

Morning Worship 21 June

from the United Reformed Church at Morpeth, Widdrington and Gt Bavington.

Opening Sentences

Paul in his letter to the Romans says:

“Since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.” Romans 6:9-11

Good morning, and welcome to our worship this morning from St George’s URC in Morpeth, and I am very pleased that you are able to join with us as we worship today. We come to offer to God our service of praise and thanksgiving this morning, and we begin by singing a hymn of thanks. Now thank we all our God.

1. Now thank we all our God,
with heart and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things has done,
in Whom this world rejoices;
Who from our mothers’ arms
has blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love,
and still is ours today.
2. Oh, may this bounteous God
through all our life be near us,
With ever joyful hearts and blessed peace to cheer us;
And keep us in His grace,
and guide us when perplexed;
And guard us through all ills
in this world, and the next!
3. All praise and thanks to God the Father now
be given,
The Son, and Him Who reigns with Them in highest
Heaven—
The one eternal God, whom earth and Heav’n adore;
For thus it was, is now, and shall be evermore.

Martin Rinkart

Prayer of Approach

God, our Father,
we give you praise and thanks today
for all that you have done,
and for all that you have provided,

in our lives.

Even though at times we have not felt your presence,
we know that you have been near us,
you have made our hearts joyful
and given blessed peace to cheer us.
We thank you that you have stuck by us,
and will stick by us,
in all that we face in this life and the next.

Even though we have been tempted to turn away
from you,
you have kept us in your grace,
you have guided us when we have been perplexed
and have freed us from all that tempts us
and is harmful to us in our lives.
We thank you that though we have turned from you,
you have never turned away from us.

We give you all our praise and thanks
and come now to hear your word again,
and from this to learn something more
of your constant love and concern for us
and for the world that you have created.

In Jesus name we pray,
AMEN

Readings: Genesis 21:1-21

Reading: Matthew 10:24-39

Reading: Psalm 86

Sermon

These are not great readings for what is Father’s Day
are they?

Jesus says in Matthews gospel: “For I have come to
turn a man against his father” and “anyone who loves
their father or mother more than me is not worthy of
me”

And even in our Old Testament reading, we hear the
story of Abraham, and Hagar and Ishmael and wonder
what message there is for us as many celebrate the
father figures in their lives on this Sunday.

Usually on this Sunday, I would choose a passage from
the bible that illustrates a good father, such as in the
prodigal son, and talk about how God is our Father
and does not fall short of our expectations. That God
is the example of a good father.

But today, we have these readings from the lectionary, and it seems that right to talk about our very human relationships, flawed though they may be, and recognise the goodness in them. Just as we might look for the good things in our passages that we share from scripture today.

I am aware that everyone's relationships with their fathers are different, some perhaps have no relationship at all, some fathers have passed away, some may have been biological fathers but have showed very little else in ways of being a father figure. We recognise from our readings today that all human relationships are flawed in some way. No relationship is perfect. We often fall short of the expectations that our parents, and our children have of us. And our fathers too may often fall short of what we expect of them.

There is an urban legend that is told – whether it is true or not I do not know – about a Spanish father and son – who had lost contact with each other, and whose relationship had broken down altogether. The father set out to track down the son, but after many months of searching was unsuccessful. In the end the father decided to put a notice in the local newspaper.

A notice which simply read:

“Dear Paco, meet me in front of this newspaper office at noon on Saturday. All is forgiven. I love you. Your Father.”

When Saturday came, nearly 800 young men named Paco showed up outside that newspaper office looking for forgiveness and love from their estranged fathers.

Family relationships break down, fathers and sons especially have difficult relationships, where Freudian psychology will talk about the Oedipus complex and the jealousy over a mother's affections.

When Jesus in our gospel passage speaks of breakdowns in family relationships he quotes from the prophet Micah when he talks about our enemies being members of our own families. Micah was certainly talking about a time, perhaps at the beginning of the exile, when people start to see a break down in society. Families being torn apart, allegiances being divided, different destinies being chosen. In order to stay alive, it may well have required a choice between family loyalty or loyalty to those who had your life in their hands.

