

## Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 14 June 2020, 11.00am

Richard Shepley

### Readings

Genesis 18: 1–15

Matthew 9:35 -10:8

Romans 5: 1-8

The account in Genesis of the three men visiting Abraham is a fascinating story. We, the readers, are let into a secret in the first verse, “The Lord appeared to Abraham”. But Abraham doesn’t know that. He just sees three men nearby: and there is obviously something that makes him uneasy.

He offers the traditional eastern hospitality. But it’s all a bit Fawlty Towers, with Abraham as the fawning Basil and Sarah as the more detached, pragmatic Sybil. Mostly because Abraham is in a flat panic throughout the encounter.

Abraham RUNS (that’s what the text says) up to them and grovels on the ground. “Please come in, have a wash and brush-up and I’ll prepare some food for you. A buttered teacake perhaps?”

He seats them under a tree.

As terrified as Basil would be if the hotel inspector were to come, he backs away, bowing as he goes, then turns and RACES (again, that’s what the text says) in to Sarah, “Quick. Make some bread. NOW! Oh, and curds, - and milk too . . .”

Then the text says, he DASHES off to the cattle pen, and selects a nice - looking calf, and screams at Manuel – sorry, the servant - “Kill it, Cook it. Bring it. NOW!

Then presumably he saunters back to the three men, probably leans casually against a tentpole, loses his balance and promptly falls over.

Or perhaps that’s a bit too Basil.

Anyway, the food arrives and he doesn’t eat with them. He stands by like a servant and watches them.

Because Abraham is a bit spooked.

Is he entertaining “Angels unawares”? It’s all a bit weird, because the narrative sometimes says, “they said to him” - as if all three spoke together - and sometimes it’s just one of them – as in verse 10, “One of them said, ‘I will surely return, and Sarah shall have a son’.”

And Sarah, hidden away in the tent, – laughs.

In the Gospel reading from Matthew, Jesus asks the 12 to go out on a healing mission to “cure disease and every sickness”. We are probably all quite comfortable with that, but he also asks them to do two other things; raise the dead, and cast out demons.

“Cast out demons.” I’m not sure what to make of that. Should I explain it away as a “pre-enlightenment misunderstanding?”

Greg Carey, the Professor of New Testament Studies at Lancaster Seminary in Pennsylvania has written a brilliant commentary on this passage, and he has an interesting take on it. He says this:-

“Even those of us who cannot get our imaginations around real demons tormenting poor individuals, can relate to what it means to be bound by a power one feels unable to resist.

“Many people find themselves bound by behaviours, patterns, or structures that they cannot escape, often cursing themselves when they repeat the same behaviour time and time again.

“When we imagine the realm of exorcism then, let us imagine liberation, freedom from powers that constrain us and prevent us from living full human lives.”

Does that ring some bells with you? It does with me.

Because in normal times we host up to 68 “12 step” groups a week at Hinde Street; people seeking liberation from alcohol and other addictions by following the 12 steps originally devised for Alcoholics Anonymous. Here are four of those 12 steps:-

- Step 1 We admitted we were powerless over alcohol - that our lives had become unmanageable.
- Step 2 We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
- Step 3 We made a decision to turn our wills and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.

Jump now to Step 11:-

- Step 11 We sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

Could be from the Bible! In fact, it basically is; but that's a story for another time.

Thousands of people worldwide have found it works, bringing them liberation from all sorts of addictions.

And it started with what we often call the "Demon Drink".

Think also of the Prodigal Son who was liberated from the dark forces (demons?) of greed, selfishness and lust for the so-called "good things of life".

Think of yourself.

That is the liberation that Jesus offered during his earthly ministry. And which he offers today:- liberation not only from the Demons of Drink/ Gambling/ Overeating etc, but perhaps also what the Bishop of Manchester referred to this week as "The Demons of Racism".

You will probably have seen in the photo in our Weekly newsheet of our corner noticeboard outside church where there are now two posters saying "We believe that Black Lives Matter". What else could we do after hearing Sam speak on Pentecost Sunday about the pain he is

feeling as a black Christian seeing the cold-blooded murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis policeman – an officer of the state authorities?

Back to Sarah laughing. The story, no longer like Fawlty Towers, now seems to be more like a pantomime.

