

A Home in the Wilderness

Sermon preached at Pusey House on the Fourth Sunday of Lent 2015 (Mothering Sunday) by the Principal, the Reverend Dr George D Westhaver

Anyone arriving in chapel this morning would see quite quickly that this Sunday has some special significance. One does not need to be an expert in liturgical colours to see that the mid-Lent pink stands out. But what is the message? Perhaps you will not be surprised to know that the residents of PH disagree over this. For some, the appearance of the Rose vestments for first time in a couple of years is a source of celebration, while another view was expressed in coining of yet another name for this Sunday – not mid-Lent Sunday, not Mothering Sunday, not even Refreshment Sunday, but rather ‘My Little Pony Sunday’. In a Church world where liturgy has been named after stories of Dr Seuss – ‘God, we have wronged you / And we need to say boo-hoo’ – in this world, ‘My Little Pony Sunday’ may be adopted as another way to make the church more relevant to a forgotten or neglected part of the population. Perhaps it will catch on. For today, I will focus instead on two other names for this Sunday – Refreshment Sunday and mid-Lent Sunday. Looking at lessons, propose to explore origin of these titles and to consider why they still matter for us.

Four weeks ago, we heard our Lord address the Church-yet to be born in

the person of 12 apostles, and at the same time to address us directly: ***Behold we go up to Jerusalem, and all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of Man shall be accomplished.***

That disciples did not understand what he told them about what would happen at Jerusalem – And they understood none of these things – and so we were warned that in some way we too share in that lack of understanding. The way to Jerusalem, the way which is also the healing of our eyesight and the perfection of our loves, takes us first into the wilderness. We are, with our Blessed Lord, led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted. These past weeks, we have considered different forms the struggle takes for us, to consider how the life of Christ grows in us to shape us. The disciplines of Lent – prayer, fasting, acts of love, and meditation on God’s holy word – help to shape the wilderness and help us to see what it means to be tempted by the devil.

Today, we find ourselves with another crowd. Our Gospel tells us that ***the passover, a feast of the Jews, was nigh.*** This is true for us in at least two ways. First, the Great Passover, the celebration of our Lord’s Passion and Resurrection, is now only three weeks away. And, in a much nearer way, we are today invited once again to feed on the Passover lamb, to make Christ’s sacrifice our food and our drink in the sacrament of the Holy Communion of our Lord’s body and Blood. In the same way, we are invited to see ourselves in the wilderness with the crowd who comes to Christ, looking for both his teaching, and for his healing intervention in their lives. Like them, we know ourselves to be a long way away from a

place of rest, and in need of refreshment and sustenance. This wilderness takes many forms – the spiritual wilderness of Lent is a picture of different kinds of barren-ness or struggle which we face and live with. The Gospel promise that our Lord is the one who sustains us in the different kinds of wilderness of this life, sustains us both with the Word which proceeds from mouth of God and with the bread of life, this is one of reasons which this Sunday is called refreshment Sunday.

To appreciate the promise of Refreshment, and to recognize the particular temptations that may keep us away from enjoying it, we are once again invited to spend some time with St Paul. This is a special challenge today, because the reading from Galatians chapter 4 is not an easy one for modern ears. Even though it gives us the title of Mothering Sunday in the phrase *Jerusalem which is above is free; which is the mother of us all*, the passage as a whole has been judged so difficult or so offensive that it is usually chopped up or simply excluded from contemporary lectionaries. Perversely perhaps, both of the reasons make it seem particularly interesting to me, so I would like to spend some time looking at it more closely to see if can discover some of the treasure which is buried there.

The epistle points us to one of the messier parts of patriarchal family history. The Lord promised Abraham that he would be the father of many nations and peoples. However, Sarah was unable to have children. So, following the customs of their day, Sarah encouraged Abraham to take

their servant Hagar as a concubine. Hagar became pregnant, and then she looked with contempt upon Sarah¹ because of her barrenness. Sarah responded by treating her harshly and Hagar ran away. However, Hagar returned and gave birth to a son named Ishmael. However, it turns out that Abraham and Sarah's solution was not God's solution. Instead of Ishmael becoming Abraham's heir, 3 angels renew the Lord's promise that Abraham would become the father of many nations through the child he would have with Sarah. In the course of time, Sarah becomes pregnant even though she is well past the years of child-bearing. Isaac, the son of the promise, is born. Then things become even more difficult. There is tension between Isaac and Ishmael. In the AV translation of a difficult passage, one reads that Ishmael mocked Isaac (Genesis 21.9). It is a difficult passage because it has been read to mean that Ishmael played with Isaac, or that he assaulted Isaac, that he laughed with him, or at him. Sarah's reaction shows that she at least saw Ishmael mocking or persecuting her son Isaac. So, we have the words of Sarah repeated by St Paul: *Cast out the bond-woman and her son; for the son of the bond-woman shall not be heir with the son of the free-woman.*

