

## No Longer slaves

[Genesis 21:8-21](#)

[Romans 6:1b-11](#)

[Matthew 10:24-39](#)

Usually we omit the Old Testament reading on the third Sunday of the month but today it seems particularly important, so I decided this morning that we should include it. Like today's gospel, it is a difficult reading. It is a difficult reading because it tells us about racial separation. It tells us that deep in the very early history of the Judeo-Christian people, just as in this country and in England, our ancestors and our spiritual ancestors were slave owners. And that often they treated their slaves unfairly. We stand today on the shoulders of the work of all those slaves.

Yes we remember that the Hebrews were enslaved in Egypt but much earlier than that they had slaves themselves. Hagar was Sarah's slave. And it was Sarah's idea that Abraham should have a child with her but then when Sarah conceived she wasn't happy that now Abraham had two sons. No. She was jealous. And she was in some way afraid. She was afraid when she saw Isaac and Ishmael playing together – slave and master.

She was afraid that somehow Ishmael would take that which was Isaac's. That there would not be enough something to go around. That people might mistake Ishmael as Abraham's heir because of course he was older. That maybe he would inherit the earth.

So Sarah persuaded Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away. And thus the Arab nations were founded. Ishmael and his bride from Egypt become the ancestors of the Arabic world.

Racism is written into the Bible. It comes even earlier than Abraham with the stories of Noah and his sons from whom we are told "came the people who were scattered over the earth.". As the result of a dispute after the flood, Noah cursed his grandson Canaan, "Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers." (Gen 9:25) And later when the Hebrews came out of slavery in Egypt and settled in the Promised Land, who were they were displacing but the Canaanites.

For the ancient tribal people, tribalism, racism and slavery were normal. They were just the way the world was.

And they are the way the world is today.

Coming from England, slavery was much more hidden. Yes we traded slaves but on the whole we didn't bring them home. So I grew up with pride in the Anglicans who led the campaign to abolish slavery, never really realizing that that meant they had previously been implicated in trading and exploiting other humans as slaves for their own profit. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century when slavery was abolished, the Bishop of Exeter and several business associates were among those who received compensation – in their case for the loss of 665 slaves.<sup>1</sup> Those of you who love Jane Austen's books and the Bronte novels – have you ever paused to think about where these characters money came from? Probably from plantations.

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<sup>1</sup> [Wikipedia: Slavery in Britain](#)

Slavery was hidden just as modern-day slavery is hidden. Human trafficking is modern day slavery. And it is real and it is here. Just as racism is here and is systemically embedded in all our institutions.

Today's gospel reading is difficult for us because it is not the gentle path of peace that we associate with the Prince of Peace. No, Jesus says the opposite, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword."

Jesus was a realistic man. He knew that his path was going to lead to a bloody confrontation with the authorities and he knew that if his disciples followed him, then they would also meet with opposition and conflict.

Because they were committed to love in a world committed to hate. They were committed to equality in a world built upon divisions. They were committed to justice in a world built upon exploitation.

Because we have experienced God's love and grace, because we know that it doesn't matter what we do, we are loved unconditionally, because we are filled up with that love we too are committed to loving others as ourselves. This is not somehow separate from God but as a direct result of God's love for us.

In both these difficult passages we see that God's love continues.

Abraham is beside himself because his son Ishmael is threatened but God says, "Do not be distressed because of the boy...I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring." Hagar is weeping because they are in the desert and have run out of water but God says. "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid," and provides not just another skin of water, but a whole well. And Jesus reassures us, "do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows."

In the difficult times, in the times of fear and pain, God's love continues to be present and we can rely on that. We know that God's eye is on the sparrow and God's love encompasses every part of creation.

But that is not an excuse. That is not a reason to tolerate injustice, thinking that God will sort it out and we don't need to. Racism is a human invention; environmental degradation is a human activity. They are sinful, they are results of the sin matrix in which we are all implicated.

But listen to what Paul says in Romans: "we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin."

We are no longer slaves to sin, for whoever has died in baptism is freed from sin. Wow!

We are already safe. We are freed from the stickiness of sin so that we can turn around and confront it. We know that in Christ "there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal.3:28) Because we know that and it is part of who we are; because in our baptism we have promised to "strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being;" we are committed to love. We are committed to strong love which is not afraid of rocking the boat.

Even if it means we are unpopular and people are unpleasant, we are committed to the love which seeks to bring justice and reconciliation, to bring God's kin-dom on earth. But we don't seek to hurt others or to bully or to manipulate. Jesus was very clear that we must pray for our enemies and that includes our political opponents. Our commitment to strong love extends to loving those who oppose us. Our commitment to strong love means building the beloved kin-dom through non-violent and peaceful means.

These are not easy readings today but they are important ones. God loves us so much that as we step out with the guidance of the Holy Spirit to live our baptismal vows and to dismantle the systems of injustice and racism, we know that we go with God and so we can go with gentle determination, not taking no for an answer and loving strongly, friend and enemy alike.

Thanks be to God whose love is our strength.