

## WHERE IS GOD TO BE FOUND?<sup>1</sup>

**A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh in St James' Church,  
King Street, Sydney, on the Second Sunday after Pentecost, 18 June 2017**

This morning's reading from *Genesis* unexpectedly plunges us into the dark underside of patriarchal society in about 2,000 BC. The story goes like this. Abraham and his wife Sarah had no children. The reason for this was, they believed, that Sarah was barren. We do not use the term "barren" as a description of infertility today, but its use here tells us something about how these ancient peoples understood the process of conception. We could describe their view quite well as the "agricultural theory" of human reproduction. They believed that the woman played no genetic role at all in the conception of children. Rather, the woman was like a field in which the man planted his seed. The woman nurtured the seed as it grew and ensured that the child was protected and ultimately born. They saw the process as just the same as that of planting wheat or corn. The sower spreads the seed and the soil in the field then nurtures it. The field, however, plays no part in determining what kind of plant grows. That all depends on the seed. Quite a lot of biblical history becomes clearer when we understand this theory.<sup>2</sup>

This helps us to understand why Sarah would be so ashamed at her barrenness and how she tried solve the problem it presented.<sup>3</sup> She was ashamed because she was, as a wife, as useless as a piece of unproductive ground. Why should anyone want to own such a thing? She had, however, an Egyptian slave girl called Hagar. She told Abraham to conceive a son by Hagar. After all, the child was Abraham's alone and would be just the same whether born through Sarah or Hagar. In addition, Sarah owned Hagar and Abraham owned them both. The field in which Abraham was to plant his seed was both his and Sarah's and the problem would be solved. Abraham would have his son through Sarah's cooperation. Everything did not go exactly as planned. Hagar did become pregnant. She realised, however, that her fertility put her above her mistress and she began to be insubordinate to Sarah. In retaliation, Sarah began to mistreat her to such an extent that Hagar ran away. A messenger from God found her by a spring and told her to return, which she did and her son, Ishmael, was safely born.

Subsequently, following the event described in this morning's reading, Sarah also had a son, Isaac. Being now no longer required, Hagar and Ishmael were sent away after Isaac was weaned. This almost led to the death of Ishmael. God again intervened through a messenger

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<sup>1</sup> Readings: Genesis 18:1-15; Psalm 116:1-2, 11-18; Romans 5:1-11; Matthew 9:35-10:8

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the custom of levirate marriage in which a man would bear children to his dead brother by impregnating the widow. Deuteronomy 25:5-10: When brothers reside together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband's brother shall go in to her, taking her in marriage, and performing the duty of a husband's brother to her, and the firstborn whom she bears shall succeed to the name of the deceased brother, so that his name may not be blotted out of Israel. But if the man has no desire to marry his brother's widow, then his brother's widow shall go up to the elders at the gate and say, "My husband's brother refuses to perpetuate his brother's name in Israel; he will not perform the duty of a husband's brother to me." Then the elders of his town shall summon him and speak to him. If he persists, saying, "I have no desire to marry her," then his brother's wife shall go up to him in the presence of the elders, pull his sandal off his foot, spit in his face, and declare, "This is what is done to the man who does not build up his brother's house." 10 Throughout Israel his family shall be known as "the house of him whose sandal was pulled off."

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 16

and Ishmael survived to adulthood. The rejected Ishmael could not have gone too far, however, since he reappears at Abraham's burial.<sup>4</sup>

By modern standards, this is a story of considerable concern. It looks to us like sexual abuse, violence and child neglect. You could imagine the headlines in the *Daily Telegraph*: 'YOUNG SERVANT GIRL EXPLOITED BY CHILDLESS COUPLE.' 'SPURNED WIFE ASSAULTS HUSBAND'S PREGNANT LIVE-IN MISTRESS.' 'COMMUNITY LEADER REJECTS LOVE-CHILD.' Those who look to history, and particularly to the Bible, for models of family life are frequently surprised by what they discover. At the very least we should be warned about reading back into the past what we would like to find there.

The lesson that we might learn from this otherwise sorry story is something quite different from family relationships and child rearing. It has to do with our understanding about how God acts. What might seem surprising about this story to a modern reader is the way in which God seems to be playing a very fast game indeed. God promises that Abraham will be the father of a great nation, but leaves him with an infertile wife. When Abraham conceives a son, God ensures that the mother is not cast out and that the child is kept safe. Later, however, God ensures that Sarah has a son, an event that results in the casting out of the first son whom God had previously gone to such lengths to save. God intervenes to ensure that the first son also lives and becomes the originator of a nation of his own. Today's Arabs claim to be descended from him, which is how Islam comes to be included as one of the three Abrahamic religions.

