

Call to worship

This place for us is Holy Ground.

The place where we sing songs of praise to the Lord, and repeat the stories of faith that inspire us to respond to Christ's love.

God called us here, in whispering winds and in burning flames,

and with his presence God disarms us of the barriers we have placed around us.

Instead God meets us in our vulnerability, our humanity.

Let us worship the Lord.

Hymn Longing for Light MP 1201

Gifts

God, receive these gifts by your grace.

Multiply and use them through the power of the Holy Spirit

to accomplish Christ's work of love in the world. **Amen.**

Today is the last day of Refugee Week and is known as Sanctuary Sunday, and so we pray with a prayer written for today by the Joint Public Issues Team (JPIT) of the URC, Methodist and Baptist Churches. Our hymns are also from a selection chosen for Sanctuary Sunday.

Opening Prayer

Holy God, You are our refuge and our strength, an ever-present help in times of trouble.

Thank you for your unconditional love and your unfailing hospitality.

On this Sanctuary Sunday, we rededicate ourselves to embody your compassion and commit to intentionally demonstrating neighbourly love to your children in need of sanctuary.

Teach us what it looks like to be the perfect host, to build bigger tables in our communities and to welcome and include those who are different from us.

We pray for all those who have been forced to flee their homes. Lord, keep them safe.

Give them courage, resilience, and tangible hope. Guide their feet to people and places who will honour them and uphold their dignity.

Work in and through all those with the power to address the situations from which people have fled, whether war, famine, persecution, or climate change. Help us to understand what part we can play in alleviating the suffering of our neighbours.

In the face of hostility towards refugees and people seeking asylum, help us to model kindness, listening and compassion towards all human beings, even those with whom we disagree.

Keep us strong in our resolve to resist policies and structures that work against your Kingdom of compassion. God, begin your work of restoration and hope in us. **Amen.**

And a prayer by the Revd John Proctor:

Let us hold before God the family life that we have shared –

its rivalries, its untidiness, its mixture of hope and struggle

and let us pray for wisdom to navigate the years,

in love that lives through troubles and testing, in faith that rises above difficulty and division.

Then let us pray for families in hard times, who have no place to call home,

who look at the world through a curtain of tears, who are wounded by the sharp edges of quarrels, who are anxious for their children's future –

and let us give thanks to God, who sees possibility beyond tragedy,

who speaks into places of distress and who offers life from a cross. **Amen**

Hymn A New Commandment MP1 Sung Twice

Bible readings: **Genesis 21:8-21**
 Matthew 10:24-39

Today's reading from Genesis seems very appropriate for Sanctuary Sunday at the end of Refugee Week. Hagar and her son Ishmael are turned out of their home into the wilderness

on the whim of Sarah. Many people become refugees because of wars or persecution which often start on the whim of a dictator or populist leader. But God cares for Hagar and her son and does not let any harm come to them. Hagar and Ishmael are two of the greatest underdogs in the patriarchal narrative. From the patriarchs – that is male leaders of a family or tribe, Abraham, his son Isaac, and grandson Jacob, the multiple nations of the people of Israel emerge. Yet God promises to Hagar that God will also make a great nation of her son Ishmael. In fact, Ishmael is greatly revered in Islam as an ancestor of the prophet Mohammed, so Ishmael led not only to a great nation, but also to another Abrahamic faith. This is the second time that Hagar has left. In chapter 16, Hagar was so badly treated by Sarah soon after she conceived Ishmael, that she ran away into the wilderness. It is there that God meets Hagar and speaks to her, just as in today's story. God comforted Hagar then with the first promise that her son would be the father of multitudes. God sees her and brings her comfort and strength to go on. For her own protection, and for the safety of her unborn child, Hagar needed to return to Abraham and Sarah in order to benefit from the security of living within a larger clan. She would not have lived long giving birth to a baby by herself in the wilderness.

In today's story when Hagar and Ishmael are sent out into the wilderness, it is her son whom God hears. God has heard the voice of her son, whom Hagar feared would die. But God reassures Hagar, just as God did on her first escape, and the angel of the Lord tells her: "Do not be afraid, for God has heard the voice of the boy."

The Hebrew word for "hear" in this text, as in when God hears Hagar and Ishmael, is not a word that means passive listening. The word is *shema*, which comes from a passage in Deuteronomy known as the Shema: "Hear O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is One". The Shema is a prayer said daily by Jews and it is so called because of the first word of the verse: *shema* which is a command. This word is about actively listening and following through with action. This kind of hearing is associated with obedience. The call to "Hear O, Israel" is a call to hear and obey. So when God hears the voice of the boy, God is obeying what that voice is crying out for - acting on the cries of the child and coming to the rescue. But, God does not seem to hear Hagar: God hears her son, but not her. Ishmael's story continues, but the last we read about Hagar is that she got her son a wife.

