

## **Genesis 21:8-21 God's love is greater...**

For the next two Sundays, our Old Testament readings take us into the beginnings of the covenant or agreement God made with Abraham. This week the reading is about Abraham and Ishmael, and next week about Abraham and Isaac.

As we look at these readings, not only do we see the plan of God for humankind unfolding, we also see the relationship God has with his people. Our story this morning from Genesis 21, is an encouraging reminder of the greatness of God's love in the face of our human frailty.

For a start, we see that:

### **1. God's love is greater than our mistakes.**

You'll remember that had God promised that he would make a great nation of Abraham, that his descendants would number more than the stars in the sky. The problem was, Sarah was barren. They hadn't been able to have children. Despite this, Abraham believed God's promise, and we read that it was credited to him as righteousness.

However, time went by, and still Sarah didn't conceive. It's evident that Sarah was somewhat skeptical of this promise, because she laughed when the angel told them the news. Nonetheless, she desperately wanted children. This was such a strong desire, that she proposed giving Abraham her slave girl as a wife in the hope that she would provide them with an heir.

This is where Abraham made a big mistake. He stopped trusting God to fulfil his promise, and decided to help God along by agreeing to Sarah's suggestion. Perhaps he even rationalised that this was how it was meant to be. The slave girl Hagar conceived, and the complications began.

Hagar was jubilant - and unwisely, provoked Sarah to jealousy. Sarah was angry, and in return, she treated Hagar harshly - so harshly that Hagar ran away. Things must have been pretty bad. There was now serious discord in the household - hatred, jealousy, anger, violence, fear, hopelessness.... I wonder what Abraham made of that?

Yet how great the love of God was for this family - despite all that had gone wrong. How patient God was with them; how caring, as he picked up the broken pieces of his promise and put them back together. Despite Abraham & Sarah's mistake, God still fulfilled his promise and Isaac was born.

*So God's love is greater than our mistakes*

## **2. God's love is greater than our difficult circumstances - even when we create them for ourselves.**

We come now to Hagar and Ishmael. Hagar was no doubt delighted when she was given to Abraham by Sarah to be his 2nd wife and she conceived. Overnight she'd gone from slave girl to wife; from being a mere possession, to a woman of substance, and she soon to be mother of the only heir to Abraham's fortune.

Unwisely, it seems she let this go to her head, and she began to treat Sarah with contempt - perhaps seeking to elevate herself above Sarah. Sarah was not someone to be crossed and came down on Hagar like a ton of bricks. She treated Hagar so harshly, that Hagar ran away.

In a sense, Hagar had created this situation for herself - yet the Lord mercifully intervened, sent her back to Sarah, no doubt a little more careful, and Ishmael was born.

Later, when Isaac was born, Sarah did not want a rival, so she demanded that Hagar be banished. Once again, Hagar found herself out in the wilderness, this time with a young son to care for.

This time it was serious. She could not go back, as the master had agreed to send her away. All she had was a skin of water. When it was gone, she knew she and her son would die.

In the midst of their hopelessness, the Lord spoke to Hagar, met her need, and promised her and Ishmael a future. We read that Ishmael became an expert with the bow. They had food and water, and later, Hagar found Ishmael a wife.

Despite the hopelessness of their circumstances, Hagar and Ishmael were enfolded in the love of God, cared for, comforted and blessed.

*God's love is greater than our difficult circumstances.*

## **3. God's love is greater than the messes we make**

Abraham & Sarah made such a mess. When they chose to trust their own wisdom rather than God's, they complicated everything. The family was

plunged into conflict, they stopped trusting God, and now there were two heirs.

Hagar made such mess. She sacted with immaturity and poor judgement in putting down her mistress to elevate her own position. She ended up in the wilderness not once, but twice. In the end she was banished from Abraham's household.

Yet God took both of these situations and wove them into his great plan of Salvation. Abraham and Sarah did bear a son, Isaac, who was the beginning of the fulfilment of God's covenant.

God also fulfilled his promise to Hagar, and made of Ishmael a nation. There are many today who believe the Arab nations are descended from Ishmael - though that is open to conjecture.

*So God's love is greater than any mess we can make of our lives.*

I wonder if, like Abraham & Sarah, we've ever made a serious mistake, or a bad decision; or like Hagar, have acted unwisely? Have we ever brought about consequences we wish we could change, but can't because the damage is done.

Are there any 'if only's' in our lives? "If only I had done this, or not done this...." "If only I'd said that or hadn't said that...."

It's possible for us to carry these 'if only's' right through our lives. It's possible to carry guilt, and to let our past mistakes and poor decisions influence, and even define who we are today. But that's not where God wants us to be. He wants us to live in freedom and victory.

Because of the cross, our God is a God of clean slates, second chances, and new beginnings.

It doesn't matter what we've done in the distant, or even recent past - If we come to God and ask his forgiveness, he will cleanse us.

John tells us in his first letter, v9 "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just, will forgive us our sins, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

If we give back to God, the broken pieces of our lives, he will take them and make them into something new.

Paul reminds us in 2 Corinthians 5:17 that "If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation. The old has gone, and the new has come".

In order to pick up something new, we have to empty our hands of anything we are holding that is broken or decayed. If we're hanging on to any old baggage this morning - let's put it down, and hold our empty hands up to God and ask him for the renewal he promises.

And it doesn't matter if we think we have made a mess of things - whether in the distant or recent past, or even if we're in the middle of a mess right now. Once again, we can take our mess to God, give it to him, and trust in his overwhelming goodness.

Paul again, has words of wisdom and comfort for us, when he says, "All things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose."

We need to be aware though, that God doesn't necessarily promise to 'fix' things the way we would like them fixed. It may be that we find ourselves in a situation we've created, and we wish more than anything that things could back to the way were, before we messed up. While we can offer that longing to God in prayer, it's not an expectation we can place on him. We need to trust his wisdom.

We can however, expect God to keep his promises. He will always cleanse a repentant sinner. He will always accept the broken pieces of our lives, redeem us, and make us his new creation. He will always work in us and through us for our good and for the good of his kingdom.

As I said at the beginning, story this morning from Genesis 21, is an encouraging reminder of the greatness of God's love in the face of our human frailty.

Let us give thanks that:

God's love is greater than our mistakes

God's love is greater than our difficult circumstances.

God's love is greater than any mess we can make of our lives.

Closing prayer.