

Evensong Reading – Genesis 21: 8-21

⁸ The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. ⁹But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. ¹⁰ 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.' ¹¹The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. ¹²But 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. ¹³As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.' ¹⁴So 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.

¹⁵ When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. ¹⁶Then 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. ¹⁷And 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. ¹⁸Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.' ¹⁹Then 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.

²⁰ God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. ²¹He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

Security and Insecurity

An address by Revd Mandy Flaherty

Good evening everyone and I hope you are all well. Forgive me, but I am actually like a kid with a new toy with this online editing that we all have to do now. And my latest toy is being able to change the background where I am speaking from – look (*Mandy changes background to her video*) So it can fit the mood or theme of what I am talking about.... Anyway, enough of this frivolity! We have two readings for this evening – one is the story of Hagar and Ishmael being cast out from Abraham and Sarah's home, and the other is a teaching passage in Matthew's gospel from Jesus, about, basically, who to listen to and follow. Both passages have something to say to us, I think, about following and also about security and insecurity and I just want to highlight a few points I have gleaned on these subjects this evening.

I was out yesterday in our horse trailer going to a cross country course and following a friend of mine in her Defender in front of us. Now, I must admit that I am not the most confident when I am driving the trailer with Ziggy, our pony, in it and it is good to have someone to follow to alleviate my worries. However, we were going to a place called Keysoe which is a few miles past Kimbolton and my friend had suggested going the back roads through the villages to avoid the A1 and dual carriageways.

Sensible I thought, so off we went. What she didn't prepare me for though, was a rather steep hill on the other side of Barham that you have to go down in order to cross over the A14. I won't tell you what came out of my daughter's mouth as we came to the brow of the hill but we were both a bit startled and unprepared. All was ok, mind, and we got to the venue, enjoyed the cross country and started our journey home. Knowing I would have to go back UP the hill I had come down with the trailer, I asked my friend how best to do it. She offered me an alternative route

and I was overjoyed! So, I am afraid, I chickened out and took the easier route home. There are lots of things about that journey that made me feel secure and insecure – following my friend gave me confidence, being un-prepared for the hill made me insecure and having an alternative choice gave me freedom and some further confidence. There are many ways to define what security means and it has different meanings depending on the contexts but for us this evening, I want to focus on two meanings that arise from the Cambridge dictionary: ‘freedom from risk and the threat of change for the worse’ and also as ‘the feeling of being confident in one’s family and relationships’.

Hagar was a young woman who, let’s be honest, had been taken advantage of by Abraham and Sarah. She had borne Abraham’s child so that he had an inheritance. In doing so, Hagar had perhaps thought that this secured her future. She was to be kept and looked after by Abraham and Sarah because she bore his son. However, Sarah and Abraham hadn’t taken God’s word to them that Sarah would bear a child, as seriously as they should have and they put their trust in Hagar’s pregnancy. When God’s word actually did come true, then everything changed, most notably Hagar’s security. She was cast out. I feel for Hagar. What kind of life could she have once she was cast out? She was a woman, a slave girl and she was a single mother with a young son. And she had nothing. Absolutely everything was against her. No wonder she put her son in the bushes and sat a way off waiting for him and herself to die. Everything she had formerly put her trust in had gone and she had nothing she could depend on for her future.

We all build our lives on lots of things. Careers, families, jobs, houses, children, wealth, status. But they can all go at any point. The Shelter organisation who provide affordable homes for working people did a study with Gov.UK back in September which concluded a staggering 60% of their three million renters could be just one pay cheque away from losing their home. That was back in September so I wonder what the real figure is now whilst we’re in the midst of the Covid-19 crisis? Their living security is from just one pay cheque to another and it could easily be lost.

We know we’re in an unstable time and much of what we formerly relied on has been taken away, temporarily or not, we have to wait and see.

