

SLAVERY AND SCRIPTURE

The story in Genesis we heard is one of the most moving in all of the Old Testament.

THE STORY SO FAR ...

Let me recap the situation for you –

Abraham and Sarah are faithful to God and have been promised descendants by God, but have no children.

So in order to help bring about the fulfilment of God's promise and continue his line, Abraham takes one of his slaves as a second wife, Hagar, and to her Ismael is born.

A few years later, in her old age, Sarah miraculously conceives, and Isaac is born.

This is where today's story picks up,
And it is in this context that we hear Sarah's harsh words:

*'Cast out this slave woman with her son;
for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac'*

In her anger and bitterness at years of humiliation, Sarah can't even bring herself to say their names, and although Abraham shows tenderness towards Hagar and Ismail, by sending them into the desert he is also sending them to their death.

It is a story of cruelty towards the vulnerable
And the anguish they experience as a result
I find myself deeply moved by the description of Hagar casting her child under a bush, and walking away because she can't bear to watch him die.

SLAVERY IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

But of course, the thing that stands out is the issue of **slavery**,
Which is much in the news at the moment.

Hagar is a slave,
and her son Ismail is a slave by virtue of his birth.

What are we to make of this?

The first thing to say is that slavery was an integral part of the ancient world.
an accepted reality and part of life.

It's really hard for us to imagine a world, in which there was no concept of
human rights,
no sense that everyone should have a right to be the person they want to be,
and do the things they want to do,
but we have to try, because it's the way the world was for thousands of years.
This isn't to *excuse* it, but it is to try and *understand* it on its own terms,
in order to make some kind of sense of the past,
for they were people like us,
and we cannot condemn them all as wicked just like that.

In the ancient world,
people were enslaved for all sorts of reasons
and there were different kinds of slavery:
from captured political prisoners undertaking hard labour
to respected domestic servants.
Some born into slavery,
and some who sold themselves in order to survive.
So slavery can mean many different things,
and existed in different places in different ways.
For the most part,
you didn't have to be aristocratic or very wealthy to own slaves,
Even someone of modest means might have one or two slaves.
But in all cases it meant an individual giving up their own will to carry out the
will of another.

What does this story in Genesis tell us about slavery and God?

Ismail's name means '*God will hear*'.
And that tells us something important.
God hears the cry of the exploited and the oppressed,
in this case, Hagar and Ismail,
and he sends them a message of comfort.
But God doesn't just send comforting words,
He gives them the means to live,
And gives them the means not only to survive but thrive.
'*God was with the boy*' it says.
God is with the exploited,
And lives that appeared to be hopeless and at an end,
Receive dignity and a future worth having.

JESUS, THE NEW TESTAMENT AND SLAVERY

This is the place from which Jesus begins
Slavery might be accepted as a reality,
But as a Jew,
Jesus was aware that the people of Israel had themselves been slaves in Egypt
and they had a collective memory of what it was like.
So the Jewish scriptures moderate slavery
with repeated reminders to treat slaves kindly and well.
As limited as this sounds,
it made slavery *a moral issue*
And this was the beginning of a change.

When Jesus uses the imagery and language of slavery in his parables
He isn't condoning slavery.
In Christ, God came to us in time and to a particular culture,
he engaged with that culture as it existed
To prepare the way for the end of slavery.

This was also true of the first Christians,
Some of whom owned slaves themselves,

In Galatians, when Paul famously says that there is *'neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female'*, he and all of the first Christians were still working out what this meant in practice.

They wrestled with the question of the extent to which this spiritual equality should be manifested in the life of the Church and in the wider world.

In several places, Christian slaves are told to obey their masters in order to receive a future reward – which was perhaps good advice when there was nothing else they could do about it.

Evidence suggests that many slaves were attracted to the Christian faith.

This was because,

they saw the same hope for them

that was given to Hagar and Ismail all those years ago,

but now

this hope was more real and tangible than ever before

in the Good News of Jesus Christ.

This was the Christ who (as Colossians says) had *'taken on the form of a slave'*

They could see the love of God for them as individuals,

capable of human dignity and eternal salvation.

The great and fundamental change that Christianity brought about was in the understanding of the human person.

God's love for each and every person, their special and personal dignity, ultimately make slavery not just a moral issue but a moral impossibility.

This is something so big and so radical

that its application is an unfolding truth over time.

Christian societies,

and even the Church itself have failed to always grasp its full meaning

- and for this Christians, as much as anyone else must repent.

Yet it is this Christian insight into the right of each person to freedom and dignity that lies behind the modern concept of human rights.

SLAVERY IN OUR OWN TIME

Because of this,
We can never be complacent.
The Gospels comes to us afresh in every generation
challenging us again and again,
and if we think there no slaves to set free today
Then we are very much mistaken;
from those who trafficked and exploited all over the world,
To those are enslaved by debt and circumstance
And live in our own country,
whose choices in life are taken away
even from birth.

As today we agonise over the sins of past slavery,
We would do just as well consider
what forms of slavery we accept as a normal today.
We may have made some progress,
But we are no more perfect than at any other time
and if we think we *are* then we deceive ourselves.

The challenge of the Gospel is to always listen to the cry of the marginalised and
the oppressed, the enslaved and the exploited,
And to give to them,
as God gave to Hagar and Ismail,
The right to freedom in the present
and a future filled with hope.