

St Columba
14 Ordinary Sunday
Refugee Sunday

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Genesis 24: 34-38, 42-49
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

Chosen Journeys

Introduction to the readings:

Today we skip on number of years from last week's story of Isaac's near death experience. Sarah has died, so there will be only the one child for Sarah and Abraham through which God's promise of a multitude of descendants can be fulfilled. Today the focus of the story shifts from the presentation of male behaviour to a focus on a woman and her behaviour.

The portion of the story we will read tells of Abraham's effort to find a suitable wife for Isaac. Remember God has promised that a mighty nation, a multitude, will grow from Isaac, the child of Abraham and Sarah – and this is the beginning of the story of the next generation in that dynasty. This family saga is significant to the foundations of Jewish and Christian and Muslim faith and ethics. Not all of the story is admirable, as we saw last week – and the different Abrahamic faiths give emphasis to different aspects of that story- but it is a very human story with all the confidence and doubt, friendships and feuds that go on in family networks.

The threads we opened last week continue on this week and as the family drama unfolds over the next few weeks:

- the place of community,
- respect for strangers and messengers,

- the expectation of hospitality and
- the importance of choice.

Hospitality and choice are also themes in the Matthew reading. The writer presents to us Jesus offering a way of life to the community – inviting those who seek to follow in the ways of ‘wisdom’ (you will remember Jesus called himself a child of wisdom – a prophet of wisdom – **a messenger**). He encourages the community to stop being like squabbling children who can’t agree, and to hear the invitation of **hospitality**; of **friendship**.

As you listen to the readings listen for the **place and role of the messenger**, the place of **hospitality, and the importance of choice**.

On the back of your order of service there is a picture. Please will you look at it.

- How does it make you feel?
- What questions arise in you? (*Time for some response.*)

It seems to me this is a familiar dilemma for most of us: This way or that? What to choose?

Last week we noted the importance of free choice for ethical living. We also heard about the place of the community in process of choosing. In both the readings this week the focus on choice continues. I want to explore the Genesis reading more closely than the Matthew reading however, as it offers us a less familiar story and, what is even more unusual, it offers the decisions and actions of a woman for us to consider!

The fulcrum of this story, and therefore of all that unfolds hereafter in the development of the three religious traditions that have Abraham as their common ancestor, is the young woman Rebekah. We first meet her at the well where she **chooses** to give water to a stranger. She is acting on the cultural hospitality protocol to provide for travellers – water and food and later a place to rest. She provides also for his animals. She could have chosen not to do this – she didn't know this strange man, a servant. Yet he turned out to have come from a kinsman, from Abraham on an important quest.

Abraham was also acting within cultural protocol when he chose to send his servant to seek a wife for his son from amongst his own tribal network. It was important to secure land and wealth by arranging marriages from within the tribe, rather than dispersing land and wealth by marrying outside of the tribal network. Abraham was seeking to secure what he had gained over the years for the benefit of the whole tribal family, including God's favour and blessing. But this could not be done without the cooperation of Rebekah!

And so a woman is the nexus of all the interlocking choices that are being made as the story unfolds. According to marriage protocols she had to consent willingly to the marriage proposal and could not be coerced. She is asked by her mother if she is prepared to travel to the tent of an unknown man, the son of Abraham who they did know. She agrees, and in an echo of Sarah and Abraham's own story, chooses to leave the house of her mother and father and travel into unknown territory to become part of a family she did not know. Now it might become possible for God to fulfil the promise, to Abraham that he would be blessed with a multitude of descendants, and his heirs would always be blessed and held within the eyes of God. God's capacity to act in ways that would fulfil his promise was also dependent on the choice this young woman was to make! (*Interesting*)

There are many opportunities for us to ask ‘what if...’ in this story. What if a different choice had been made? Always we are tempted to ask that question... what if? And sometimes as the story of the descendants of Sarah and Abraham unfolds we can see, with hindsight, different choices that might have been better!

But that is life, as they say. We choose, and then we have to live with the choice.

What can help guide the choices we make, ensuring they are more likely to be ethically positive, is to consider who benefits from the choice and how the choice will impact on others. We can set as a standard for our choices our own personal aggrandisement, or we can consider the wellbeing of those nearest and dearest only, or we can take a more comprehensive view and consider the community/family network we are part of and how they are likely to be affected, now and into the future.

Rebekah was a strong young woman, confident, she knew she had a responsibility to the wellbeing of her community and chose to act accordingly. She was confident enough in her own ability to make the choice work -but she could not be certain!

And that is where our lives and the many choices we have to make intersect with this story.

We can’t be certain of the outcome of our choices, but in making our choices we can be mindful of gracious hospitality and loving kindness that gives life and hope to those who need it. The expansive loving kindness of God promises that the life-giving dynamic of God’s spirit will be with us whatever the choice so that life and love and well-being can flourish.

We can remember the chastisement in the Matthew reading and stop squabbling like children in the market place and chose instead to follow God's way as revealed to us in Jesus.

If we did so, it might help the Church out of its current squabble over the ordained ministry of people who are gay or lesbian (in the papers again this week). Let's make the best choices we can!