

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost – Sea Sunday

9th July 2023

First Reading: Genesis 24:34-38,42-49,58-67

The servant whom Abraham had sent said to Laban: 'I am Abraham's servant. The LORD has greatly blessed my master, and he has become wealthy; he has given him flocks and herds, silver and gold, male and female slaves, camels and donkeys. And Sarah my master's wife bore a son to my master when she was old; and he has given him all that he has. My master made me swear, saying, "You shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, in whose land I live; but you shall go to my father's house, to my kindred, and get a wife for my son."

I came today to the spring, and said, "O LORD, the God of my master Abraham, if now you will only make successful the way I am going! I am standing here by the spring of water; let the young woman who comes out to draw, to whom I shall say, 'Please give me a little water from your jar to drink,' and who will say to me, 'Drink, and I will draw for your camels also' – let her be the woman whom the LORD has appointed for my master's son."

Before I had finished speaking in my heart, there was Rebekah coming out with her water jar on her shoulder; and she went down to the spring, and drew. I said to her, "Please let me drink." She quickly let down her jar from her shoulder, and said, "Drink, and I will also water your camels." So I drank, and she also watered the camels. Then I asked her, "Whose daughter are you?" She said, "The daughter of Bethuel, Nahor's son, whom Milcah bore to him." So I put the ring on her nose, and the bracelets on her arms. Then I bowed my head and worshipped the LORD, and blessed the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who had led me by the right way to obtain the daughter of my master's kinsman for his son. Now then, if you will deal loyally and truly with my master, tell me; and if not, tell me, so that I may turn either to the right hand or to the left.'

And they called Rebekah, and said to her, 'Will you go with this man?' She said, 'I will.' So they sent away their sister Rebekah and her nurse along with Abraham's servant and his men. And they blessed Rebekah and said to her, "May you, our sister, become thousands of myriads; may your offspring gain possession of the gates of their foes." Then Rebekah and her maids rose up, mounted the camels, and followed the man, and the servant took Rebekah and went his way.

Now Isaac had come from Beer-lahai-roi and was settled in the Negeb. Isaac went out in the evening to walk in the field, and, looking up, he saw camels coming. And Rebekah looked up, and when she saw Isaac, she slipped quickly from the camel and said to the servant, "Who is the man over there, walking in the field to meet us?" The servant said, "It is my master." So she took her veil and covered herself. And the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent. He took Rebekah, and she became his wife, and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.

Second Reading: Romans 7:15-25a

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the

good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Gospel: St Matthew 11:16-19,25-30

At that time Jesus said, 'To what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market-places and calling to one another, "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn." For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, "He has a demon"; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!" Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.

I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'

A Reflection for Sea Sunday

Just over four years ago, I had the privilege of visiting the Seafarer's Centre in Invergordon. Invergordon, being a deep water port, sees many visits from the largest cruise ships as well as all types of merchant vessels transporting cargo around the world and serving the offshore energy industry.

The Seafarers' Centre is in the Church of Scotland and is run by the Sailors' Society, one of quite a number of missions established in the 19th century to serve the needs of seafarers and their families, and which now operates in many ports across the world. It is run by the Port Chaplain and others who are mostly volunteers, providing facilities for crew members who often have limited shore leave and little money. On the day I visited, there were seafarers in from The Philippines, India, Brazil, Zimbabwe, the UK and the United States amongst other places.

Seafarers are often away from their homes for many months so one of the most important services the Centre provides is wi-fi to contact their families, something they are often unable to do on board the ships. Whilst I was there, one man was using this to speak to his 4-year-old son in The Philippines. The Centre also sells SIM cards and reduced rate telephone cards, provides advice, support and refreshments, and has a minibus to take seafarers on shopping and sight-seeing trips when time permits – as they said, everyone wants to see Loch Ness, not just those paying for an expensive cruise!