As is the case with many marginalized groups, we only see them in their stereotypical roles: mothers as caregivers, perhaps matchmakers, but not history-makers. In Biblical times, and in some places still, it is the men who made the decisions, took the actions, made history and wrote history. There are many people whose stories continue to go unheard in our society. We may see them, but do we hear what they are trying to tell us? Do we hear and

The Bridgwater Drive Church, 26 Feb. 2023

actually feel moved to act and obey? Among those we maybe don't truly see, hear and listen too are the disabled and refugees. The voices of refugees and asylum seekers are drowned out by the noise of the media, the headlines that we are being swamped and invaded by so many people, and by the government with its constant talk about fixing the small boat crisis with anti-immigration laws.

God continues to reassure women, the widows, orphans and strangers who are marginalized: God sees and hears them. When we hear them, then we must not remain passive, but must act accordingly. We must not only listen, but truly hear and obey, living out our faith in the world. But what can we practically do to offer welcome and hospitality to refugees? Refugees and asylum seekers are unlikely to walk through our doors here at church, but if they did, hopefully we would give them a warm welcome. What we can do is raise awareness of the plight of refugees. We can go to reliable sources of information about refugees and asylum seekers and not repeat the propaganda that comes out in some of the press. We can sign petitions and speak out against the appalling anti-immigration laws our government is trying to introduce, and we can pray – pray for all refugees, pray for those who help them, and pray that those in government will have their eyes and ears opened and will act with humanity, compassion and hospitality.

So what does the story of Hagar and Ishmael bring to our understanding of God and what God wants us to do. What do they contribute to our understanding of God and God's mission in the world? The main theme of the ancestral narratives in Genesis is the fulfilment of the promises God makes to Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 12 for children, land, and blessing. But we would be mistaken if we believed that God only had eyes on those who were selected to be God's chosen people. Scattered throughout the stories of God's chosen are the stories of Lot, Hagar and Ishmael, and Esau, those who have not been chosen. Yet in each case, God is present in their lives.

These stories, can serve as an important corrective to notions of chosenness and election among the people of God. Our chosenness as people of faith does not mean that we have a corner on God. It does not mean that God's love and care is limited only to us. What is striking about Isaac and Ishmael is that God makes the same promise to both of them. God promises both that they would each become a great nation. They would both experience God's presence and blessing.

The difference between Isaac and Ishmael, then, is not so much chosenness, but calling. Isaac and his descendants were called to the task of being the means through which God would bless the nations. They were to model what a faithful relationship with God looks like, what it means to live out God's will for his creation. They were to show and tell God's love

The Bridgwater Drive Church, 26 Feb. 2023

for the whole world, and ultimately, to participate in God's redemptive work by being the people through whom the Messiah of the world would come.

These stories are in Genesis to remind us of this. God loves the Hagar and Ishmaels of our world. The refugees and asylum seekers. God hears their cries, sees their suffering, and brings about their redemption. This is the gospel story. And the invitation for those of us who are God's people is to attend to, bless, and embody God's love and care to those outside of the community of Christian faith, particularly to those who are the most vulnerable. Just as God loves the Hagar and Ishmaels of our world, so should we.

Hymn Brother, sister let me serve you MP1261

Prayers of intercession

Gracious God, we pray today with all those living in poverty. We pray especially for those in our own country who are suffering greatly due to the cost-of-living crisis, and for asylum seekers who are not allowed to work. **Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer**

We pray for unity and equality and an end to discrimination and prejudice of all kind. This Pride month, we pray for those who have experienced discrimination because of their sexuality. Help us to truly remember that in Christ we are all one, created in God's image.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray for all those who go hungry and for the people who help them, through volunteering at foodbanks, by donating food and money, or by speaking out and raising awareness of issues.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray for doctors, nurses, porters and cleaners, carers and their families, as they care for our health and wellbeing and we pray for the NHS.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray for world leaders and democratic systems. Let them not be abused and help us not to be overtaken by apathy and despair when it seems that democracy is flawed. We pray for elected officials and MPs, that they may conduct their lives with decency and honesty. We pray for journalists who risk their lives to bring us the truth and for aid workers in challenging conditions. We pray for peace in all places, especially in Ukraine, Sudan and the Middle East.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray for and with all who feel lonely and sad. For the homeless, those with addictions, those with mental health conditions and those who are neurodivergent.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray for all those who are ill and those who care for them; for those awaiting test results or treatment, for the dying and those who mourn.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer. Amen

The Lord's Prayer

Hymn We are marching in the light of God MP954

Blessing

May God's justice strengthen you

May the reconciliation of the Holy Spirit be in all your encounters

And may the love of Christ live in you as you go out into the world. Amen

The Bridgwater Drive Church sung Blessing