

Sunday 28th June 2020

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God is love, let us adore God by sharing God's love.

God is ever present, around us and within us, though separate let us worship together in God.

Hymn/prayer For the beauty of the earth,
for the beauty of the skies,
for the love which from our birth
over and around us lies:
*Gracious God, to thee we raise
this our sacrifice of praise.*

For the beauty of each hour
of the day and of the night,
hill and vale, and tree and flower,
sun and moon, and stars of light:
Gracious God, to thee we raise..

For the joy of ear and eye,
for the heart and mind's delight,
for the mystic harmony
linking sense to sound and sight:
Gracious God, to thee we raise..

For the joy of human love,
brother, sister, parent, child,
friends on earth, and friends above;
for all gentle thoughts and mild:
Gracious God, to thee we raise..

For each perfect gift of thine
to our race so freely given,
graces human and divine,
flowers of earth and buds of heaven:
Gracious God, to thee we raise..

For thy people, evermore
lifting holy hands above,
offering up on every shore
their pure sacrifice of love:
Gracious God, to thee we raise..

F. S. PIERPOINT (1835-1917) altd.*

The Lord's prayer

Readings Genesis 16:1-6, 15-16 and 17:15-16
1 Corinthians 12:14-26

Story The Intolerant tools, a re-telling of a Swedish Folk Tale
Once upon a time there lived a carpenter who had his own workshop with all manner of useful tools.
One day, when the carpenter was away from his workshop, an argument broke out among the tools.
Some felt more important than others and wanted to exclude those they saw as of little worth from
the workshop.

The saw was accused of 'biting and grinding her teeth' and being irritable.

The plane was accused of having a cruel nature as he scraped at everything he touched.

The hammer was accused of being noisy and boring, bashing away at everything.

The nails were accused of being sharp and bringing danger to the workshop.

And so it went on, the file, the rasp, the sandpaper, there was something negative about everything it seemed as you listened to the accusations from around the workshop. before long the workshop was like a battleground with accusation flying like daggers and no one knew who started things but as all joined in all found themselves in the excluded group.

Then the door opened, and the carpenter returned to a silent workshop. Unaware of the battle he picked up a plank of wood and cut it to size with the saw, then smoothed it with the plane then he used the hammer and nails to attach it to another piece of prepared wood. When he had attached it he used the file and the sandpaper to creates a wonderfully smooth finish. Every tool was used as the carpenter lovingly built a cradle for a baby. A cradle to hold and nurture life.

Think of someone from you church and a gift within them that you recognise and value. Commit to phone or write to them to express your appreciation of their gift.

Hymn

Thou whose almighty word
chaos and darkness heard,
and took their flight,
hear us, we humbly pray,
and where the gospel day
sheds not its glorious ray,
let there be light.

Thou who didst come to bring
on thy redeeming wing
healing and sight,
health to the sick in mind,
sight to the inly blind,
now to all humankind
let there be light.

Spirit of truth and love,
life-giving, holy dove,
speed forth thy flight;
move o'er the waters' face,
bearing the lamp of grace,
and in earth's darkest place
let there be light.

Holy and blessed Three,
glorious Trinity,
Wisdom, Love, Might,
boundless as ocean's tide
rolling in fullest pride,
through the world, far and wide,
let there be light.

JOHN MARRIOTT (1780-1825)*
adpt. from FELICE GIARDINI (1716-96)

Reflection

Since our last reading from Genesis 12, Sarai has been absent from the narrator's story and only re-appears in Chapter 16. However, Abram has been busy, and the list of his activities is long and varied:

- Sorted the conflict between his herdsmen and Lot's herdsmen
- Conversated with God over the extent of the are allocated in the Promised Land
- Sorted the distribution of the land allocated in the Promised Land
- Walked the perimeter of the land allocated to stake his claim
- Settled his own household in Mamre
- Built his third alter
- Gone on a daring raid to rescue Lot
- Met the King of Sodom and been feted a hero
- Been blessed by Melchizadek, Priest King of Jerusalem
- Had a second vision of God and a first dialogue
- Taken part in a covenant ceremony sealing God's promises
- Been assure by God that he will have a son and heir, although there is no mention of who the mother will be at this stage.