When Jesus talks to the disciples, he knows that for them, their journeys would require them to make the

same choices. For to follow Christ, and recognising him as Messiah, would require turning their back on their Jewish roots – and that meant turning their back on their families. Jesus says if you want to be my followers then you will be called to choose between loyalty to Christ and loyalty to family. Jesus is not making them choose – its either them or me – but just recognising our flawed human relationships, and that the stage will come when that choice will be thrust upon them.

In last weeks service we heard about the time when God announced that Sarah was to have a baby, at the age of 90, when Abraham was reaching his centenary. Abraham at that stage already had a child, through Sarah's suggestion that he sleep with her Egyptian servant Hagar. Abraham did as Sarah suggested, and Hagar became pregnant and Abraham found himself father to a son called Ishmael. Sarah didn't like this – but she blames Abraham – and starts to ill-treat Hagar.

The Old Testament here says that Sarah, the Hebrew, afflicted Hagar, the Egyptian – and that word afflicted is the same word used when later on in Genesis, the Egyptians afflict the Hebrews through their years of slavery. We get hints in this passage, that this story is being told on different levels – a story about a family and a birth of a son, and a story about international relations and the birth of nations.

As time goes by, Sarah as we know does have son, Isaac, who has been promised by God to be the ancestor of many generations and even kings. And Sarah is keen to make sure that this inheritance is not taken away from Isaac, by Abraham's first born Ishmael. She accuses Ishmael of mocking Isaac and calls for Abraham to get rid of Hagar and Ishmael.

It seems a trivial charge to bring against him – this accusation of mocking. But the word for “mocking” used here, literally means “laughing” – and “laughing” is mentioned 7 times in this story and seems to be a significant part of the story of Abraham and Sarah; Abraham laughs when he hears the news he is to be given a child by Sarah, in our passage last week Sarah at the age of 90 laughs too, and is accused by the Lord for laughing, to which she denies, Isaac is so called because his name means ‘he laughs’ and at his birth Sarah says “God has given me laughter” – and here in our reading today, Ishmael is accused of laughing. Laughing we see is used in a variety of contexts – in joy, in disbelief, in mockery- and it is ambiguous as to

what it was that Ishmael was accused of when he was laughing.

Whatever the reason, Sarah accuses Ishmael of laughing, and demands that Abraham gets rid of him and his mother. Abraham is forced to make the choice. Such are human relationships that these choices have to be made, and the family is divided against each other. Hagar and Ishmael are banished to the desert, and when their survival hangs in the balance, God steps in and provides for them, and we are told God was with Ishmael as he grew up in.

God keeps his promises to Hagar and does make Ishmael into a great nation. You will recall that when Joseph later on is sold into slavery in Egypt – his brothers sell him to some passing Ishmaelites on their way back to Egypt. The descendants of Ishmael become a great nation and ultimately become the people of Islam. The descendants of Isaac too become the Israelites, and become the Jewish people. We see this story as the origins of these two nations who may continue to battle each other, and two Abrahamic faiths and the tension suggested between them.

What is important to note – is that though Abraham is forced to choose between his two sons – God does not. God blesses and continues to bless Ishmael and Isaac. Both fulfil their destinies and both are provided for by God.

And that seems to be the end of Hagar and Ishmael's story. And perhaps rather a sad one at that.

But we are given a glimpse later on that this is perhaps the full story. Because when Abraham dies, Genesis tells us:

“Then Abraham breathed his last breath and died at a good old age, and old man and full of years; and he was gathered to his people. His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave near Mamre.” Gen 25:8

For those of you who like happy endings, then perhaps this gives us a glimpse of one at the end of Abraham's story.

We find little else in scripture, but the ancient commentaries called the Midrash which were written down about a century after the time of Jesus, try to fill in the missing pieces for us and try to give answers to our questions.

