

**Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> July 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**

New every morning is the love  
our waking and uprising prove;  
through sleep and darkness safely brought  
restored to life and power and thought.

tune Tallis' Canon

New mercies each returning day,  
hover around us while we pray;  
new perils past, new sins forgiven,  
new thoughts of God, new hopes of heaven

If on our daily course our mind  
be set to hallow all we find,  
new treasures still, of countless price,  
God will provide for sacrifice.

Old friends, old scenes, will lovelier be,  
as more of heaven in each we see;  
some softening gleam of love and prayer  
shall dawn on every cross and care.

The trivial round, the common task  
will furnish all we ought to ask.  
Lord, help us, this and every day,  
to live more nearly as we pray.

JOHN KEBLE (1792-1866) altd. \*

**Prayer** (based on Psalm 119:105-112)

Eternal god, your creation guides our ways,

your love invites us beyond self and in you we find our being.

One with Christ we have committed to following the way of Jesus,  
seeking love in all things and generously sharing all that we have with others.

At times, life is hard, and we feel frail and our faith fragile

but your Spirit is all around and will fill us with hope and love when we allow ourselves to trust.

As we praise you our eyes are opened to your way and our hearts are lifted.

Every day we face new challenges and new opportunities,

when we focus on the way of Jesus, we become aware of the presence of love  
and find the courage to resist ways and opportunities which are less loving.

Eternal God in the oneness of your being our hearts sing and we feel fulfilled,

in the oneness of love our lives grow and we journey deeper, in oneness we are.

To you we turn and in you we live. Amen

The Lord's prayer

**Reading**

Genesis 21:1-14

## Thoughts

Sarah has her longed-for son, an heir for Abraham, and her joy should be complete. Yet there are some anomalies that the narrator springs on us, contra to the tradition of the time we are told it is Abraham who names the child, and we are told he is the one to circumcise Isaac, not as unusual but again a little strange. It is almost as if the narrator needs to underline the importance of Abraham at the expense of Sarah something that has been happening throughout the story. Fast forward a couple of years and we find ourselves at the celebration of Isaac's weaning. This was an immensely significant time in a child's life as very few children survived to weaning. It was a celebration that the main dangers were now passed and surely Sarah could have relaxed, but amid the celebration she is reminded that Abraham has another older son, Ishmael, the son of Hagar. Ishmael we are told is Lording it over Isaac, presumably no one has told him about the promise made to Abraham regarding Isaac, in fact no one has told Sarah this part of the story either and so what she witnesses brings real fear into her heart and as is often the case fear is expressed as anger.

With her last words in the story she bids Abraham to banish Hagar and her son, it is a cruel and tragic twist which Abraham complies with. It is perhaps the inevitable bad decision made as is often the case because Sarah is in a bad place. When life is impossibly hard, when you feel threatened, it is difficult not to make bad decisions. Sarah's life, as told in the story, has been cruel and tragic, and when that is all you have known it is too often the driving force in how you relate to others. This is why following the Jesus way is about offering love to those who may never have experienced love. By doing this we offer the chance of changing the way people choose, changing decision making from desperate to loving. Around the world there are millions of women and men, trapped in situations over which they feel they have no control, poverty, disease, injustice, terrorism, and decisions are made that simply make things worse. The message of Jesus that all are loved, all are worthy and there is nothing which can keep us from the love of God can be the key that changes everything.

## Hymn

There's a wideness in God's mercy  
like the wideness of the sea;  
there's a kindness in his justice  
which is more than liberty.

There is plentiful redemption  
in the blood that has been shed;  
there is joy for all the members  
in the sorrows of the Head.

There is grace enough for thousands  
of new worlds as great as this;  
there is room for fresh creations  
in the Lord's unfathomed bliss.

For the love of God is broader  
than the measures of our mind;  
and the heart of the Eternal  
is most wonderfully kind.

But we make his love too narrow  
by false limits of our own;  
and we magnify his strictness  
with a zeal he will not own.

If our love were but more simple  
we should take him at his word;  
and our lives would be illumined  
by the glory of the Lord.

F. W. FABER (1814-63) altd. \*

## Reading

Genesis 22

## Thoughts

This is not a story about Sarah, she is not mentioned in the biblical version, but how can we ignore her when this story involves Isaac, the laughter in her life. Sarah was very quick to protect Isaac from the threat of Ishmael but in keeping with the rest of the story it is highly unlikely that Abraham shared with her what God had asked him to do. It would not be an easy thing to share.

So, we hear how Abraham took Isaac to Moriah with the intention of building a fire and sacrificing him to God. How, at the last minute, Abraham hears a ram caught in the bushes and substitutes it for Isaac, and how Isaac runs away. It is this story which may be behind the New Testament adoration of Abraham's faith, he was prepared to do the worst a father may be asked to do. Yet, it is a story which read 'live', without the benefit of the bigger picture, leaves us with so many questions, and maybe that is the point.

We have been looking at the story from Sarah's perspective, so our first questions have to be about what happened when Abraham returned without Isaac. Remember, Sarah had no idea where they had gone, they disappeared before she arose, and although she may have asked the servants where they had gone she would not have received much information other than that they went with a donkey, two servants, and the making for a fire associated with sacrifice. Where have you been? Where is Isaac? What do you mean, you don't know? Into that rage of questions what could Abraham bring – we went to Moriah, God told me to sacrifice Isaac? DID YOU? No, I sacrificed a ram instead. So, where is Isaac? I don't know, he ran off when I released him from the fire.