Having reminded us therefore of how insignificant Sarai is the narrator suddenly re-introduces Sarai with a not so subtle reminder that she is unable to bear children. Not only that but the narrator gives Sarai a voice. After ten years in the Promised Land she is even more desperate to provide Abram with an heir, neither of them is young and their options seem limited and so she has hatched a plan. It is a desperate plan – it was common in the in the Ancient near East that the slaves of women who cannot bear children could be used as surrogate mothers and the child born would be counted not only as the child of the father but also the child of the wife who could not bear children. So, Sarai says to Abram, 'see the Lord has stopped me from bearing children please go to my slave girl Hagar. It may be that I can be built up through her.' The word built up is significant as it is about Sarai's status being 'healed' through any child born of this partnership. Sarai's despair is echoed around the world today by women who wish a child but cannot conceive for a variety of reasons and sometimes no reason. As more women choose not to have children it is a despair that can be lost amidst a new normal, but it is still there and causes much pain. Increasingly today, couples are turning to surrogacy when they wish children but cannot have them themselves, for whatever reason, and as we see from this story it is nothing new.

Sarai's may have been a desperate plan but it was built on traditional foundations and yet it all goes wrong. Through the years some academics have suggested that Sarai's perceived lack of faith was the reason it went wrong but that is unfair not only to Sarai but also to God! Sarai, according to the story is unaware of God's intentions at this point and the pressures are simply about providing an heir in the way every couple is pressured to ensure the continuation of the their people and the whole human race at this time in history. That the God of love we recognise and worship today should be so cruel is also difficult to accept. The narrator has used Sarai in his story depicting her plan as selfish in a similar way to the selfishness depicted in of Abram's plan to protect himself in Egypt. Just as the story shows that plan going wrong so too this plan backfires, Hagar quickly conceives and equally quickly recognises her power over Sarai. If Sarai had not given her slave as a second wife maybe things would have been different, but Sarai is trying to be seen to be fair. Hagar though recognises her raised status, she is a wife now and she is pregnant, and she quickly shows her contempt for Sarai. Disappointed and frustrated Sarai lashes out at Abram, but Abram does not hear her accusation, nor does he recognise her pain and he offers no comfort or solace, no love. He is detached not just from Sarai but also from Hagar and reminds Sarai that Hagar is still her slave to do with as she pleases. Sarai turns on Hagar, what would you do in that situation, and Hagar we are told runs away. The narrator follows Hagar into the desert, and then tells of her subsequent return and

the birth of her son, whom Abram names Ishmael. It is another fourteen long years before Sarai will find her solace.

Let us move forward now to Chapter 17, where God renames Abram and Sarai and for the remainder of the story we follow Abraham and Sarah. Sarai and Sarah are most likely from the same root and we know that Sarah means princess, some have suggested that the form Sarai has links to mockery and the change in this chapter coincides with God revealing to Abraham, although not yet Sarah, that Sarah will give him his heir. We are probably all aware of Sarah laughing when she overhears Abraham being told she will have a child but in fact Abraham also laughs when God reveals this to him. We are told that Abraham falls to the ground with laughter but God says it is true and more importantly reveals that the child will be named Isaac, meaning laughter, and that he, God, will make a covenant with Isaac. There is an irony within the story that Sarah, whose despair has been so obvious should be the one to bring laughter into the world, although as yet Sarah herself knows nothing of this.

One of the things this story reveals is the need to appreciate people. How might the story have been different if the narrator had show Abram appreciating Sarai's feelings, or Sarai and Hagar appreciating each other more. Telling someone how much you appreciate them is important, it is a major part of encouraging one another and when someone feels unappreciated it can sour relationships. Paul writing to the Corinthians is at pains to underline the need to appreciate each other's gifts and skills. Often, it is only when someone dies that we discover how much they meant to others, how much they were appreciated. What difference would it have made if the person had known this in their lifetime? The Kingdom will grow as we learn to build one another up through valuing and encouraging one another. In our current experience we have made a positive statement of appreciation for the key workers who have continued to work despite the risks they have faced – NHS staff, shop workers, the police and fire workers, rubbish collectors, pharmacists and many more. We must not forget them because there is no longer a special evening, we must continue to show our appreciation through how we treat people, how we relate to them and value them for their skills.

