

A Day of Private Reflection can be a very personal, even private experience, or it can be a reflective experience in small groups. To enable reflection, especially for those of a Christian faith community, the Bible readings set for the Sundays before and after the 21<sup>st</sup> June offer suggestive material.

Three readings for each Sunday are identified, one from the Hebrew Scriptures, the Psalm for the day and the Gospel. The reflections offered are not exhaustive, but offer pointers for private reflection, group reflection or for homilies or sermons on either Sunday. As we reflect, remember and commit ourselves to a different future, the churches book provides uncomfortable challenge, transformative and healing insights and future direction.

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# **Day of Reflection Liturgical Resource**

## **Biblical Reflections for Year A**

### **Sunday Before**

#### **Genesis 18 v 1-15**

Moving from a troubled and painful past to a new and different future is a difficult journey. Just drawing a line under the past, forgetting and moving on, for many is irritatingly simplistic. Yet there are always future possibilities. The future is not closed.

Abraham and Sarah were childless and in a clan-based eastern culture that meant no future. In this dramatic piece of storytelling they encountered three strangers. In the heat of the mid-day sun the three arrived in the clan camp. Eastern culture was and is strong on hospitality. People without a future respond with generous hospitality. It is extended to strangers. The text is littered with active doing words. Abraham bows to the ground, a gesture of respect, even reverence for the stranger. Whoever these strangers were, hospitality was an essential. The word '*haste*' occurs five times. Hospitality to the stranger was urgent business.

The story-teller wants us to read between the lines. Abraham and Sarah encounter God in the stranger and through the practice of generosity, openness and hospitality. In their present despair and future without hope they treat the other with respect, generosity and the sharing of food. In doing so they encounter the divine other, God in human form. It is that act and encounter that opens up the future rather than closing it down.

Like Abraham and Sarah we can sit in the tent with our pain, despair and closed future. Or we can reach towards others, especially strangers, share a meal, even a tea or coffee, maybe even with those whom politically or culturally we find it difficult to encounter. In the practice of hospitality we may encounter the God of future possibilities, experience a different future opening up. Whatever our pain, and we will not forget it, doing hospitality means the future is not closed. We meet God in the other and find hope.

#### **Psalms 116 v 102; 12-19**

The Hebrew Psalms are essential to worship and liturgy. The personal and public act are poorer without participation in Israel's poetry. However theological the Psalms are, they are profoundly psychological. These poems from the heart of Israel's liturgical life cover the spectrum of human experiences and emotions.

This particular poem is one of gratitude to God which at the same time is an act of commitment to and ultimate trust in a gracious God. The gratitude and trust arise out of painful experience. There are no pious platitudes in the poem nor is it a superficial expression of happy praise; feel good whether you do or not! The third verse avoids any superficiality. Snares of death, pangs of Sheol and the suffering of distress and anguish are about as bad as it gets. In other poems Sheol is portrayed as an experience which appears to be even beyond God's reach. Yet others view Sheol as a negative power that invades and '*takes hold*' of life, yet from which God can liberate. Whatever exactly this poet has in mind it is a life experience of deep distress and anguish.

The most recent period of violence and conflict in Ireland, itself a legacy of past violence, has left many with such an experience. The poetic metaphors of verse 3 will resonate with many and reflection at this time needs to remember their distress and anguish. Yet this poet gives witness to an experience of liberation, a freedom from the power of these experiences that threatened to, and indeed did seem to turn life into a living death.

With the help of God, the poet, or it may have been a community, *'kept faith, even when I said, I am greatly afflicted'* (v 10). The person or community endured; instead of remaining victims, became courageous survivors. Centering life on the divine liberator they found a way out of the living death to *'walk before the Lord in the land of the living'* (v 9). It was their *'cup of salvation'* (v 13), and in gratitude they publicly told their story (v 17-18).

### **Matthew 9 v 35 – 10 v 8**

Reading Matthew in its first century context reminds us that Jesus and the Gospels are set in a world of socio-political suffering, violence and oppression. The story comes out of a world of victims, of people who were *'harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd'* (v 36). We should not underestimate the force of Matthew's language. Jesus in the Gospel sees crowds suffering from violence. *'Harassed'* carries the sense of violence and plunder. *'Helpless'* means to be thrown down in a violent way; it also refers to imperial violence, the violence of a domination system, an oppressive power or body and the experience of war and death. All of this was real life experience in the Roman dominated world of Jesus with its all pervasive state and resistance or paramilitary led violence. As always the innocent suffered.

It is in this context that Jesus *'had compassion for them'* (v 16). Compassion means to suffer alongside, to be in active solidarity with the many harassed and helpless, the many and varied victims of violence.

*'The harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few ..... send out labourers into the harvest'* (v 37). This and the sending out of the twelve disciples has too long suffered from a very narrow interpretation, a modernist evangelistic perspective. *'The harvest is plentiful'* is a frequent image of God's judgement. God is against domination systems and violence and there is a moral judgement and critique to be made of both state and paramilitary violence of the past. That ought to be the moral voice of the faith community. At the same time the *'mission'* of that community is to respond to the victims of violence and those who caused violence with Christ-like compassion, merciful, loving action to heal, raise to life, help the social outcasts clean up and enable others to exorcise the demons of loss, bitterness or past violence and its associated guilt. Maybe like the Gospel story only a marginal few will engage with a mission of compassion, but they will be crucial to the healing of community memories.