We know from Genesis that Isaac lived near Beer-Lahai- Roi, which is the place that Hagar fled to the first time she ran away from Abraham and Sarah. The

Midrash suggests that actually Isaac keeps in contact with Hagar and Ishmael, and perhaps even ends up living near them.

Genesis also tells us that after Sarah dies, Abraham takes another wife, a woman called Keturah who has six other children with Abraham. Each of those children in turn become the founders of nations, including Midian whose descendants become the Midianites. Keturah is a name that means fragrance or incense, and the Midrash suggests that Keturah, may well be Hagar herself.

Through the pieces of the text that we can piece together we are given a glimpse of a family reconciled, and a father who continues to love and care for his sons. We see Abraham, not as a cold and uncaring parent, but as a Father called to make difficult choices.

We see a family, divided by human jealousies, and reconciled perhaps despite their history.

And throughout it all, we see a God, who recognises the weakness of our human relationships, but allows these choices to be made, but has no need to make those choices himself and continues to provide for and bless all his children.

Hymn:

How deep the Father's love for us,
How vast beyond all measure
That He should give His only Son
To make a wretch His treasure
How great the pain of searing loss,
The Father turns His face away
As wounds which mar the chosen One,
Bring many sons to glory.

Behold the Man upon a cross,
My sin upon His shoulders
Ashamed I hear my mocking voice,
Call out among the scoffers
It was my sin that held Him there
Until it was accomplished
His dying breath has brought me life
I know that it is finished.

I will not boast in anything
No gifts, no power, no wisdom
But I will boast in Jesus Christ
His death and resurrection
Why should I gain from His reward?
I cannot give an answer
But this I know with all my heart
His wounds have paid my ransom.

Stuart Townend

Prayers of Intercession

Father God,

We come to you now to offer our prayers
for ourselves and for our communities,
to hold before you all our relationships
and ask your healing and reconciliation.

We pray for the nations of the world
especially those nations where conflict is still evident
and tensions are rising.
We pray for India and China,
We pray for the Middle East
We pray for South and North Korea
Though our histories paint nations as either good and
bad
we know God that you provide for and bless
all nations and all people.

We pray for the religious faiths around the world
those that are rooted from the same scripture as ours
and those whose scriptures are different.
We pray that there may be an understanding between

the different faiths, and a constructive dialogue
between them.

We pray that by listening and learning from one
another
we may learn more about you, who is the source of all
that is.

We pray for our families around the world,
we pray for families that are estranged from each
other
and for families that are struggling to stay together.
We pray for situations where there are ongoing family
arguments
and longstanding bitterness and hurt.
We pray for your peace and harmony.
Wherever children are unwanted and unloved
neglected or in danger
we ask your protection and help.

We pray for those who have died
and for the families left behind,
we pray for those things left unsaid
and matters that are left unreconciled.
We pray for your mercy and forgiveness
and trust in your safe keeping of all those who
have died.

And today Lord we pray for all those
who are father figures in our lives,
recognising that our relationships are not perfect
and asking for guidance so that we can make the right
choices in the lives we lead together.
We pray for those who cannot be with their fathers
today
through isolation, through estrangement, and through
death.
May we look to you, God our Father,
in sure and certain faith that in time all things will be
reconciled in you.

We offer our prayers in the name of Jesus Christ,
who taught us to say together:

The Lord's Prayer

Hymn:

Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us
o'er the world's tempestuous sea;
guard us, guide us, keep us, feed us,
for we have no help but thee;
yet possessing every blessing,
if our God our Father be.

Saviour, breathe forgiveness o'er us;
all our weakness thou dost know;
thou didst tread this earth before us;
thou didst feel its keenest woe;
lone and dreary, faint and weary,
through the desert thou didst go.

Spirit of our God, descending,
fill our hearts with heavenly joy;
love with every passion blending
pleasure that can never cloy;
thus provided, pardoned, guided,
nothing can our peace destroy.

James Edmeston

Blessing