Verse 13, “The **Lord God** said to Abraham, “*Why did Sarah laugh?*”

But Sarah said, “*I didn’t laugh!*”, to which the **Lord** replied, “*Oh yes you did*”.

I wonder how long it went on?

“*Oh no I didn’t!*”

“*Oh yes you did!*”

Perhaps more importantly; **why** did Sarah laugh?

Why?

Possibly because 25 years previously God had promised Abraham (then 75 with Sarah 10 years younger) that he would be “*the father of a great nation*”.

Eleven years later, Sarah - tired of waiting - gave her slave girl to Abraham, and she produced a son – Ishmael.

Another thirteen years go by; God says to Abraham *again*, “I will give you a son by Sarah.”

And shortly afterwards here come three men, once more giving the same promise.

That laugh wasn’t an outburst of joy. The Hebrew word actually means “she laughed to herself”.

So, it was probably a cynical “HA!” – as in “Yeah, well I’ve heard **that** one before.”

**It seems that, after 25 years waiting, Sarah had given up hope.**

---

Slavery was abolished in the British Empire in 1833 and in the US in 1863. But we still have racial discrimination built into our societies.

In 150 years, there have been changes for the better for many. But there are still too many things that have not changed. And if those who still suffer discrimination in our society see little or no change after all this time, they too **will lose, or have already lost hope**. Is there any solution?

Does Paul in our Romans passage help in restoring hope to shattered lives?

Well, yes and no.

In the previous 4 chapters, Paul has been talking about those who boast in their good deeds to earn a place in heaven. He has been explaining that instead of trying to earn our place, God has offered us forgiveness “free”, through faith.

So, he says we can now boast in the Hope of sharing God’s glory.

That’s in the long term.

However, in the short term we actually may need to boast in suffering; **suffering** that produces **endurance**, which produces **character**, which produces **hope**, a sure hope, because we have the love of God in our hearts.

Now Paul is 100% **not** suggesting that we should approach someone who has lost hope that their world will ever change for the better, and say to them, *“Fret not, my friend! You should boast in your suffering, because there is a noble outcome”*.

No. Paul is talking here about those who like us, have CHOSEN the way of Christ. And he’s telling us that it may indeed involve suffering which can strengthen us. We should be prepared for suffering in living for Christ.

---

The news over the last few weeks (and especially yesterday in Westminster) has shown that there is still a long way to go before the demons of racism are expunged from our world.

Listen to Psalm 94 **“How long, O LORD? How long will the wicked be allowed to gloat?”**

You see? Even in the bible it takes time.

Sarah had to wait 25 years before her frustration and sadness turned to joy.

The Children of Israel in Egypt had to wait centuries before God sent Moses to liberate them from slavery.

It's over 150 years since the British Empire abolished the slave trade.

**“How long O Lord?”**

Here's a question:-

Is now the time?

Can we hope that things will **really** change now that there has been such revulsion at the murder of George Floyd?

I hope so.

Is that it? - I hope so - now back to the crossword?

Or could we work together more to bring hope into the lives of the hopeless - we who have the Hope of Glory?

Many of us do so already, from campaigning, writing to government, protesting on the streets, to even just offering a friendly word to those who are friendless.

But I was really struck by what Miriam Kennedy— our Community worker— posted on Instagram about Sam's testimony.

She said this *“I realise I need to relearn my approach as to what it means to be an anti-racist.”*

She talks about her discomfort from her inherited privilege of simply being born white.

She concludes, “I am sorry. I vow to learn more and stand with you – my eyes are open.”

**“I am sorry. I vow to learn more and stand with you – my eyes are open.”**

And me?

**I too am sorry**

I know I need to think through this honestly, and search out any traces of racism that may lurk deep within me, and ask the Holy Spirit to liberate me.

**I too vow to learn more**

Our own Hannah Brown works for the Joint Public Issues Team at Methodist Church House. Hannah pointed me to their website (just Google “JPIT”) which - to my shame - I had never looked at. Amazing information, policy documents and campaigns to be involved in. Or look at the Black Lives Matter website.

**I too vow to stand with you**

And me. Am I prepared to stand up and be counted where I see or hear racism? Even if it could involve suffering? Am I really prepared for suffering?

**My eyes too are open**

I will not look away

**I say with Miriam, “I am sorry. I vow to learn more and stand with you – my eyes are open.”**

And you? What do you say?