

## ***Seen, and seeing... with the God Who Sees***



*Learning to see like a child. Like the God who sees and delights in every tiny brown sparrow.*

There's this story in book of Genesis that we have the end of today.

The story of Abraham. Of Hagar, and Sarai. Of Isaac and Ishmael.

Abraham the great patriarch in whose tribe this is set.

Sarai, his wife – with all the social standing but no respect – she was beautiful – and rich - but barren; less than a woman in the eyes of the Hebrew community.

And Hagar, the Egyptian slave of the Hebrew woman.

She's at the bottom of the social pile. Poor, a slave, and black.

No voice, no status, no dignity – a possession of others.

Sarai gives Hagar to her husband, to provide a child.

Hagar's child would belong to Sarai legally, as Sarai owned Hagar.

Hagar was never asked her opinion. Or permission.

It was rape, and abuse.

It is in so many ways a story of such deep pains, and fears.

But also a story of discoveries and promises.

Before: Hagar was a defenceless slave.

Now: she is the pregnant concubine of the prosperous Abram, she is protected. She becomes Abram's wife.

Perhaps the pregnancy awakens Hagar's self-worth – her attitude changed. She sees herself as more than a slave – as a woman, and a life-bearer. She is given a glimpse of the truth, and she pushes back against Sarai's mistreatment of her.

After Sarai finally conceives, and has her own son – Abraham's heir - Hagar and her son become an embarrassment, and a challenge – Hagar is ill-treated and she runs with the baby into the wilderness, where she fears that they will die of thirst.

God meets her, and restores her advocacy and agency to her – he says her son will be hers, not Sarai's. He gives him a name (hardly anyone in the bible is named by God, but Ishmael is), and reveals to them a well of life-giving water. He sends her back to Sarai and Abraham, but with a new understanding of who she is ...

... in return ... Hagar names God – (no one, not even Moses, has done this.)

*She gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her:*

*"You are the God who sees me,"*

*for she said, "I have now seen the One who sees me."*

*That is why the well was called Beer Lahai Roi<sup>1</sup>;*

*(the well of the Living One who sees me)*

But, later, Sarai sees her son and heir playing with the child of the slave-woman. In their youth, the children are not inhibited by the painful story behind them, nor by social status, or the colour of their skin. They just play together.

Sarai is horrified – and afraid – she fears eating her up from within - and throws Hagar and Ishmael out once more. And once more the God Who Sees, sees those whom no one else sees – and gives them water, comfort and protection.

Eventually, after Abraham dies, ... Isaac and Ishmael bury him together<sup>2</sup>, and Isaac settles... poignantly ... near the well of Beer Lahai Roi (the well of the *God who sees*, where Hagar and Ishmael were saved by God). But the pains of their history are never addressed. The brothers are at odds all their life.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 16: 13 – 14 (the full story of Hagar begins in Genesis 16)

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 25

Isaac's own sons will be Esau – and Jacob, who swindles his older brother's inheritance<sup>3</sup>. And then Jacob's sons will be the twelve, ten of whom try to murder their younger brother, Joseph<sup>4</sup>.... and so the brokenness, unhealed, passes down through the generations.

And here we are, thousands of years later, descendants ourselves, so our faith tells us, from this story. And we see here too echoes of our own painful history – and the brokenness of the world in which we still live.

There are echoes here of the world's – and the church's - shameful history with slavery, and especially with the abuse of women within that. And the scars that are still here, and the prejudice, inequality and mono-chrome vision also still here. We see too the presence of modern slavery – the men, women and children trafficked and forced into labour, raped, abused, or used in prostitution. We see the pain of wars; the pain of innocent people caught up in death, loss, violences, fears and greeds far beyond their power to control. We see the effects on our planet of climate change, and the poorest in our global community bearing the larger weight of that.

A distance still between those who 'have' and those who 'have not' – where human dignity and worth are defined by purchasing power, and people are used or seen as collateral damage.

