Sermon 21st June 2020 Genesis 21.8-21 Romans 6.1b-11 Matthew 10.24-39

I sometims hear the phrase, families are so much more complicated than they used to be. And I know what people mean but I’m never sure how true it really was. It certainly wasn’t true in Abraham’s time. As you may remember, God had promised that Abraham would be the father of a great nation. But he and his wife Sarah had reached a great age and had no children of their own. Sarah had offered her Egyptian maid Hagar to Abraham and she had borne him a son Ishmael but after Ishmael was born, Hagar grew proud and Sarah grew jealous. Miraculously, Sarah then gave birth to a son, Isaac. He was the legitimate heir but was younger than his half brother and Sarah decided to get rid of Hagar and Ishmael. Not surprisingly, Abraham was upset about this. But God told him to do what Sarah wanted. Isaac was to be his heir. So he sent Hagar out into the desert. When their water ran out, Hagar waited for her son to die. But God heard her crying and sent help. And Hagar and Ishmael survived. And Ishmael became the father of the Arab nation. And this story of domestic conflict continues to have an impact on the Middle East today.

Hopefully, none of us are having to deal with issues quite like that in lockdown but for some, spending time at home with our nearest and dearest will have had its challenges. On the other hand, those of us who are living alone might be glad of a bit of family drama. This reading from Genesis has some echoes in our Gospel. In biblical times, family was everything. But Jesus warned those who followed him that doing so would bring them into conflict with their blood relations. The purposes of God are not advanced without upheaval, change and sometimes pain.

Hagar has been highlighted by some theologians as a victim of racism, slavery and sexual exploitation. Her story raises issues that we are still dealing with today. The death of George Floyd and the disproportionate impact of Covid on BAME people have led to the Black Lives Matter demonstrations around the world. Issues that have lain neglected and hidden are now coming to the fore. The truth is sometimes painful and unsettling but it sets us free and will come out eventually. As Jesus says, nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What he says in the dark, we are to tell in the light; and what we hear whispered we are to proclaim from the housetops.

In some ways it feels as if we have morphed from a very long Lent into a season of Advent. A time of waiting and expectation. Of preparation for something new. In an ordinary Advent we know what is coming. The birth of the Christchild. And we have little time to observe it with all the carol services and festivities. And we tend to pay lip service to the rather apocalyptic readings that accompany the season. The warnings of judgement and the end times. But today we have one of those readings in our Gospel and it resonates in a way that it probably wouldn’t in December. Today we are not preparing for the birth of a child but for the birth of a new world. With different ways of living and different values and priorities. Birth is never easy. It involves pain and change. But out of is something new comes.

In this time of waiting and change, two stories have stood out for me this week. Signs of hope. Signs perhaps, of the new world that is coming into being. The first was the rescue by Patrick Hutchinson, a Black Lives Matter protester, of a far right activist. When the two sides met, the far right protester got cut off from the other people he was with and was in real danger of being beaten to death. Patrick waded into the melee, scooped the man up and carried him to safety. It was a modern retelling of the story of the good Samaritan. Where the good neighbour is not always the person we expect.

The second sign of hope was the action the footballer, Marcus Rashford. He used his own experience growing up in a big family on little money to highlight the need for free school meals to continue over the summer. And he was successful in persuading the government to change its mind. Demand for foodbanks is already at an all time high and with the increases in unemployment that is only going to get worse. So it is important that our poorest children don’t go hungry. But foodbanks and free school meals are really only sticking plasters. In the new world that is coming into being we need to address the longstanding inequalities that exist in society.

The world is changing. And that may be a cause of anxiety. Some of that change will be hard. But we are people of hope. People on a journey. And Jesus tells us not to be fearful. We are called to be open and expectant. And alive to the new things that God is doing through and around us. Amen.