

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword. I have come to set a man against his father ... and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.” After hearing Matthew’s Jesus we might realise family difficulties go back a long way – at least as far back as the family of Abraham. If Jesus brings disturbance, though, what sustains us? God’s valuing presence does.

Abraham had been promised a son and many descendants, and when no baby arrived – for his wife Sarah was unable to conceive – Sarah gave her Egyptian slave girl Hagar to her husband, and the child Ishmael was conceived. This was a perfectly legal arrangement in those days, and it’s an interesting forerunner of modern surrogacy. But later Abraham and Sarah were visited by divine messengers who announced the birth of their own son: named Isaac, for Sarah’s laughter at the door of the tent. Isaac grew and was weaned, and the two boys played together, the son of the promise and the son of the slave woman. Oblivious to the histories and agendas of their parents, their laughter rang through the house, an echo of Sarah’s earlier laughter. But Sarah couldn’t cope – maybe she felt threatened on behalf of Isaac. She demands that Abraham cast out Hagar and her son. And Abraham, largely a passive character here, agrees.

Hagar and Ishmael are cast out, sent away with only some bread and one skin of water. As so often in the Bible, they have to take their chances in the wilderness, the place of wandering, the place of fear and danger. And again, as so often in the Bible, the wilderness is the place of encounter with God. For this is a story, not about Sarah and Hagar, not about Sarah and Abraham, but about Hagar and God and Ishmael and God. God has already appeared to Hagar once: an angel came, in the first of the biblical annunciation stories, to tell her about Ishmael’s birth: “you shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the LORD has given heed to your affliction” [Gen 16:11]. Now when the water gives out, Hagar puts her child carefully under a bush, and retreats a bowshot away, to where she can see him but where they can’t hear each other’s crying.

Here is Hagar: a woman, an Egyptian, a slave, and now an outcast. Four times marginalised. Out there in the desert, in despair at the death of her son, which can only be hours away; about to die herself. Yet, to this dying, despairing, outcast Egyptian female slave, God chooses to appear. God speaks a word of comfort, of sustenance and hope. “Do not be afraid.”

It’s the same word Jesus speaks repeatedly to his friends: “Have no fear of them ... do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul ... do not be afraid.” “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.” Jesus tells his friends that they’re not insignificant: they matter to God. Hagar, the despairing slave out there in the wilderness, is not insignificant either: she matters to God. Ishmael, cast out by his father from the household, dying of thirst, is not insignificant: he matters to God. And God saves them: God hears their cries, and leads Hagar to a well. “God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow”; and his mother got a wife for him from amongst her own people. And God did indeed fulfil the promise to “make a great nation” of Ishmael: it’s from Ishmael that all Muslims trace their descent from Abraham.

Hagar, Ishmael, the disciples are all loved and valued by God. This above all else is good news. It is the good news that lies behind the Old Testament covenants, in which God says “I will be your God and you will be my people.” It is the good news that Jesus came to speak to everyone: the good

news that we are loved and valued by God. That we are more to God than many sparrows. That we are precious.

Hagar and Ishmael were not sparrows. And we need to hear the same thing: that we are not sparrows either, not birds sold cheaply, creatures that don't matter to anyone else and who might fall unnoticed to the ground. Jesus affirms that we are precious, watched over, loved. And it goes without saying, but let's say it anyway: sparrows themselves, and all the other members of the nonhuman world, are valued and precious to God.

We need to hear the good news that God loves us. Our children need to hear this too, but it's hard for us to pass this lesson onto them if we haven't learnt it ourselves, if we as adults are still plagued with insecurity. We need to hear that we are precious to God, loved and valued, that we are more to God than the sparrows. That when bad things happen to us God notices, God cares, God is there.

For in today's Gospel Jesus is also clear about something else. God won't protect disciples – and that includes us – from all harm, but God will be with them and will bring them through it. Following Jesus isn't a guarantee that nothing bad will happen to us – after all, bad things happened to Jesus himself, and we are called to be like him – but God's presence and care will be with us to sustain us. Therefore, do not be afraid!

Paul gives a similar message to the Christians in Rome. We have been united with Christ by baptism. Our old slavery to sin has died with Christ, and we should now consider ourselves alive to God in Christ, living our lives turned towards God. -That's going to affect our priorities, and impact our decisions, isn't it. And it's going to mean that if we ever face a choice about what to do or who to imitate, then we go with Jesus, even over those others that we love, even sometimes over family members. Because the risk is that those who give their highest priority to protecting themselves will find in the end that there's nothing left to protect.

But do not be afraid: God is with us and we are loved. Knowing that can stop ourselves tuning in to those other voices that try to tell us the opposite, that God doesn't care about us. We don't need to live stuck inside the metaphor, thinking we don't matter, seeing ourselves only as sparrows.

Maybe that's what Sarah was doing. Maybe (I'm guessing here) her problem was that underneath she saw herself as only a sparrow. All those years of not having a child had left her insecure, never sure of her place in the world, wondering whether she really mattered. When she saw the two boys playing together she remembered she wasn't the only mother of a child of Abraham. Maybe Abraham would love the other boy better than her son. Maybe there was only so much love to go around, only so much wealth to inherit, only so much of God's promise of blessing. And so, out of her insecurity, she got rid of Hagar and Ishmael, sending them off to die in the wilderness.

But Sarah was wrong: she mattered to God too, except that she couldn't see it. And though a happy ending for Hagar and Ishmael might've passed Sarah by, it doesn't have to be like that for us. Today, let us remind ourselves that we as individuals matter to God. That we are more to God than the sparrows. That we are precious, watched over, loved. And then, knowing ourselves loved by God, we can begin to love one another, and those around us as God loves us. Today, we're invited to move from being loved ourselves to seeing and valuing others who maybe feel like sparrows.

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