

Ishmael

4 12 16

O Lord, raise up, we pray, your power,
and come among us,
and with great might succour us:
that whereas through our sins and wickedness
we are grievously hindered
in running the race that is set before us,
your beautiful grace and mercy
may speedily help and deliver us.

Our text may be found in the book of Genesis, chapter 16, verse 15: 'Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael.'

The Second Sunday of Advent Sunday, the first Sunday in December, just 21 days to go till Christmas and today the second in a Advent series of sponsored sermons, today sponsored by Helen Morgan, who has asked me to preach on Ishmael, the son of Abraham by Hagar, the Egyptian slave-girl of his wife, Sarah.

Abraham is 85, married to Sarah, but they have no children so Sarah comes up with the idea of letting her husband sleep with one of her young slaves, an Egyptian girl called Hagar and this early way of obtaining a surrogate child is a success – Ishmael is born and Abraham later has him circumcised when God

commands that circumcision be a mark, an outward sign of the covenant between him and his Chosen People, the Jews.

Ishmael, the name 'yisma-el', means God hears. And though God has heard Abraham's and Sarah's prayers for a son, things don't really go well with Ishmael. In an age where having children was a mark of normality, what it is fully, truly, to be a woman, Sarah's barren womb is a sign she's not up-to-scratch, she's lacking in this essential virtue of a married woman - to be a mother. And when Hagar finds herself pregnant, she does not conceal her contempt for her mistress who mistreats her so badly that Hagar runs away. But she is found by an angel who tells her to go back and be obedient to her mistress because Ishmael, the son she is carrying in her womb, will be the father of a great multitude of people.

Well things do go well till Sarah herself conceives and bears Abraham a second son, Isaac. Sibling rivalry, parental jealousy, who knows, but seeing Ishmael playing with Isaac makes Sarah ask Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael packing. Abraham is not a happy man but God speaks to him directly tells him that Isaac is his true heir but that, in his turn, Ishmael will also be a father of a great nation.

Hagar and Ishmael are sent packing and things go seriously bad for them lost in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. Without food and water, things are desperate when Hagar has a second angelic encounter. The angel tells her that God has heard Ishmael and the angel points her to a well of water. The angel tells her that God will make a great nation of her son, Ishmael.

So things do go well with Ishmael. He grows up, becomes an archer, marries and has twelve sons, and when Abraham dies, he is there with Isaac at his father's burial in the cave of Machpelah east of Mamre.

So what can we learn from the story of Ishmael ? The potential for problems in a family. Rivalry, tensions, unkindness. The kindness of God who does look after Ishmael, who ultimately enables him to prosper. The thought that God hears us, is there for us, will comfort and support us in our need.

Okay Ishmael was no saint; according to the first angel, Ishmael would be

A wild ass of a man

with his hand against everyone

and everyone's hand against him

and he shall live at odds with all his kin. (Genesis 16 12)

But I think Ishmael is an example to us of what can be if we trust in the fact that God loves us and wants us to be the people he intends us to be.

I have spoken in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

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