

Genesis 21.8-21

Isaac grew and was weaned, and on the day he was weaned Abraham held a great feast. But Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking, and she said to Abraham, "Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac."

The matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son. But God said to him, "Do not be so distressed about the boy and your maidservant. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. I will make the son of the maidservant into a nation also, because he is your offspring."

Early the next morning Abraham took some food and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar. He set them on her shoulders and then sent her off with the boy. She went on her way and wandered in the desert of Beersheba.

When the water in the skin was gone, she put the boy under one of the bushes. Then she went off and sat down nearby, about a bow-shot away, for she thought, "I cannot watch the boy die." And as she sat there nearby, she began to sob.

God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid; God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation."

Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. So she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink.

God was with the boy as he grew up. He lived in the desert and became an archer. While he was living in the Desert of Paran, his mother got a wife for him from Egypt.

Luke 15.11 – 32

The Parable of the Lost Son

¹¹ Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

¹³ "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

²¹ "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

²² "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴

For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

²⁵ “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷ ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

²⁸ “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him.

²⁹ But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

³¹ “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

Reflection

I started to think about today's readings on the first Saturday of June – the day on which my Father turned 90. Unfortunately, due to the lockdown, we were not able to go and visit him – as my parents live in Somerset and are shielding because of their age and health issues.

Our reading from Genesis is from the Lectionary for today but might seem an odd choice for Father's Day and you may well be wondering why I did not change it to something else. However, I have changed the Gospel reading to the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

One of the reasons is that I kept the Genesis reading is that it takes us to one of the aspects of Fatherhood that we sometimes forget.

Abraham (or Abram as he started life) was given a promise by God – as we heard in last Sunday's Genesis reading – that he would have a son and that nations – and indeed the world – would be blessed through him. At the time, both he and Sarah (or Sarai as she started life) were of some age and Sarah was passed the age for childbearing. So, she laughed at God's prophecy. As time ticked by, and given their age, they – and Sarah in particular – took things into their own hands. Sarah gave Abraham one of her maidservants to bear him a child. That maidservant was called Hagar and the child that she bore was called Ishmael. However, it all went wrong – as it usually does when we think that we know better than God. As a result, Abraham ended up with two sons: Isaac born of Sarah; and Ishmael born of Hagar. Sarah found that she could not live with this and so she made Abraham banish Hagar and Ishmael. This, as our reading from Genesis tells us, he duly did – albeit with a heavy heart. After all, to send your son away is a hard thing to do – especially when he is not guilty of anything. However, God intervened, and Ishmael was protected by God and went on to have descendants – those of the Muslim faith. In what my daughter Abbie would delightedly call a 'plot twist', it was descendants of Ishmael who bought and then transported Isaac's son Joseph into Egypt.

When Sarah told Abraham to get rid of Hagar and Ishmael, her instruction caused Abraham a lot of pain because what she asked him to do concerned his son. Abraham was forced – by the woman who, in a sense, had caused all the trouble in the first place by not trusting God to do what he had promised – to choose between his sons and that meant sending Ishmael and his mother away.

In life, fathers – and prospective fathers – are faced with many difficult decisions though not all of them will be as hard as the choice Abraham faced. In making decisions as parents – whether we are mothers or fathers – we always try to do what is best for our child or children. Sometimes that is not easy. Some of those decisions require us to make sacrifices or take decisions that will have a negative impact on us as parents but will benefit our children. Some of those decisions will be difficult for our children to accept because saying "No" out of love and concern for their wellbeing is actually the right thing to say – even if saying "Yes" might seem easier at the time. As our children grow up, we have to learn to let our children stand on their own two feet and then sometimes stand-by helplessly as they make their own decisions. Sometimes, that results in mistakes – perhaps with their own children – because as human beings we are all capable of making wrong choices but equally there are times when we learn more from making the wrong choice rather than the right one.

We also need to acknowledge that some fathers do not make the right decisions and behave in a way that does not benefit their children. As a result, their children may be hurt physically and/or emotionally – and those scars can be long-lived. This matters a great deal and it can colour the relationship between fathers and their children and within the wider family as a whole. Some children carry the pain of not feeling a father's love from childhood for a long time and it can take a toll on them and their future relationships with others – even to the extent of making it difficult for them to accept God as their father. I do not wish or seek to trivialise this pain because it is real and can blind us to what a father truly can be. And that is understandable too.

God chooses to reveal himself to us in the Bible as the Father – the one who created us. He wants us to know that he loves each and every one of us – even though he knows that we are more than capable of making mistakes. Indeed, as the Parable of the Prodigal Son (my chosen Gospel reading for today)

shows us, even though the younger son behaved very badly, the father in that parable is longing for that son to come to his senses and return. The father loves him so much that all he wants to do is to restore his errant son – once he had recognised the errors of his behaviour. God or Father shows us that he loves us as much as the father in the Parable loved his son, because he sent his only begotten Son, Jesus, to take on human flesh, to know the love of a family and to walk amongst us to show us what love is really like. Jesus came to show us the Father that we might know him through Jesus and to love him in return. Jesus' ministry shows that God wants each of us – whether we feel that we are truly part of the Church community or on its fringes through disability, illness or some other reason – to know that Jesus understands the difficult choices that we face and the errors that we make. Jesus took all of that upon himself when he suffered on the cross – becoming sin for us. In giving up his life for us, he knew the separation from the Father that sin brings about and cried out “My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?”. That pain – excruciating as it was physically, mentally, and spiritually – cuts both ways. God the Father knows the pain of separation as well – it was not just felt by Jesus. Having given his life for us, the Father raised his son to new life, to resurrected life. But now Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father in glory interceding for you and for me so that in our decisions (difficult or not), trials and tribulations we might know the power of God at work within us when feel weak and powerless.

As our Father, God wants us to know and to enjoy the most intimate of relationships with him – that's what he made us for. Most of us enjoy good relationships with our earthly fathers but God wants us to enjoy something even better with him. Part of that comes through praying the Lord's prayer – be it together or alone. To pray “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name ...” is an important part of that relationship. To claim for ourselves the fact that God is our Father is to know that we are loved and valued to the extent that every hair on our head – even those who are short of hair-covering – and that we are clothed better than the lilies of the valley and given our daily bread by God our Father.

As we celebrate Father's Day today, let us be grateful for the love that we have known from our fathers and all that they have given us – even if some of the genes we have inherited are not always the ones that we might have chosen for ourselves. Let us also rejoice that we can know an even greater love from God our Father who gave up his son for us on the cross and wants us to know that close father-child relationship with him.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord; and the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be among you and remain with you always. Amen.

Rupert.