

Reflection on 14 June 2020

David Fotheringham,
High Street Uniting Church Frankston

Bible readings (read these first): Genesis 21: 8-21
 Psalm 86
 Matthew 10: 24-31

This is the second week of using the Revised Common Lectionary as the index for our Bible Readings, and when I first looked at the readings I was filled with horror.

Starting at the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible reading, we have Abraham turning out a slave woman, along with the son that he had by her (admittedly at his wife's suggestion). The reading says nothing specific about the colour of her skin (or of Abraham's, for that matter) but even so, on the back of important protesting and with issues around slavery and the valuing of lives, the reading has a whole lot of issues going on.

So I looked at the gospel reading. In a sense it seems less threatening – Jesus talks about how our lives are “worth more than sparrows, so do not be afraid.” But then, when you look at the context, it's all about not being afraid *even when there are people who object, maybe violently, to your proclamation of the Good News of Jesus*. It's one of those cases when you get told “do not be afraid”, and your first reaction is to worry about what you're not supposed to be afraid of.

So, this having been a big week (with two funerals among other things), I turned to the Psalm, hoping for something more gentle. And it kind of is. And, actually, it turn out to be helpful in making some sense of those other two readings. Sometimes hearing different parts of Scripture speak to each other can help to illuminate God's voice *to us* in *our* context.

So we've read the Psalm together. And I just want to draw three key movements out of it. They are the prayers to hear me, to teach me, and to keep me.

Apparently the Psalmist has their life under threat – the Psalm is attributed to David, and there were certainly times when *his* life *was* under threat, especially when the increasingly paranoid Saul was king. In those days David spent a lot of time as an outcast, sent out into the wilderness, a refugee, seeking safety. And so this prayer.

The prayer – the Psalm - celebrates that God is gracious and does marvellous things and acknowledges that God is full of steadfast love; and on that basis the Psalmist prays to be heard, in the day of trouble. Recognising God's character there is then prayer to continue to learn God's way and not be side-tracked into dangerous paths that would erode the Psalmists character and life. *As we celebrated Ray's funeral two days ago, reference was made to how his character was such a positive example when so many people in business*

getting to his sort of position behave so badly. The Psalmist may be tempted down darker paths, but prays to learn God's way with an undivided heart; it is a good prayer.

And finally the Psalm is a prayer to be kept, to be held in God's grace, and know God's comfort and strength in the midst of weakness and need.

If this was written by David when he was an outcast, it's not hard to see parallels with the cry of Hagar in the wilderness - the cries that God indeed hears. God hears the cry of the outcast slave, the refugee.

Perhaps, with recent events and protests, our awareness of the cry of hurt of the dispossessed and disenfranchised is ringing in our own ears. The cries which reach out not only to God, but to God in us; to us, in God.

In the day of trouble they call, they ask that we hear, that we answer. When we pray with the Psalm for God to 'teach us your way' will we learn from the way God responded to Hagar?

When Jesus is teaching his disciples his way, he teaches them to expect opposition. He is teaching them that when they respond to the human cry, the human need for Good News which is all about hope and justice and love, proclaiming God's kingdom of grace and hope, they - we - may upset the status quo.

We are loved, so much more than so many sparrows; reflecting that love for others may mean challenging the status quo, protesting for change, encouraging leaders to care, reaching beyond our comfort zones.

This week I will have a little time with the Spiritual Formation Group that I've been a part of, this year. We'd originally been aiming for a week in Queensland, but now it's more like a day on zoom. Had we been together physically we would probably have set aside some time for stillness and solitude, some retreat time with God, observing that was valued by Jesus who is worth learning from. But a lot of our group have had oodles of solitude under the lock-down. So what we can also learn from Jesus is engagement and activity for healing, for reconciliation, and restoring people to community.

For introverts who are relatively good at solitude, making time to respond to the world's needs and the needs of the local community deepen prayer; just as for extroverts who are relatively good activists making time for silence, introspection and prayer means having more to give to the world with a grounded and vibrant soul.ⁱ

Our readings today take us into the relative 'unsafety' of the experience of refugees and of disciples who challenge the status quo. But the third movement in the Psalm is the prayer that in that we may be kept by God.

We are not greater than our master and teacher, Jesus, and he teaches that within any of these challenges we can still stop to breathe.

Because we don't do any of this alone. It is God who keeps us. And we are more important to God even than the sparrows. So, in the assurance of God's steadfast love may God hear our cries, teach us God's ways, and keep us in faith, hope and love.

Amen.

ⁱ See Aaron Niequist, "The Eternal Current", chapter 9.