

Telling the whole story

Genesis 21:8-21
Romans 6:1b-11
Matthew 10:24-39

We routinely use the Lectionary. A Lectionary is a set list of readings that we use for worship week after week, and the particular Lectionary we use sets before us a great deal of the Bible's content over the course of three years. One of the things I value about preaching to the Lectionary is that it forces me to address passages that I might otherwise wish to ignore or gloss over.

During Ordinary Time, the season in which we now find ourselves, the Lectionary offers us the choice of either "Related" or "Continuous" readings. Under the "Related" option, the Old Testament readings are chosen so as to relate in some way to the Gospel passage. Under the "Continuous" option, the Old Testament readings proceed in sequence through particular books of the Old Testament – not every chapter and every verse, but covering the broad sweep of the Old Testament – chosen without reference to the Gospel. I prefer to use the "Continuous" option. I like that this gives us the opportunity to encounter the unfolding narrative of God's dealings with his people. And I like that the "unrelatedness" often results in things bumping up against each other in unexpected ways leading to new insight into the ways of God.

However, these features of the Lectionary that I value on one level can also make it difficult to create sermons. There are passages that are hard to understand and hard to explain, there are teachings that discomfort us, there are narratives that are deeply troubling...

But isn't that true of life too? There are events that are hard to understand and to explain, points of view that discomfort us, stories and histories that are deeply troubling...

We need to bring all this complexity and ambiguity of life into the light of what the Bible is all about; we need to bring all this difficulty into the light of the purposes of God, God's plan for humankind and for creation; we need to bring all this difficulty into the light of the good news that Jesus Christ is becoming king of the whole world and has done what is necessary for us to not only be rescued ourselves but to also be part of God's rescue plan for the rest of creation.

As I looked at these three readings for today, they resonated strongly for me in relation to some of what is going on in the world at the moment. Rather than taking a systematic approach to these readings, I therefore want to offer some thoughts for your consideration.

The first thing that stands out for me is around fear.

There is a great deal that might give us cause to be fearful at the moment.

- Are our borders sufficiently secure against Covid19?
- What is going to happen to the economy, to incomes and jobs?
- Can governments, scientists, authorities be trusted to have our wellbeing and best interests at heart?
- Are the protests of the Black Lives Matter movement going to continue and to escalate?
- Will we have to remove many of our nation's monuments, street names, etc; will we have to destroy books? Will I have to think differently about my heroes?
- Will I receive just and fair treatment at the hands of the justice system?
- If I say what I think, will I be subject to scorn or outrage?
- Will the Church's standing in society be damaged by revelations arising during the process of the Royal Commission into abuse in care?
- In a few years' time will it be safe to identify as Christian in New Zealand?

And so one could go on, and on. There is a lot that might make us fearful.

Our particular fears may depend on our past experience, and may depend on our position in society, our race, our religion, our hopes, our ultimate loyalties. A person with brown skin in New Zealand may be fearful of being targeted by the Police, and that if arrested for something will face a greater likelihood of imprisonment than someone with pink skin; whereas a person whose ancestors came here from England in 1840 may be fearful that debate about the actions and motives of the colonists may call into question their sense of identity as a New Zealander.

There seems to be a great deal of fear around at the moment.

In Matthew 10, Jesus is preparing to send the twelve apostles out into the nearby communities on a brave new mission, for which they feel ill-equipped. “As you go,” he says, “proclaim this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons.”

But they could well be fearful, because there are risks involved. They may not be made welcome as they go with this message of a new king’s reign. They are likely to be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. They may find themselves having to explain themselves to governors and kings. They may be arrested, betrayed by family members, hated, persecuted.

But over and over again, Jesus says to these apostles, “Do not fear”.

In fact, the good news of Jesus is threaded through with this message of “Do not fear”, “Do not be afraid”. Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. Don’t be afraid, Joseph, for what is conceived in Mary is of the Holy Spirit. Do not be afraid, shepherds, for the angel brings you glad tidings of great joy. Do not be afraid, Simon, James and John, for Jesus will make you fishers of men.

Again and again, Jesus says, “Do not be afraid for I am with you.”

And then to the two Marys at the tomb on that first Easter morn, Jesus says, “Don’t be afraid”, and soon after it is to the frightened and astonished disciples in the upper room after his death that Jesus appears and says, “Don’t be afraid.”

“Do not fear” seems a very pertinent message in these times of many fears.