# Day of Reflection Liturgical Resource

## Biblical Reflections for Year A/C

### Sunday After

#### Genesis 21 v 8-21

It's a tragic reality of life that sometimes victims become victimisers and the abused become abusers. This may even happen in less obvious ways. Those who have experienced many put-downs in earlier life or had their self-esteem and worth destroyed or damaged, sometimes project their experiences onto others. Violence does irreparable damage to people and the understandable bitterness and anger, and equally understandable desire for vengeance, can become generational. We might prefer to avoid today's Genesis story!

Sarah has already been abused by a patriarchal system. Abraham, to preserve his male honour has passed her off as his sister to Pharaoh, a story with sexual abuse overtones. Unable to conceive Sarah later in keeping with a patriarchal eastern culture, *'approves'* of Abraham sleeping with the slave girl Hagar. Ishmael is born, providing his foreign mother with a *'rung'* above Sarah. When Sarah eventually does give birth to Isaac, she is determined to *'get even'* and persuades Abraham to send the slave woman and her son out of the camp and into the wilderness. Hagar and Ishmael are homeless. Victimised Sarah now victimises Hagar.

There are a number of layers in the story worth reflection. Women are victims of male domination, in the story a patriarchal system requiring a male heir. Women did commit acts of violence during the *'troubles'*, but many more were the victims of the violence and its consequences deriving from a macho culture.

Abraham is anything but an attractive character in the cycle of stories. Twice he passes Sarah off as somebody else to preserve his male honour. Patriarchy must be maintained for self-preservation and a power base.

God appears in the story as morally ambivalent, even appearing to be in collusion with the abuse of Hagar. Yet God pledges Godself to Hagar and Ishmael in an identical covenant to the one with Abraham. Perhaps the story reflects this storyteller's struggle in knowing who God really is in the midst of systems of violence. This is a faith struggle which still resonates!

Many women who have experienced rejection, violence and abuse will find their stories in Hagar. We may find it difficult to reflect on this story but it may be worth it in the end.

#### Psalms 86 v 1-10; 16-17

The specific details are unclear but here is poetry out of intense suffering. What is clear is that faith in God does not generate immunity from suffering or a life untouched by violence and trouble. These things happen to innocent and good people and God does not intervene or protect. That is a difficulty for people of faith or those who are *'devoted'* (v 2), utterly committed to God. The poet recognised this but even in the depths of Sheol and in

the face of the violence of those who seek to destroy life (v 13-14), she somehow knows and experiences a God who is good, compassionate and loving (v 5 and 15).

The poem is a remarkable expression of faith in a God who does not intervene or protect in the face of life's violence and suffering. Over the thirty-five years of violence many, understandably lost what faith they had and gave up on God. Religious people, especially those who suffered little or not at all, have no right to make a judgment on such loss of faith. At the same time there were those who '*cried all day long*' (v 3), and in their honest and often angry lament before God, found strength, help and comfort (v 16-17). They did not find answers to their '*why*' questions, but in their trauma and pain they somehow found a gracious God.

The key aspects of God's identity that became part of the poet's identity are rich in meaning. They sum up Israel's deepest faith experienced in and shaped by a history of suffering and violence at the hands of oppressive powers. God is compassionate, good, forgiving, overflowing in steadfast, loyal love (v 3 and 5), and a God of truth or faithfulness, utterly true to Godself and to the hurting (v 15). The huge paradox is that Israel and this poet only knew and experienced such a God in the midst of violence, darkness, discrimination and suffering. Trust in God and a life shaped by God rarely happens in a comfort zone or in a life of ease. Out of the depths of adversity and violence the poet found faith. She may have had to let go of simplistic distorted or immoral and violent images of God to find a deeper and more liberating reality. '*For you, O Lord are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call on you*' (v 5). Nothing '*will be able to separate us from the love of God*' (Romans 8 v 39). Faith for hard times!

### **Matthew 10 v 24-39**

Today's Gospel sounds almost fanatical in its claims. It may be uncomfortable reading for those who want to focus on the blessedness of the peacemakers pronounced by Jesus earlier in Matthew's Gospel (5 v 9). Now there is something of a shock to hear Matthew's Jesus say that he has come not to bring peace to the earth, but a sword (v 34). He has even come to set family members against each other.

Texts need to be set in context and in the thematic construction of the Matthean Gospel, the writer in 9 v 36 – 10 v 42 presents the second of five blocks of teaching that make up this Gospel. This organised block of teaching material has to do with mission. Last Sunday's reading identified the mission with active, compassionate response to those who were the victims of violence and suffering. A small, marginalised group of Jesus followers were empowered and sent on such a mission of compassion, to create an alternative community to that of the imperial violence, injustice and inequality. Matthew's community in under no illusion about this mission. Not everyone will accept it and there will be opposition, not least from those who want to retain their positions of power. The mission of compassion to the harassed and helpless (9 v 36) will require courage, stickability and an ultimate commitment to the Jesus cause, the reign of God on earth, the alternative community to the unjust status quo.

Building communities of justice, peace and compassion out of the destruction and legacy of violence, including the cost of the troubles, is tough work and often goes against the grain. Raising ethical questions about the past, insisting on a more ethical form of remembering, and pushing for core, ethical values to be at the heart of a desired future is

not always popular work. Paradoxically, peacebuilding brings a sword and creates conflict, even between families and friends.

Yet the future needs to be constructed differently, open to the possibilities of justice, equality, compassion, truthfulness and peace. To the past we need to say never again and to a just, peaceful and shared future we say a big yes. Matthew's Jesus pointed up the core values to make a future, but he was under no illusion that peacebuilding meant *'taking up the cross'* (10 v 38). On a day of reflection we should be under no illusions either.