The way that Hagar and Ishmael are treated by Sarah and Abraham is one of the reasons which passage from Galatians often excluded from contempt cycles of readings. However, important to see two things – the Scriptural witness suggests that Hagar (Genesis 16.4) and Ishmael were

¹ Gen 16.4, RSV, 'despised' AV

responsible in different ways for their being sent way. One could challenge that, but only by re-writing biblical accounts. Secondly, whoever is responsible, Genesis chapter Twenty One goes on to describe the Lord's care for Hagar and Ishmael, and the promises made to them both that Ishmael also will be the father of a great nation.

The very least one can say about this passage is that we see that God's mercy, power, and guiding hand can be seen in the most messy family histories, and that must be something for which people of all ages may be grateful. God's love and care is not dependent on our being part of successful families – thank God for that.

The second reason story excluded is not for what happened in the history, but for how St Paul interpreted the history: *Which things are an allegory*. He tells us that in addition to what we understand in the history, the story of Hagar and Sarah has another meaning for us. And it is this 'other' or allegorical meaning that is the more important part for us. The background here is important also. St Paul is writing to the Galatians, a group of Gentiles, non-Jews, who have become Christians. However, it appears that some were telling the Gentiles that to be real Christians, they had to follow a rigid view of the Jewish law, including being circumcised. It may be the case that this group was telling the Gentile Christians that only followers of the law could be children of Abraham.² Paul responds to this conflict by trying to show what was at stake, for them and for us. He argues that

² This is N T Wright's view, see *Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians*, pp 56-60.

in the story of Hagar and Sarah, God reveals what it means to be a follower of laws turned into customs. Hagar and Sarah, says Paul, represent two covenants, the Old Covenant, and the New. Hagar is from Arabia, and so she is a picture of the Old Covenant which the people of Israel received in Arabia when Moses was given the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. Paul's opponents claim authority from Jerusalem, but this is the Jerusalem of Paul's day which is a place where the people of Israel are in slavery in two kinds of ways – they are slaves because some insist that they should follow even those laws which God himself has abolished, and they are slaves because they live under the authority of the Romans: *For this Agar is mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children.*

You can perhaps see now the second reason why the passage is not very popular these days – it is viewed as contributing to an anti-Jewish hostility among Christians. It may be that the text could be warped in this way, but then so can just about every part of the Christian message. There is no getting away from the claim that is central to Gospel promise, that all people, children of Abraham, children of Ishmael, and the whole Gentile world need Christ. St Paul is focussing here on what the law cannot do. It is a school-master, a custodian, until Christ came. But the school master is not the thing itself. The law served as an important guide, but it did not give the people of Israel the freedom which God intended to give them in

Christ.³ Until this happened, there would be no real solution to the dilemma that St Paul describes in Romans and which we recognize all too well: *'the good that I would, I do not, and the evil that I would not, that I do'*. St Paul tries to show the Christians in Galatia that the problems they are facing cannot be fixed by the kind of control which following a set of rules may appear to give us, either as individuals or as a society.

But there is still a worst kind of problem which St Paul thinks is revealed in the allegory of Hagar and Sarah. Ishmael is born according to the natural course of things. Indeed, he was born when Abraham and Sarah tried to do in their own way what God had promised. To say that Ishmael is the son of the bondwomen is to say that he represents the kind of life whereby all we have and can be is what we are given when we are born. The problem is not with nature or the normal way of things, but when a people claim that what we received by nature is the most fundamental part of who we are. Being born into a particular family gives us a certain nationality, an ethnic identity, a cultural and linguistic identity. It will probably mean that we have more or less social status and power. We may see these things as the most important things about ourselves or our society. For some, going to a certain kind of school has a kind of absolute importance, but it's just as possible that not going to a certain kind of school can be made a badge of identity; having a certain kind of accent, or not having it. St