And the basis for “Do not fear” lies in the question of what ultimately matters. Jesus says “Rather fear the one who can destroy both body and soul in hell”. Perspective comes in the light of one’s eternal destiny: are we united to Christ; or do we allow ourselves to fall into the grip of the dark forces that lead to annihilation? “Do not fear” arises out of our being united to Christ, because this is what brings us life in the face of the very worst that the world can do to us. As Saint Paul said, “Just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his.” We have already suffered death in

advance in the death of Jesus and have been given the sure promise of victory over death in God's raising of Jesus on the third day.¹

A lot of the things going on at present around which fears may exist have to do with our histories, our stories, and truth. As thoughts of this have swirled around my mind this week, I found that today's Old Testament reading speaks profoundly into the situation. It is not so much the detail of the story of Hagar and Ishmael that speaks into our situation, but rather that the story exists in our Bible at all.

Why did the descendants of Abraham and Sarah not expunge this tale from their history, when it shows the two of them in such a bad light? How could Abraham be held out as a paragon of faith in Hebrews and Romans when events such as this, and the bizarre incidents in which he allowed his wife Sarah to be taken by other men, raise deep questions about his morality?

But here the story remains.

And I find it both comforting and challenging that our scriptures are not sanitised. It is comforting to me, because it helps assure me of their truthfulness. It is comforting too, because it is through stories such as these that we find that God is at work in all the muck and mire of the worst of humankind, and we find that God is at work even in and through very ordinary, fallen, human beings such as me.

And I find these un-sanitised scriptures also challenge me because they take me deeper into the mysterious ways of our almighty and merciful God.

Just as my preaching needs to be informed and challenged by the difficult passages thrown up by the fullness of the Lectionary, so too our stories, our histories, need to be full and complete – including the willingness to name and own the difficult and unpleasant bits.

I think this is an important part of our response to some of the things that may make us fearful today. Let us be willing to name and own the difficult, dark, and terrible

¹ Rollefson, p.138

bits of our colonial history, for example. Let us be willing to name and own the dreadful bits of our church history too. It is only as evil things are brought into the light that they can be defeated; it is only as things are brought into the light that they can be forgiven, healed, and restored.

This process of naming and owning our stories involves vulnerability and humility. And so it seems to me that we therefore need to be cautious about demanding that others own the unpleasant and difficult bits in their histories. The risk is that such demands amount to an exercise of power, effectively adding to the historical offences.

To be vulnerable and humble feels risky. But vulnerability and humility are intrinsically part of the way of God. One of the most beautiful hymns of praise in scripture is found in Philippians 2. It ends with the exaltation of Jesus Christ, ruling over all:

God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

But let us not forget how it begins:

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself

by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

How do we deal with being vulnerable and humble? A lot of it depends on how secure we feel in our identity.

Many of the things that might cause us to fear at present do so because they threaten our identity, our sense of what makes us who we are. Often our desire to hide parts of our personal or collective history arises from the way those parts call into question our self-understanding, and perhaps make us feel bad about ourselves.

The words of Jesus to the Twelve would have been profoundly challenging to them, because Jesus calls into question a key element of Jewish identity: kinship ties. Jesus says “Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” It is not that Jesus doesn’t care about families: after all, on the cross he was at pains to ensure that his mother would be cared for. Nor is it that Jesus has a goal of bringing conflict and division: after all, he set his disciples the task of bringing forgiveness and reconciliation.

But what Jesus is saying to his Jewish disciples is that finding their identity in their Jewishness, in having their standing in the world determined by their claiming descent from Abraham, in taking pride in locating themselves within the story of one or other of the twelve tribes of Israel, doesn’t ultimately matter. What ultimately matters is their allegiance to him.

To be adopted as a child of God – who is not only the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but is also God the creator of all – matters far more than any other identity claim we can make. It matters far more, because this is the only identity that matters in terms of eternal destiny; and it is from this identity that we have our purpose in life (both individually, and corporately as the Church).

Our identity in God and Christ puts into perspective our stories – both good and bad bits – and puts into perspective the things that we fear.

As we go through these challenging times, may we have this perspective – and may we be ambassadors of it in the same way Jesus sent the Twelve all those years ago.

Works consulted:

- John Rollefson, *Postils for Preaching: Commentaries on the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, 2016*
- Tom Wright, *Twelve Months of Sundays*, SPCK 2012