

Homily

Pentecost 3 – 21-06-20 - Bishop Cam Venables

Readings: Genesis 21:8-21; Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17; Romans 6:1-11; Matthew 10:24-39

In the different communities I've lived in over the years I've learnt it is wise to work on the assumption that each person is related - and, if not related, then at least connected! Even in the large geography of south west Queensland I'm often reminded of this. I was particularly reminded after I first drove out to Eromanga in 2014. Eromanga is a small and vibrant community about ten hour's drive west from Toowoomba.

For those who have not been to Eromanga it is well worth a visit because it is the furthest point in Australia from any ocean, and even better than that - it has a world class natural history museum. (For more details please check out the Eromanga Natural History Museum website: <https://enhm.com.au/>)

When I got back from that trip I talked about the journey with my old next door neighbour and she explained that her sister in law had met me the previous week for worship at the Eromanga community hall!

This experience supports the 'six degrees of separation' theory which claims that any person on the planet can be connected to another person through a chain of no more than five people. But, in the Anglican Church of Australia I think it's probably four degrees, and if the Eromanga experience is anything to go by it could be only three!

Remembering that we are connected to other people probably increases the likelihood of us being more accountable for our words and actions, and more interested in the well-being and welfare of the people we meet. Conversely, if we perceive that there is no relationship with a person or group of people, we might think we are not accountable for our words and actions and have little or no interest in their current or future well-being.

As protests have unfolded around the world in recent weeks there is no denying that there are polarities that divide communities. Conflict based on the very different ways that people are treated according to their skin colour, ethnicity, and language has created deep pain. When we add into the mix tension about different religious beliefs things start to get even more interesting! Karen Armstrong's helpful book 'Battle for God' documents examples of intra religious conflict with Orthodox Jews killing other Jews; conservative Christians killing other Christians; and Sunni Muslims killing Shi'a Muslims. Together with the more obvious inter-religious conflicts where members of one faith kill those from another faith - believing somehow that God desires this.

Is it possible for religious faiths to recognise common ground and based on this find ways to live in peace?

The Old Testament reading set for today reminds Christians, Muslims, and Jews that they are related to each other in God, because the story of Abraham's relationship with Hagar and their son Ismael is a sacred story for each of these faiths. Although each faith honours Abraham Jews and Christians focus particularly on Abraham, his wife Sarah, and their son Isaac; while Muslims focus particularly

on Abraham, his slave Hagar and their son Ishmael.

Recognising Abraham as the common factor in this shared story it's not surprising that Judaism, Christianity and Islam are known as Abrahamic faiths.

I have to say that the story of Abraham's treatment of Hagar and Ishmael in today's reading is shameful when viewed through the of human rights lens of the Twenty First Century. We are familiar with the story, and the elements of longing, jealousy, and spite within it but let's touch base with it again.

Sarah couldn't have children, so she asked her husband Abraham to take her servant girl Hagar as a concubine in order that he could have a son. Not surprisingly, when Hagar gave birth to Ishmael this created tension between Sarah and Hagar. But, later Sarah became pregnant and gave birth to Isaac.

A little time passed, but as Sarah watched Ishmael interacting with Isaac she became worried her son would not inherit Abraham's wealth and name. To resolve this she demanded that Abraham cast Hagar and Ishmael out into the desert to die. Initially Abraham was distressed by the demand, but then had a sense of God telling him they would be OK if he did this. So, Abraham abandoned the mother of his first son, together with his first son, to the wilderness of Beer-sheba... and God's grace.

Not surprisingly Hagar was gutted and when her water was finished, she left her son under a bush to die, before moving away so she could not hear his cries. In that experience of despair the angel of God spoke to Hagar, and reassured her that Ishmael would be fine, and that God would make a great nation from his descendants. Not just a nation, but a great nation. It is this part of the story from Genesis, sacred to both Jewish and Christian communities, that we read and hear this weekend.

Clearly, there are important themes to recognise. One of them is that Abraham was faithful to God's direction, even when it seemed like a callous thing to do. Abraham trusted that God would look after Hagar and Ishmael in the wilderness... and they survived and prospered. However, we are more familiar with the great nation that came from Abraham's second son Isaac, and can name his twelve grandsons who are remembered as the founding fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel. We are not familiar with the great nation that came from Ishmael... or are we?

In the sacred writing of the Muslim community, the Quran, the story is told differently with Hagar being remembered as a wife of the Prophet Abraham, as well as the mother of Ishmael. In the Quran, Abraham was commanded by God to take his young son Ishmael to the holy land of Ka'bah in Mecca and leave him there. So, Abraham took Hagar and Ishmael to Mecca and left them there with a bucket of water and some dates.

For the Jewish community Abraham is remembered as the founding father of their faith, whose grandson Jacob was renamed Israel, and whose best known descendent was King David. While for the Christian community Abraham is also remembered as the founding father, but whose greatest descendent was Jesus of Nazareth. Christians believe Jesus to be the Son of God, and the fulfilment of an ancient promise from God.

In contrast the Muslim community revere both Abraham and Ishmael as prophets but remember the Prophet Muhammad as being their most significant descendant.

So, maybe Jews, Christians, and Muslims have more in common than we realised? Maybe we should be interested in the wellbeing of all people, and not just the ones who belong to the same religious faith as us? Maybe the God, known variously as 'Lord', 'Yahweh', and 'Allah' - calls us to be reconciled, and live together in peace?

Remember Jesus said, 'Love your neighbour...!' He didn't say love your neighbour if they are the same colour as you, speak the same language as you, or share the same religious belief. He simply said, 'Love your neighbour... as you love yourself!'

It's as simple and as complicated as that!

Friends, let's pray...

Loving God, we offer to you the violence and brokenness of our world and pray for reconciliation and peace. In your grace help us to love our neighbours wherever we are and work together with them to build communities in which there is peace and harmony. In this we ask that your kingdom come, and your will be done... in Jesus' Name. Amen

Questions:

1. What difference does it make to our perception of the world when we think of Jews, Christians and Muslims sharing Abraham as a common ancestor?
2. What is the toughest thing for you about the command from Jesus to love your neighbour as yourself? (Mark 12:31)
3. Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God." (Matthew 5:9). How can you and I be peacemakers?

Further Reading:

1. The Battle for God: Fundamentalism in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

(Karen Armstrong, published by Knopf/Harper Collins, in 2000)

Supplementary Questions:

1. When you read today's reading what strikes you as the most important message in the passage?
2. What parts of the sermon reaffirmed aspects of the Christian faith for you?
3. What parts of the sermon challenged or disturbed you?
4. What do you want to explore further because of today's homily?
5. How will you live differently or what challenge will you take up from today's homily?

Genesis 21:8-21

"The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. So she said to Abraham, 'Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.' The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. But God said to Abraham, 'Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named after you. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.' So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.

When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, 'Do not let me look on the death of the child.' And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, 'What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.' Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink.

God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt."