

Sunday 18th June 2023
Morning Worship - St John's and Christ the King

Sarah laughed

Genesis 18:1-15

I wonder if you have a bucket list? A list of things that you would love to do, or achieve, before you die?

I have a few things on mine – mostly places I'd like to visit

New Zealand

the Fire Festival held on the Shetland Isles - Up Helly Ya

Colonsay

(esp) St Kilda

I'd also like to have the inspiration, skill and discipline to write a book, but maybe I know myself too well to really put it on the list!

But mostly I realise that I have already been blessed with the most important things that I hoped for from my life (in no particular order!) - faith, a safe home, a career which I have enjoyed and found fulfilling, an ongoing sense of purpose, a happy marriage, and my wonderful family.

And for that I am unbelievably thankful.

Especially when I compare my life with that of Sarah, Abraham's wife, who we have just heard about.

It's sad but true that in Sarah's day, women didn't have much status or say in anything that happened to them. Did I say "much"? Perhaps what I really mean is "any". It was an incredibly male dominated society, where women were viewed as part of a man's "possessions", without a voice, or an opinion, and basically with one purpose only - to bear children. And ideally male children, to ensure that the property and wealth remained under the control of the family dynasty.

So when Sarai's father-in-law decreed that the family would move from Ur in what is now southern Iraq to Haran in Eastern Turkey, she had no option other than to go too. And when God called Abram to leave his home in Haran and travel south to Canaan, off she went again. When there was famine in Canaan and Abram went down to Egypt to escape from it, he insisted that she should pretend to be his sister, because she was so beautiful that he was afraid that the Egyptian men would murder him so they could possess her. Without his protection she ended up in Pharaoh's harem, whilst Abram, as her "brother" acquired flocks and wealth as a result.

And yet, none of this would have set her apart from other women in that culture. What was to her an abiding source of shame, however, was the fact that she was childless. (And let's

note here that infertility was considered to be entirely the woman's fault – no suggestion that the husband might be in any way responsible.)

And maybe we know what happened next. Sarai offers her maidservant Hagar to Abraham as a kind of “surrogate mother”, hoping to build a family through her. But it doesn't work out well. Relationships break down. Hagar does indeed have a son, Ishmael, but when God promises Abram that he will be the “father of many nations” he makes it clear that this will not be through Hagar and Ishmael, but through Sarai. And he renames Abram as Abraham, and Sarai as Sarah – “father...” and “mother... of nations”.

Does Abraham really believe God? Who knows. He certainly laughs at the very idea.

Does he tell Sarah? Well -there's a question.

And then we get to this morning's reading. The three mysterious visitors who turn out somehow to be God in person.

Abraham greeting them, giving orders to the servant and to Sarah to prepare food, the offering of hospitality.

The enquiry by the visitors as to where Sarah is, and on being told that she is within earshot, the repetition of the promise that within 12 months she will have a child of her own.

It's tempting to image Sarah - there just inside the tent, listening to these men discussing her future. Once again – apparently – just incidental in the story of her own life.

No wonder she laughs. A cynical, maybe even a sarcastic laugh.

What do these three men know of her history? Of her shame and disgrace. Of waiting and hoping month after month – only for those hopes to be dashed. Every. Single. Time.

Or maybe by this time – a rueful laugh – acknowledging her own desire, but with acceptance that it will not now happen. She is now too old. “That ship has sailed”. Reconciled to the sad memory of what might have been.

There now is nothing she can do

But – and it's a big BUT...

This is not just about her. It is about God's Big Plan.

God intends that Abraham and she together will be the “father and mother of nations”

And it turns out that although there is now nothing *she* can do, there is plenty that God can do....

As the visitor – now revealed as God - says, “Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?”

Maybe it reminds you of the Annunciation? Of Gabriel's response to Mary, when she protests that she can't have the promised child because she is too young to be married "for nothing will be impossible with God."

Sarah is too old – the baby must be God-given, not human-intended
Mary is too young to be married – the baby must be from God

And we don't know if Mary laughs, but we do know that when Isaac is born, just as God had promised, and at the time he had announced, that Sarah laughs again. And that this is a new laughter.

Not cynical, or rueful, but full of joy. Isaac's very name means "laughter".
God's promise fulfilled.

"Now Sarah said, God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me"
Gen 21:6

God promise fulfilled
Our faithful God.

So, as we draw to a conclusion, can I invite you spend a moment reflecting on the ways in which God has shown himself to be faithful in our own lives. And to give thanks.

And then to spend a moment reflecting on what remains 'outstanding' – not of our perhaps rather selfish 'bucket lists' but the things we have striven for, for God, which remain unfulfilled?

And may we find, like Sarah in the tent, overhearing the visitors, that when we reach the end of our own resources, there we find God.