Sea Sunday, the day on which many churches remember seafarers and their families and give thanks for their lives and work, is traditionally kept on the second Sunday in July. Although our Lectionary does not have specific readings for Sea Sunday, I think many of seafarers would relate to the today's passage from Genesis, the story of Abraham's servant – someone on a long and probably dangerous journey far from all that is familiar. A few weeks ago we heard how Abraham and Sarah followed God's call and left their family and all that they knew, their home, to go to new land that God would show them. It was a journey into the unknown. Now, many years later, the servant is being sent back to the old family lands to find a wife for Abraham and Sarah's son, Isaac. Modern seafarers are not generally journeying into the unknown, but some certainly spend long periods of time on journeys to strange (to them) lands far away from family and home.

In the ports of the west coast, we don't get the very large vessels that come into Invergordon, but we are familiar with the ferry and the fishing boats, the cruise ships and other craft that come in and out of our harbours on a daily basis. They remind us of our dependence on the sea and seafarers for much of what we enjoy in life in terms of goods and food that come from other countries as well as our local seafood.

Many of the people of these islands have traditionally been sea-faring people – for most of the history of this part of the world, a boat was the obvious way to get about on- roads are relatively recent innovation. And there is a history of the ancient peoples of our own lands travelling in small boats on long journeys to new places. Legend tells us that St Brendan the Navigator, a 6th century Irish monk and contemporary of Columba, led a group in search of the 'Promised Land for Saints', and were the first Europeans to visit America. Would that have been possible in the simple coracles or *currach* of the time? They were, after all, just flimsy craft made of skins stretched over a simple wooden frame with a sail. The exploits of the explorer Tim Severin described in his 1978 book and the associated film 'The Brendan Voyage', suggests it was.

Or you may know of the Kon-Tiki expedition of Thor Heyerdahl. He demonstrated that the Polynesian Islands of the South Pacific could have been populated by people from South America travelling for thousands of miles on balsawood rafts, as the traditional stories claimed.

Some years ago, I read a book by the spiritual writer Margaret Silf called 'At Sea with God'. We are familiar with the idea of our Christian or spiritual lives being likened to a pilgrimage or journey. In this book, she used the analogy of a sea voyage in the same way. She wrote:

'Our life is like a voyage of discovery. Every moment is an opportunity to discover something of the mystery of God and of God's desire for our personal living and growing.'

In the book, she urges readers to think about what sort of boat it is that they are sailing through life, whether they have crew with them or are sailing single-handed, where they are sailing, whether the waters are calm or stormy and how they vary. These are the circumstances of our lives, some of which we have control over and others we do not. But then she goes on to encourage readers to think about whether they always stay in safe, familiar waters, hugging the coastline perhaps, or whether they are prepared to head out into the open sea and seek what is beyond the horizon, to let God do the steering. It's worth pondering.

For the ancient sailors, theirs really was a journey into the unknown and to a great extent they had no option but to let God do the steering. Nowadays, ships have charts and navigational aids that allow them to know exactly where

they are and plot an accurate course to their destination. We too have the equivalent of navigational aids for our spiritual journey: if we will let God do the steering, God will guide the voyage of our lives in many ways: through the words of scripture, doctrines and creeds, through prayer and meditation, through communal worship and sacrament, through the prophetic words of others, through the natural world...

When I visited the Seafarer's centre at Invergordon, I was struck that one of the most popular things they give out is Bibles, including children's Bibles to take home to families. Working on board ships, most have good English and it seems that some seafarers, at least, still want God to do the steering.

In one of my commentaries, today's Gospel passage comes in a section entitled 'Israel's Crisis of Faith'. Jesus says that those he calls 'this generation', but which could apply to any generation, are like squabbling children who refuse to play each other's games. In a similar way, they have refused to listen to words of John the Baptist calling them to repentance or to recognise the words and works of Jesus that reveal him as the Messiah. They have reached a crisis point, having lost sight of where they are and where they are going.

But Jesus is also Saviour, and so he moves into a prayer of thanks that not everyone is blind to what God is doing. He issues this wonderful invitation:

Come to me all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.'

To return to the nautical analogy, It is not a promise that hereafter we will only sail in calm waters. But it is a promise that, if we allow God's hand to control the tiller of our lives, that God will steer us safely through both the calms and storms of our lives.