So what did Hagar do? She was alone, bereft, scared, resigned. And God spoke to her in the midst of her despair ‘Do not be afraid for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is’. God does not wait for us to get ourselves into a good place before he speaks and acts. He acts and speaks when we are most despairing. The psalms, I think, are a good marker for human feeling and response to both joys and hardships. I love the fact that we use them in the rhythm of our daily prayer because they are the human voice talking incessantly to God about everything to do with the human condition – sin, shame, anger, love, praise, joy, worry, fear, encouragement, awe, wonder – they cover the whole spectrum of human feeling, emotion and our condition before God as well describing his Grace and Love towards each one of us. For Hagar and for us when our own security has been taken away from us,

I like psalm 40:

‘I waited patiently for the LORD;
he turned to me and heard my cry.
He lifted me out of the slimy pit,
out of the mud and mire;
he set my feet on a rock
and gave me a firm place to stand.
He put a new song in my mouth,
a hymn of praise to our God.
Many will see and fear
and put their trust in the LORD.’

Quite apart for the fact that it has some wonderful and evocative images in it of slimy pits, mud and mire, it’s the thought that God finds each of us a rock and gives us a firm place to stand.

That is the clearest image of being made secure – to be lifted up and placed on a firm rock. Now, in my Irish heritage, I come from a place in the South East of Ireland called Campile and Campile is about 10 km from a place called Hooks Head which is the most southerly point of

Ireland. It has a lighthouse on it and some rather stunning rocks – and here it is, hopefully, showing behind me (*Mandy changes the background showing rocky seashore*).

Now these rocks, if they get wet, are not at all secure, so I imagine that the psalm is not thinking about the wet and slimy rocks like this with waves crashing about to make you slip, but rather, a rock like this.... (*... changes background, again, showing dry, smooth rock*).

Hagar heard the voice of God and she was able to save her son. It's interesting isn't it that the first things she sees that God does for her is to provide her with a well of water. I can't help mirror this image of Hagar by the well of water here with Jesus by the well with the Samaritan woman in John's gospel. In both stories we have a theme of redemption – of putting the past behind and forging a new future. Water symbolises new life and satisfaction. But if I have got my science right then water also always runs towards an opening – down the cracks in pavements, down a plughole, into drains etc. It finds the lowest point when running downhill and it finds the cracks. When we're in our darkest, most hurt, most damaged and needy state, God's water finds us. When the woman at the well in John's gospel says to Jesus, 'give me this living water' that he speaks about, Jesus says to her 'go and call your husband' and with that one sentence, he gets to the nub of her life – he opens up the wounds that probably she wants to cover over and forget about. But it's not to shame her or disgrace her, it is to cleanse and heal her – so that she can place her feet on a firm rock and be secure in God's love and knowledge of her. Hagar sits alone as God speaks to her and he provides her with a well of water to drink from that will ensure her survival and security for the future. Whatever has been in the past is done with now and a new life awaits. It may not be the life she was expecting but it is a life where she can be confident and secure in the fact that God has her back and she will not slip or fall.

To finish, in the gospel reading it ends with Jesus saying 'Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.' Finding and defining our lives with things that we seek and build on to make ourselves feel secure – like careers, houses, wealth, drugs, fame, status – whatever it is, and they're not necessarily bad in themselves, but when we depend on them alone to make us happy and secure, we lose our lives. We constantly strive or are fearful, we don't relax.

I heard recently from a sermon I was listening to, about the Catholic Theologian James Allison who describes having faith as 'relaxing in God'. He 'describes faith not as intellectually ascending to a set of theological propositions, but he describes faith as relaxing. Relaxing in the love and presence of God in the way we relax in the presence of someone we are certain is fond of us. When we are in the presence of someone we are certain is fond of us, we are funnier, more spontaneous, softer and less defended. If I know for sure someone likes and loves me there is no reason to pretend anything. Allison says faith is 'relaxing'.

I like that idea – to have faith is to relax with God – let go, let God deal, let the living water come in. And when we're relaxed we don't need to strive to have things in our lives to be secure, we can 'lose' our lives and in doing so, find it.

Amen.