Questions, questions, questions, and we must have question also – why would God ask Abraham to sacrifice Isaac? Why would God promise nations built on Abraham's descendants and then wipe out the descendant? The more I read this story in all its cruelty and tragedy, the more I read a story, I cannot be certain that Abraham and Sarah ever really existed, any more than Adam and Eve in the creation poems. However, the questioning is important. Abraham has questioned God before, why did he not question God when it came to this sacrifice? This story is set at a time when the people believed in a God who is severe and demanding, a bully almost, who bestows forgiveness and other blessings only after human sacrifice has been made. If you believed that, it would affect every aspect of life, how you worship, how you treat people, how you respond to cruelty. Imagine being the first person to challenge such a belief. This story was written down when the understanding of God was changing, when rituals were being questioned, and prophets were bringing new insights. It is a story which underlines what happens when you don't question.

Theologian, Brian McLaren, reflecting on this passage says if our assumptions are not sometimes questioned then belief in God becomes less plausible. The image of God sitting on a throne is not one that many people now accept and yet in Old Testament times it was a common image. Our understanding of God's power has evolved as our humanity has evolved. Our limited human imagery can only take us so far, and the more we seem to know about God, the more we realise we do not know. Just as the big theories of science must be open to question, our faith must be open to question if we are to grow in our discipleship and our humanity. In our story, the discovery is made that animal blood could be substituted for human blood in sacrifice. Later still, prophets would suggest that any form of sacrificial killing was unnecessary, and Micah would reveal that what God really wants is for us to walk humbly and do justice and love kindness. That is a world away from our story and yet there is an important lesson in this story – with faith it is never too late to dream. In

the film 'The Neverending Story', the land of Fantasia has been destroyed and only a single grain of sand is left, but with belief, imagination and desire the central character of the story can rebuild Fantasia, and we can build the Kingdom. We can help build a world where all are safe. Isaac does not return with Abraham, maybe he ran away after his father attempted to sacrifice him, too many children are forced to run away from situations of cruelty and neglect. In the Kingdom children will be safe, that is why safeguarding is so important in the church, we are modelling the kingdom. We are living the hope and dreaming the dream.

### **Prayers of concern and commitment**

Loving God, as we worship you together, we bring our prayers of concern and commitment. Life is strange for us all, and we are feeling our way to a new normal yet you are our one constant and with you we are able to share our worries and fears and our hopes and dreams.

We are all unsure of the future, we find it difficult to imagine what the new normal will look like, and fear is threatening our celebration of life. We are all facing decisions and yet we are aware that fear can distort our ability to make good decisions. May we rest in your presence and trust in your Spirit to guide us through these difficult days.

As church, we are a people of love and follow the way of Jesus, sharing love and hope with family friends and strangers. In our conversations with others may we encourage one another to trust in the oneness that holds us together, may we share the message of your love for all people, and build a web of worth within the fragmentation of society. May we rest in your presence and trust in your Spirit to guide our words and actions.

As a pilgrim people, you invite us to question and explore, building our faith through discovering more about our oneness in you. May we never be afraid to question and grow in our faith, learning from the past and building a living tradition which will inspire those who follow to create their own living tradition. May we value one another, as we are valued by you, and encourage one another in sharing our stories of your presence in our lives, recognising the different paths on which you lead each one of us. May we rest in your presence and trust in your Spirit to guide our journey together.

As a faithful people we share our hopes and our dreams of the Kingdom and yet at times fear can blind us and we feel we lose our way. You are always with us. When we hold on to things, afraid of change and the unknown, may your love open our eyes to the possibilities that change can bring. When we avoid change, may your love give us courage to explore new ways and a passion for new ideas. When we are afraid that all we know will disappear, may your love overcome our fear and lead us forward towards the kingdom, broadening our imagination to take in the majesty of your creation. May we rest in your presence and trust in your Spirit on the unknown paths of life.

Loving God as we have explored the story of Sarah we have been reminded of the pain of childlessness and we think of those who long for a child to love and find their longing unfulfilled. We think of all those who have lost a child and recognise the heartbreak that they carry. In our oneness our hearts cry with their pain. We are heartbroken as we think of the children forced to flee from brutal situations and cruelty and pray that they may find a safe place to recover and rebuild their lives. May we rest in your presence and trust in your Spirit to guide us to a place of healing.

Loving God, you offer us hope through our shared journeys, our shared love, and the power of our imagination in your Spirit. You call us to care for each other and so we offer you our families, friends, and our fellowships in prayer. In our caring and our sharing may we bring your kingdom closer. In our discipleship may we be fired to see a new tomorrow and resting in your presence and trusting in your Spirit may we move forward with courage.

In Jesus name. 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, you take the hidden pain  
that's buried in my mind;  
knowing you can bear the strain,  
I leave it all behind.  
I let go of what is past,  
cut the knots that bound me fast,  
reaching out so I can grasp  
the hope I find in you.

I am travelling on the way  
that you have shown to me;  
I am finding each new day  
the person I can be.  
Walking with my friends around,  
I will stand on holy ground,  
and rejoice in all I've found  
of new-born hope in you.

You have led me out of shame,  
and in your love I've grown;  
you have given me a name  
that I can call my own.  
In the name that makes me 'me',  
in the name that's yet to be,  
for the future I'm set free  
to find my hope in you.

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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.