

This week we start our Advent preaching series on women in the bible. So often the women mentioned in the bible are barely known, we see them only in glimpses or snippets or short episodes in a supporting role whilst the starring roles seem to be given to those they are married to or their children or their ailment or an assumed character that has grown over the centuries or the men they share their story with. Not all the women who appear in the bible have names but even the nameless have their part to play in the story of God and his people.

This year we as a team, wanted to delve deeper into the lives of a few of these women, and what better time can there be than Advent when we wait for the coming of God as a tiny child born of a woman in humble and scandalous but yet wondrous circumstances. Over the four weeks we will cover Sarah the wife of Abraham, Bishop John will preach on Ruth the great grandmother of King David, Sandra will explore the story of Mary, the mother of Jesus and Mike, Mary Magdalene.

Today I start with Sarah.

At the start of Matthew's gospel there is a listed the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham; but it might alternatively read the son of David, the son of Sarah. For it is with Sarah the wife of Abraham and mother of Isaac that we see the start of the building of the nation of the children of Israel. Sarah, perhaps could be described as the Matriarch of the Jewish nation.

But this is to get ahead of ourselves for when we first meet Sarah at the end of Genesis Chapter 11 we are told that she is Abraham's wife and that she is barren, she has no children.

In the times in which they live this is a dreadful description, an indictment. We aren't sure when exactly Abraham and Sarah lived or their story written. It could have been any time between 1800 to 1600 BCE or 1100 to 1000 BCE, that's middle bronze age or early iron age and a written version of the story of ancestors that was handed down...

They are part of a tribal people, nomads who live in tents able to move around relatively quickly. Wealth is measured not just in gold or silver but in animals and servants and in the blessing of children. Marriages take place usually from within the tribe so there are close family ties and relationships. Society is structured so that women belong to their fathers and then their husbands, goods to be passed from one to the other; children too. The lives of men and women are segregated; living in separate tents with women responsible for running the household and looking after children, keeping a low profile. A woman's status is linked to her fertility and most importantly her ability to produce sons.

The book of Genesis documents how Abraham and Sarah move from place to place in response to God's call and to escape famine, on the way Sarah's beauty catches the eye of Pharaohs and Kings and Abraham conveniently forgets that Sarah is his wife and emphasises that she is his sister (she is actually his half-sister, different mothers but they have the same father) to save his life. Through it all Sarah remains childless but God continually promises to Abraham that he will father a great nation.

As a woman myself I find it hard to imagine how Sarah must have felt. Anxiously waiting each month to see if she was pregnant, given over as a concubine to other men; so desperate to have a child she gives her maid to Abraham in the hopes that surrogate motherhood will raise her status and fill her empty arms. This was not unusual as we can read later in Genesis in the story of their grandson Jacob. To some extent this plan backfires when Hagar the maid gives birth to a son and Sarah is so jealous of her and her boy that she casts them out.

But the episode for me that captures Sarah the woman is to be found in Genesis Chapter 18 when three men visit Abraham suddenly and after the flurry of preparations, they eat and talk.

Genesis 18:9-15

“They said to him, ‘Where is your wife Sarah?’ And he said, ‘There, in the tent.’ Then one said, ‘I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.’ And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, ‘After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?’ The Lord said to Abraham, ‘Why did Sarah laugh, and say, “Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?” Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.’ But Sarah denied, saying, ‘I did not laugh’; for she was afraid. He said, ‘Oh yes, you did laugh.’”

Sarah and Abraham are old, very old, she has been through the menopause and it is probably some time since they shared a bed. After all that she has been through it is no wonder she laughs. Laughs that she is old, that she is worn out and that she gave up long ago the hope that she would have any child let alone a longed for son. I don't think this is a chuckle of amusement, more a snort of incredulity and bitterness. How can this be? What is foretold is beyond imagining. No wonder she is afraid to admit that she laughed when challenged. But it appears that one of the visitors is God Almighty, Yahweh, The Lord and as we and eventually Sarah (and a teenager in Nazareth many years later) know, nothing is impossible with God.

Sarah conceives and bears a son who is called Isaac. His name means something like “may God laugh” interesting as it was his mother who laughed at God when told she would have a child. After Isaac is a few years old we hear nothing more of Sarah until her death when Abraham buys some land for a burial ground. We are not told if the famous scene where Abraham almost sacrifices Isaac to God is known to her. She is buried in a cave facing Mamre, which is the place where she heard she was finally to be a mother and Abraham is eventually buried with her when he too dies.

Sarah, the sister/wife, a woman whose beauty turned the heads of royalty, whose jealousy sent a maid and her son out into the wilderness to face almost certain death, whose outspokenness at her frustration in her inability to have a child, who seems to bear being given away to other men without a murmur and generally get on with her duties as a wife; comes out of these few chapters of Genesis as a real woman. Someone whose character and reactions we might recognise today, even if her lifestyle is alien to us.

Sarah gives me hope for even in her flawed human nature God uses her to build the foundations of a great nation with Abraham. For her, and for him, although neither lived to see it, their descendant Joseph is the man to whom the care of the son of God, Jesus, is given. What greater legacy can there be?

Faith in God is no guarantee of wish fulfilment. If it was Sarah would have been a mother much earlier and each of us here might be living different lives. But God is faithful and in Sarah's story God continually promises that she will bear a child and when she, and no doubt Abraham, has given up hope, God's promise is fulfilled. When Sarah acts badly even though she has achieved the child that was her heart's desire, God does not turn away but keeps the promise to build a great nation from Isaac.

So often when we have waited in frustration feeling that our lives should take a particular turn, when we look back we realise that what we wanted was not right for us at a particular time or place. God promises us life in all its fullness but does not promise how this will be so, only that it will be. In our human frailty we sometimes turn away and laugh with bitterness or incredulity because our timescale for fulfilment is not the same as God's, or what God has planned for us can seem fantastical. It is no coincidence that God is sometimes described as the "God of surprises".

Sarah represents every woman and every man; impatient, jealous, frustrated, dissatisfied but given her heart's desire and a legacy by God that she could only dream of. God uses us flawed as we are, in a way we can never truly comprehend.

May each of us recognise that God works in us and uses us, and accept with more grace than Sarah, God's choosing of time and place.

Amen