**Holy Covenant – Second Sunday After Pentecost – 22 June 2014**

Sarah Bachelard

Genesis 21. 8-21; Ps. 86; Romans 6. 1-11; Matthew 10. 24-39

Earlier this week, I was in Adelaide speaking at a seminar on morality and religion. I was the only theologian in a group of philosophers, and was attempting to share my understanding of the significance of resurrection for moral life and thought. At times, it sounded a bit (even to my ears) as though I was speaking Martian. The hearing I received was not unsympathetic – far from it – but I couldn't but be struck and at times unnerved by the strangeness of the story I sought to tell, and the archaic feel of the sources upon which I drew.

When we turn to the Old Testament literature, this difficulty can feel even more acute. On the one hand, if we are to take seriously the 'whole canon' of Scripture, we need some sense of how this literature might be significant for our faith and our 21st century life; on the other hand (at least it seems to me) it will not do simply to try to draw out some simplistic 'moral' of these stories, or to domesticate our reading of these strange and bewildering texts so that they slot conveniently into our understanding of the world.

Over the next few weeks, the lectionary gives us a selection of episodes from Genesis, the first book of the Bible. And I would like to have a go with you at 'reading' Genesis, with these commitments in mind. I am interested in learning in the first instance simply to 'hear' these texts, to attend to their subtlety and poetry, to see where they may lead, the questions they pose, and what they open us to.

In the Book of Genesis, Chapters 1-11 form the Primeval History which includes the Creation and Flood stories and the Tower of Babel, while Chapters 12-50 are called 'the Patriarchal Tales'.[1] Despite being composed from many different literary units, the two parts are related – the way a mediaeval cathedral built over many centuries by many hands still constitutes a thematic whole. Scholar Robert

[1] Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1996), xliii.

Alter says the first eleven chapters concern universal history and the story then moves on to the beginnings of the Israelite nation, though 'the national focus of the narrative is given moral depth because the universal perspective … is never really forgotten'.[2] On the other hand, this 'universal perspective' is now worked out in the very mundane and familial terms of tent and sheepfold, through the tensions and sometimes deadly strife between warring brothers, fathers, sons and wives.

And here we come to our reading, which is part of the story of the first patriarch, Abraham, and the complex relationships between him, his wife Sarah and her slave Hagar. This isn't the first time this three-some has appeared in Genesis. In Chapter 16, the childless Sarai had said to Abram that he should 'come to bed with my slave girl [Hagar]. Perhaps I shall be built up through her"'. Hagar the slave is given over as a kind of surrogate mother, to beget a child for Sarai and her husband, a 'well attested' [practice] in the ancient Near East although, as Alter says, 'living with the human consequences of the institution could be quite another matter'.[3]

And in fact, when Hagar conceives a child she looks down on Sarai and Sarai knows it ('I became slight in her eyes'), and she harasses her so that she runs away into the wilderness. In this first experience of desert exile, Hagar is found by the Lord's messenger by a spring of water, who promises that she will bear a son called Ishmael, whose name means 'God has heard', for the Lord has heeded (heard) her suffering. She in her turn 'called the name of the Lord who had addressed her, "El-roi"' – which means 'God who sees me' and so became the first theologian – a female no less – because she is the first person in the Bible to name God. The dynamics of hearing and seeing, being heard and being seen, are integrally part of the encounter between God and Hagar.

Fast forward then to chapter 21 where finally, in her extreme old age, Sarah has borne a son of her own, Isaac whose name in Hebrew, means 'he who laughs'.

---

[2] Alter, *Genesis*, xliv.
[3] Alter, *Genesis*, 67.

Sarah says, according to the NRSV: 'God has brought laughter for me: everyone who hears will laugh **with** me'. But the prepositions are ambiguous in the Hebrew, and it could also be translated: 'Laughter has God made me, whoever hears will laugh **at** me'.[4] Now this is interesting: the Hebrew word for laughter 'Tsehoq', the name of the child Isaac, also means mockery and so there is ambiguity in Sarah's response – there may be laughter in the sense of triumphant joy at finally bearing a son, but there may also be the laughter of mockery somehow at her expense – the absurdity of an nonagenarian with a child. Remember that earlier in the story Sarah has pretty much laughed in God's face when she had been promised a child in her old age.

Well, Isaac grows and is weaned and on that day of celebration, Sarah sees Ishmael '*playing* with her son Isaac'; but in the Hebrew it is the same word, 'laughing'. Was he playfully laughing with or scornfully laughing at? Again the text is open to interpretation, but there's nothing ambiguous about Sarah's reaction. She perceives a threat – Ishmael mocking or even worse presuming to be a child of laughter (that is, he who laughs), taking the Isaac out of Isaac we might say, presuming to take Isaac's place. Her outrage is triggered; her reaction a demand that Abraham drive Ishmael and Hagar away – another instance of suffering being caused in the world more by people taking offence than by giving it. So Hagar is cast out and finds herself once more in the wilderness, soon out of water and fearing to watch her son die. At the end of her resources, she cries out to God who (as God often does in these Genesis stories) asks her a question: 'What troubles you Hagar?' and then says: as God so often does: 'Do not be afraid'. And suddenly there is provision and the way to a new future.

If we were looking to draw a quick 'moral' from this story, it would probably pick up on this theme of God's provision and so the encouragement to trust no matter how dire the circumstances appear – and I don't think that would be entirely wrong. But it's also much richer than that. Hagar is a scapegoat. She is a slave who

[4] Alter, *Genesis*, 97.

had no choice but to bear a child for Abraham and Sarah and who now, because of the threat posed by that very child, is cast out and left to die. At the end of the scene she is still a scapegoat, still cast out, and there is no return in view. God does not rescue Hagar and Ishmael from marginalisation – but that does not mean they have no role or future – and it is God who insists this is so. God has a place and way of being for them, on the edges of the story of Israel. It is a remarkable feature of Hebrew Scripture that God is portrayed as one who does not belong exclusively to or care exclusively for the Hebrew people, the children of Abraham through Isaac, but hears the cry, sees the plight and is actively involved in the lives and destinies of other parts of the human family.

As for what it is to be found by God – in this story it is about seeing and being seen, and hearing and being heard, and it all happens for Hagar in the wilderness – in the place of desolation. As she sits in despair and weeps, 'the distance of a bowshot' from her child, she has isolated herself from Ishmael and her pain. Blinded by tears, it seems all she can see is the life and security she has lost. It is God who calls her back from isolation and the avoidance of her pain: 'Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand', and who opens her to see life and possibility where before she had seen nothing but death: 'God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water'.

The Old Testament narratives have no single point of view – and we recognise our shared humanity with each one of these characters. We share Sarah's sensitivity to being scorned, and her preparedness to sacrifice another in order to secure her own future; Abraham's going along with something that doesn't feel quite right, and his feeble attempt to mitigate the consequences; Hagar's being cast out, losing what seemed to be her only way of life, and having to discover where new life is to be sourced in the wilderness. None are wholly admirable; all are humanly recognisable. And in and through it all, is the never wholly pin-downable presence and action of God, the interweaving of the human and divine story in ways that preclude tidy moral patterns or clear ascriptions of agency, but are somehow connected to deeper

listening and sight, and the unfolding of a larger purpose for each one. It is in these lives that we recognise and read our own afresh, and it is into this ambivalent, messy, heart-breaking, eye-opening story that, in Christ, we too are invited to participate and so play our humble, messy and ambiguous part in the reconciliation of all things.