represent them. These founding mamas and papas were the ones who began and developed the Judeo-Christian system of rituals, of devotion, of covenant-making. They obeyed and failed, they knew glory and defeat, they practised justice and calumny. Like our forebears, they travelled great distances, risking new places; they suffered, lived, died, celebrated and wept. They did great things and they did mean things, they were self-sacrificing and selfish, they were fallible and courageous. They were human. They were human with a perspective beyond themselves and their own comfort.

They kept the faith in that broad sense of remaining true to the original call to look wider and broader than the daily grind. We need to remember in our sophisticated times that the daily grind of that day took *all* one's time. It was usually a subsistence lifestyle – there was mostly only time to graze the herd, grow the crops, hunt for food, set up camp, cook, clean and raise children. Neither men nor women had much leisure, yet they thought great thoughts, looked up at the stars and dreamed of great nations, listened to (and followed, what's more), the call which arose from deep within. They fought against enslavement by a foreign government. As with Stephen, they defended their changing views before orthodox religious authorities.

It is less than 2 years, I realised this week, until this church is 180 years old. 22 February 2020 is the date. Rev John McFarlane who preached the first sermon on Petone beach that day is remembered still as a founding patriarch of this parish. (I wonder who the matriarchs were?).

The question for you and for me, is, when our many-greats-grandchildren look back to 2018 or 2020; when they read the stories we have recorded in our annual reports and church histories, when they read our liturgies and maybe sing our hymns, when they watch and hear our narratives on film or audio and digital vision, when they recover our digital footprint, will they give thanks that we matriarchs and patriarchs were here?

Will they be able to discern at that distance any difference we made?

Will this century take another route because of what we do as 'the mamas and the papas' now?

Will they be glad we took decisive action when it seems the faith was being lost?

Will the names that ring in their ears from this date onwards be those of wise, compassionate people of integrity who took the long view and travelled the long journey

or will we be known as those who lost their way in (as Joy Cowley puts it) "a desert of tired words"?⁴

As what kind of matriarch or patriarch do you want to be remembered?

By placing these stories at the very beginnings of our sacred scriptures, our faith is telling us that the answers to these questions matter.

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⁴ 'Nativity' by Joy Cowley