In oneness we are interdependent, we need one another, we all have a role to play. As Paul says, if the body were only eyes how would it hear. If we all had the same skills and gifts we would less that we are. Humility means recognising the importance of others and working together for the greater good – God's Kingdom of love. We have no conclusive proof that Abraham and Sarah were real people, and the narrator of Genesis may not be one person, in fact most academics accept that there are at least four voices interwoven in the narration, but the story, like the parables of Jesus has something important for us to discover about our humanity. The interwovenness of our lives seems central to the message, as does recognising God within our own stories. Let us keep journeying and keep looking. Amen.

Prayers

Inspired by Psalm 13

In the depths I sit abandoned to my enemies who flourish. Why do I feel abandoned when I know you are deep within and we are one? Is it because I cannot see my enemies as one with me and so the fracture of my soul prevents feeling one with you? Help me to restore my sense of oneness, to see my enemies as one with me and all creation. Love mends, fear breaks.

You invite us to choose love and live, help me to live love even when the choices of others hurt me.

Help me to be one with you, to be you, to be love.

Eternal God, ever present around and within, **may your love mend society and nurture our oneness.**

In the midst of this pandemic we have often felt separated and overwhelmed, and the people whom we have relied upon have sometimes been overwhelmed. May we continue to value and support those people in our communities whose selfless work has enabled the feeding of the hungry and healing of the sick in the midst of such strangeness.

Eternal God, ever present around and within, **may your love mend society and nurture our oneness.**

We pray for those who continue to feel lonely, may we seek new and creative ways to build relationships of love and sow seeds of hope that will overcome isolation and fear. As we move forward from lockdown and the government explores safe ways to rebuild the business community may all people continue to have respect for the safety of others and allow love to guide their actions. Eternal God, ever present around and within, **may your love mend society and nurture our oneness.** As the pandemic continues to spread to other areas of the world, some less able to withstand the threat, may we always be aware of the needs of others and continue to support those working with communities less structured and developed than our own to bring equal opportunities for every human.

Eternal God, ever present around and within, **may your love mend society and nurture our oneness.** Loving God we think of all those who long for a child but cannot conceive. May we never overlook their despair and though we may not be able to offer a solution may our love and understanding offer comfort. We think of all people who feel overlooked, and invisible within the bigger picture. May we remember to encourage one another and to positively value the gifts and skills of all people in our communities and in the wider society to which we belong, and may our encouragement bring a sense of belonging for others.

Eternal God, ever present around and within, **may your love mend society and nurture our oneness.** In the coming week may we strive to mend, build and support relationships, recognising your presence with every person and may the love we receive overflow in our words and actions as we relate to one another. In Jesus name we pray. Amen

Our offering to God.

As we continue to worship apart but together, let us pledge our commitment to sharing in the work of our church by continuing to send our offering and exploring new ways of living generously, and may we know God's blessing on all we do. Amen

Hymn God who has called us to live by your grace, (tune Slane)
brought us together in this time and space
help us to learn from each other, and share
in acting and thinking, in worship and prayer.

Scriptures and stories give shape to your call,
strangers remind us your love includes all.
Teach us to listen, with broadening mind,
for in many voices your wisdom we find.

As trust grows deeper, and we lose our fear,
passion for freedom and justice grows clear.
Give us the courage to make our dreams true,
building a place of belonging in you.

All that you give us, you call us to share,
in risk and struggle, your vision to dare.
Building and growing, and learning your ways
make us a body that lives to your praise.

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Blessing

May the blessing that is the knowledge of God, source of all being, the love of God discovered through Jesus and the inspiration of the Spirit which binds us together be with us on our journey this day and every day. Amen.