

Reflections in Solitude — Week 13
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On Monday, I was heading east on Pier Street, waiting for the light to turn green at the intersection of Brighton and Diagonal Roads and, for several moments, I watched the children playing outside at the Glenelg Primary School. It was a delight to behold the abounding energy of a variety of children running and bounding across the winter green grass.

Two boys caught my eye with what appeared to be a game of follow the leader. One of the boys took off in a sprint, performing feats of youthful skill like jumping to touch a high tree branch, leaping from object to object without stumbling, and bursting over the top of a hill to summersault down the other side. His friend followed behind, mimicking his precise moves without skipping a bit.

As I watched, I was taken back to my own days on the playground. I acknowledge that childhood is far, far from easy or without its bumps and bruises. Then and now, some homes and environments give rise to prejudice, hatred and addiction. Some children know the painful realities of poverty, abuse, and grief. Nevertheless, I remembered the kind of innocence I enjoyed then—a freedom from the complexity of global concerns and the paralysing weight of them. Life together was relatively simple and involved such things as being kind, respecting and befriending others and sharing.



In this way, I also saw and felt potential as I gazed on the playground. There, in the sea of blue uniforms, was a future not yet entirely shaped by what has always been or skewed by cynicism, fear, greed, and regret. For this reason, when I read Sarah's sharp and lamentable instruction to "cast out this slave woman and her son" upon seeing Ishmael and Isaac playing together, I felt dismay. Her words throw a bucket of ice water on visions of what might be and our hope for a different future.

In the context of their day, Sarah and Abraham's actions are, shall we say, understandable. They were formed by and concerned with the social structures and customs that maintained (and they thought upheld) life as God intended. There were longstanding justifications for why things were the way they were, namely the need for clarity when it came to paternity, inheritance and the care of women and children, at least the ones that were seen to matter.

Applied without wisdom and compassion, the promises made to Sarah and Abraham in scripture have resulted in an unfortunate and mixed legacy, some of which is hinted at in the story of Hagar and Ishmael's banishment. This horrific act supported with religious and societal laws of the time has been repeated throughout history, resulting not only in refugees and asylum seekers, but in all kinds of exclusion, inequality and violence.

Indeed, we don't have to look too far to uncover some of its legacy in our own land. In an interview during Reconciliation Week this year, Uniting Church Minister Aunty Denise Champion said:

We seem to be able to remember the 'war stories' very well [World War I and II], but we still have amnesia about what happened to Aboriginal people. ...Reconciliation Week is all about truth telling. It allows the truth to be told. Sometimes, things will happen that will make us stop and listen to the truth. If we are not listening to the truth, other things will continue to happen.

Perhaps the image of children playing this week—Ishmael and Isaac as well as the children I saw on the playground that day—might provide insight for us. What might it be to foster in ourselves and our communities a greater innocence? to find that primal place that is untouched by prejudice, hatred and fear? What would it look like to be freed from the warping effect of life's hard knocks and cynicism in order to see with eyes and hearts newly born? to be able to envision, with creativity and love, more lifegiving possibilities?

During our Emergency Relief Service this week, for example, we had the opportunity once again to introduce one of our volunteers and a friend who came for food support. Both have emigrated from a Middle Eastern country, the volunteer several decades ago and our friend more recently. I remember when I first arrived in Australia, it was a delight (and relief!) to speak with someone from the United States and to converse more easily given our shared culture and geography. So, I innocently thought the same might be the case for these two.

However, when they first met each other, I sensed a reserve. It dawned on me that something of Isaac and Ishmael's painful legacy may be playing out in front of me. For though they shared a country of origin, one of our friends is Muslim and the other Christian. The two chatted briefly and graciously, but I felt many unsaid things were going on below the surface.

Later, I wondered about the naivete of my actions. Did my projections get in the way of clear thinking? Would it have been more appropriate to allow this meeting to happen by chance, if at all? Did I inadvertently make things worse?

In speaking with our Muslim volunteer a few days later about the encounter, she gently suggested, "We're in Australia now... it is time for healing and a new story." So, despite the awkwardness of their introduction, it seems a glimmer of hope continues to shimmer. Only God knows what seeds were planted through their exchange.

A redeeming element in the story of Hagar and Ishmael is the recognition that, in God's eyes, *all lives matter*. Hagar was not left in her despair. She was



given a place of sanctuary where she and Ishmael could make a new start. It seems to me that those of us who long to be people after God's own heart might be emboldened by this thread in the narrative.



Do we hear the cries—and angry shouts—of the excluded, the impoverished, the pushed aside, disenfranchised and

dispossessed? What might these voices be saying about the way things are? What are the turning points and where are we called to be at this time in history?

God of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar,
God of travellers, migrants and refugees.
Thank you for the beauty and uniqueness
of this southern land which we share.

Grant your protection and grace
to all who shelter here.

Forgive the racism and destruction
that have been part of our history,
and our disregard for the pain and oppression
within the Australian community today.

Help us shed our provincial expectations.

Take away our cultural tunnel vision.

Open our hearts
to be caring neighbours to each other.

Direct our lives
to just and peaceful action.

God of a thousand faces,
help us also to acknowledge
you are worshipped in many languages,
in different songs

and rhythms of life from our own.

May we respect
these religious insights in each other
and assist each faithful expression of you.

We rejoice in you, God,
in whose image we are brothers and sisters
and by whose example in Jesus Christ
we know the breadth and depth
of your universal love.

Amen

Justice for Asylum Seekers, Resources for Worship,
Uniting Church in Australia Assembly