Perhaps, on a more intimate scale, we see the pains of our own stories, perhaps deep in our past, whose legacy still remains in our hearts and limits us through trauma, tenderness and bruises.

Perhaps we, like Hagar, cry out and wonder who will see.

Really, we all need to be seen. To be truly seen, known - and yet loved.

Perhaps we also need to know that the brokenness of the world is seen. That someone sees, knows and cares.

Perhaps we are brought to reflect on how our own actions or choices have impacted on others ... through choices we make about where we choose to see... or not see.

Jesus tells us today that we are so deeply seen. Seen in all our story, and loved, by the one who sees the little brown sparrow, and knows every hair on our head.

And he encourages us to see too. To dig deep, and to see clearly. In our own story, and as a church and society. We need to see to heal the hurt. To see our own wounds, honestly. And to learn to see each other as he sees.

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 25: 19 – 34, and Genesis 27

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 37

Any good counsellor will tell you that the first steps to healing are seeing and naming the hidden stories, the fears, and hurts that limit us, or scar us. And celebrating and seeking the good too.

Jesus, in our gospel today, names the fears. He doesn't pull his punches, or sugar-coat the Christian life. He knows the power of truly seeing, truly knowing.

If you're a Harry Potter fan it might remind you of Harry Potter's insistence on naming *He who must not be named* – 'Voldemort' – and thus removing the power of the un-named. Naming fear is the first step from it to freedom.

But Jesus also winds the reasons for fear together with words of reassurance and love: Any fear we can name is met with his greater love and power. Just as Hagar, lost and dying in the drought of the wilderness meets with God's greater presence, and the water of life.

Don't be afraid, he says:

Love, not fear, has the final word. And in the Love That Sees - life is found.

Any good counsellor has to find the source of the pain.

Any good peacemaker or mediator has to find and address the source of the hurt.

*Do not think*, says Jesus, *that I have come to bring peace, but a sword*<sup>5</sup>. Scripture tells us *the word of God is ... sharper than any double-edged sword, it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart*<sup>6</sup>. There is a good peace that comes from justice and harmony. But there is a harmful complacency too, that Jesus talks about here; that comes from putting up with the wrongs and the pains in the world because either we don't see it, or we are afraid to speak out.

Jesus will *disown the "one who disowns him"*<sup>7</sup> – Jesus has the ultimate power to cast out fear and darkness. He promises a time and a justice where all who have disowned the voice of love will stand to account; where what is warped and broken – in society and in our own lives and heart - will be cast aside - and humanity restored to the deeper truth of what he created it to be.

Those echoes in our story from Hagar are real.

Just as her story was riven with injustice and brokenness, and as she herself was abused and deprived of voice and human dignity, so such injustices still tear our world apart.

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 10: 34

<sup>6</sup> Hebrews 4:12

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 10: 33

But just as she was seen, restored and lifted up by the God who sees, so we are too.

Jesus tells us to look at the children, for they show us the way<sup>8</sup>. Little Isaac and Little Ishmael, playing together, innocent of the fears and politics above their heads. To learn again to see each other simply as 'brothers and sisters'. To see ourselves as children of God. And to insist on that truth.

Hold to your truth, says Jesus today; *what I say to you in the dark ... tell in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the rooftops.*

We are called to stand in the grace and the light of The One Who Sees - against the cycle of unhealed, un-named brokenness that passes down the generations, and the damage we make to creation and pass to those who follow after us. This is the grace of our baptism. To stand against sin, to reject evil. To over and again come to the well of the water of life to be washed clean, and to re-gain our sight of each other as sister and brother.

Do not be afraid to be who you are called to be, says Jesus. God knows every single hair on your head, every turn of your fingerprint, every cell in your skin; and every single one is precious. Be who you are in my Name, and proclaim the works and the presence and the power of love.

The love that values the tiny brown sparrow and lifts up the lowly.

The love of The God Who Sees.

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<sup>8</sup> Matthew 18: 3