We might well ask what God is up to here. There seems to be no clear divine plan, or, if there is, God's mind frequently changes. It looks like a process of "muddling through". God supports both sides in ways that do not seem to be productive. Can we make any sense of all this? We might, if we start by noting how these stories intertwine human and divine action. The story tellers have a habit of attributing everything to God, so we need to read a little between the lines. This is a very human story indeed. The infertile woman is desperate for a child. She believes that her infertility threatens her very identity. Infertility is a real and ever present human problem.

Of course, with social policies around adoption, surrogacy and scientific intervention, we, in our day, try to solve such problems. In all of these cases we have an intertwining of human reactions to circumstances, of complex interactions between natural events and human ingenuity. These interactions also occur within their own social contexts, whether of ancient patriarchy or of more modern social, scientific and political arrangements. Where is God in all this?

There is no general answer to this question. So, I want to concentrate on the theological implications that have traditionally been drawn from the part of the story that we heard this morning. Last year, when I preached on Trinity Sunday, I drew your attention to the famous Rublev icon.<sup>5</sup> This icon is based on the narrative we heard this morning. The number of the messengers suggested the Trinity to Christian theologians and iconographers and Rublev's icon represents this idea. The icon's imagery is striking because of the way that the three figures

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<sup>4</sup> Genesis 25:9

<sup>5</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trinity\\_\(Andrei\\_Rublev\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trinity_(Andrei_Rublev))

look at each other and seem to make a circle of their mutual regard. This circular movement goes by the name of *perichoresis*, literally, “dancing around”.



I said last year:

The mutuality evident in the Rublev icon calls us to realise that our culturally bound concept of God as a god of wrath must be superseded. God is a god of love. It is hard to imagine love as a characteristic of a single entity. Love requires another, it can never be notional. The way in which the three Rublev messengers regard each other gives rise to a mutual response that is of the essence of love.

This morning’s gospel reading helps us to move beyond thinking that everything that happens is an act of God. Instead, we might think of God as an ever-present participant. In the Genesis story, God, through a messenger, seems to pop up everywhere. In today’s gospel, Jesus is concerned about the crowds who come to see him. He comments that they are lost, sheep without a shepherd.

Jesus chooses not to intervene directly. He collects a ragbag of ordinary locals and makes them the shepherds, the labourers in the fields. As we later learn and, as today’s reading openly states, everything does not go according to plan. One of those chosen fails absolutely. The others fail in their own less total ways. Their history is, like ours, a combination of affirmations and betrayals.

The affirmations and betrayals come in small and in grand styles. They come in the guise of small kindnesses and small rebuffs. They come in great acts of heroism and sacrifice and in acts of monumental and widespread cruelty. They come as positive acts and as omissions. They come when we take deliberate action and when we neglect to think and observe. They come when we see Christ in others and when we fail to see anything but the reflection of ourselves. However and whenever we affirm or deny the value of our fellow human beings, we are affirming or denying God in the world. We are affirming or denying the creation and the creator in whom we say, week by week, that we believe.

In this morning’s gospel, God is present not because, in some way, God intervenes directly. God is present in and through those whom Jesus sends. But we should not imagine that God was not there already. God was as much present in the leaderless sheep as in the commissioned apostles. That is the meaning of the Incarnation and it is also the meaning of the Trinity as imagined from today’s Old Testament reading.

What the three messengers tell us is that God can be encountered in everyday meetings, just as Abraham did with the three travellers who came to his door. I can’t reconstruct what happened beyond the report in Genesis. Actually, I don’t want to. There is a mythological quality to these stories and that means that we look for meaning rather than for historical reconstruction. At the very least, the frequent appearance of God in the narrative, and on both sides, confirms for us the perception that God is always present, no matter what.

This moment is captured well by George Herbert in his poem, “The Elixir”, which is a hymn we will all recognise.

Teach me, my God and King,  
In all things Thee to see,  
And what I do in anything  
To do it as for Thee.

Not rudely, as a beast,  
To run into an action;  
But still to make Thee prepossest,  
And give it his perfection.

A man that looks on glass,  
On it may stay his eye;  
Or if he pleaseth, through it pass,  
And then the heav'n espy.

All may of Thee partake:  
Nothing can be so mean,  
Which with this tincture—“for Thy sake”—  
Will not grow bright and clean.

A servant with this clause  
Makes drudgery divine:  
Who sweeps a room as for Thy laws,  
Makes that and th' action fine.

This is the famous stone  
That turneth all to gold;  
For that which God doth touch and own  
Cannot for less be told.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> George Herbert, “The Elixir”, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/44362>