³ the Messiah come to lead a new exodus from the slavery of all the diminishes life to a new promised land

Paul is highlighting not only a problem between Jews and gentiles, but a more fundamental one. He is arguing that the things which we have by nature, whatever that nature is, whether it is that of a first century Jew or a Twenty-First Century British person, is not the most important thing. These things may be reasons for gratitude and thanksgiving, but they can never be the reason for adopting an attitude of superiority over another group. When we do that, we are acting like slaves who can never have more than what we can give ourselves. That's the worst kind of slavery. That may seem attractive if one is particularly rich and powerful, but we don't need much imagination or knowledge of history to see the kind of slavery that lurks there. The most important thing is not what we can claim by ethnic, cultural, or even religious identity, but what God accomplishes by his promise. Isaac is the children of the promise – the identity which he has from God, an identity which expresses God's gift rather than a primarily human action or solution, this is the most fundamental.

And so all of this takes us to the identity which St Paul wants the Gentiles to embrace, and which we here today are invited to see for our own:

But Jerusalem which is above is free; which is the mother of us all. For it is written, Rejoice, thou barren that bearest not; break forth and cry, thou that travailest not: for the desolate hath many more children than she which hath an husband.

Jerusalem is here compared to Sarah. She is the mother who was barren but who, when Christ came and died and gave himself for her, became the

fruitful bride which is the New Jerusalem, the Church.⁴ This Jerusalem is not the present Jerusalem, nor indeed is it any earthly city, it is not even first any particular institutional expression of this heavenly reality on earth, rather it is first what St Paul calls the ‘Jerusalem which is above’. The ‘Jerusalem which is above’ is the name given by the new society formed by union with Christ. The churches of which we are members are earthly outposts of his heavenly city. It is not a natural city, it is not defined by ethnicity or language, or culture, it is formed by the promise which is fulfilled in Christ. For St Paul, the special place that Jerusalem has in the Old Covenant is meant to help us to appreciate the identity and reality of the heavenly city which is not defined by place or time first, but by a relationship with the risen and ascended Christ. According to this logic, all the joy which King David had when he was finally able to come up to Jerusalem, the city which God made to be a place of hard-earned peace and prosperity, or the joy which the exiles had when they returned to Jerusalem with Ezra to rebuild the temple, becomes a picture for us of the joy in which we are invited to share when we come to the worship Christ, sat on the holy mountain and surrounded by his disciples in the Gospel reading for today, a picture of the Church, the city built on a hill:

I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the LORD. Our feet shall stand within thy gates, O Jerusalem. Ps 122.1-2

The joy which is evoked in this psalm is the joy which we are invite to

⁴ Eph 5.24-26

share. But to do so involves us in a kind of struggle and a choice. The primary struggle and choice are those which Christ has endured and made on our behalf. And yet these must become our own also. St Paul said that there is a message in what he calls Ishmael's persecution of Isaac. This is a picture of a spiritual conflict which continues. Where will we find and chose our identity? This is a very practical question. Some scholars of the wars of the past century argue that the Western societies will never chose to go to war because it would damage our economic prosperity. That is not mean to be an apology for war, but if the maintenance of a certain kind of standard of living really is the most important thing to us, then we are vulnerable to the worst kinds of slavery: *O that we had died in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh pots, and when we did eat bread to the full.* Christ offers both a future which the world cannot give, possibilities and a future which is his gift, in the same way he offers a kind of refreshment and strength that the world cannot give. But is this what we want for ourselves? Is the weakness of the Saviour, the weakness of the sacraments, as appealing as the appeal to raw power? Even as we are invited to be refreshed in the wilderness, we are confronted with this choice. The struggles of Lent are not left entirely behind us.

I conclude with a brief comment on the motet which you will hear sung after communion. It tells of the life of the daughter of Jephthah, who appears to have suffered and died because of a rash oath made by her father, a terrible decision which he bitterly regretted. However Jephthah does not simply suffer as a helpless victim. Rather, the account in the book

of Judges presents her as dying willingly out of love and in hope. For this reason, she has become a picture of the love of Christ, a love which does not only endure the ravages of sin, but which in the freedom of divine love, makes those ravages the fertile garden of new life, water and manna in the wilderness:

Whence shall we buy bread, that these may eat?

Jerusalem which is above is free; which is the mother of us all,