

Unexpected consequences from the ordinary

Genesis 21:8-21; Matthew 10:24-39; 13:10-16

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Well folks, we're in what's called "ordinary time" – that is the long, long number of Sundays before Advent. That's 20 Sundays until All Saints Day and 25 to Christ the King and the beginning of Advent.

But ordinary isn't ordinary. There's a lot that happens, stories are told, healing takes place and the disciples learn their trade. The church's colour for ordinary time is green because this is a time of more verdant faith – a time of growth. These stories are soil from which we grow understanding. These are the stories of faithfulness and doubt; obedience and disobedience.

It is "a time in which the mystery of Christ is called to penetrate ever more deeply into history until all things are finally caught up in Christ."¹ It is a slow time to explore and a time to more deeply understand. "Jesuit priest and writer Anthony de Mello puts it well: "Some people will never learn anything because they grasp too soon. Wisdom, after all, is not a station you arrive at, but a manner of traveling. . . . To know exactly where you're headed may be the best way to go astray. Not all who loiter are lost."²

Let's loiter for the next 20 weeks... and also address today's difficult texts³.

Matthew Gospel⁴ says "The disciples came to him and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?"

This is why I speak to them in parables:

"Though seeing, they do not see;
though hearing, they do not hear or understand.

In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah:

"You will be ever hearing but never understanding;
you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become calloused;
they hardly hear with their ears,

¹ US Conference of Catholic Bishops

² (from "When the Heart Waits: Spiritual Direction for Life's Sacred Questions (Plus)" by Sue Monk Kidd)

³ And there will be several over the coming weeks

⁴ Matthew 13:10, 14-16

and they have closed their eyes.
Otherwise they might see with their eyes,
hear with their ears,
understand with their hearts
and turn, and I would heal them.'

But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear.⁵

So much of what Jesus taught is about listening and *really* hearing – and not so much on predicting the future. There's a reason for that – God's plan will always trump ours. So, the best thing to do is listen carefully to see what glimpses we might discern. We remember the extraordinary – but it is in the ordinary where wisdom grows, slowly. It is in the dark – new things are born.

We have two difficult texts today. What happened to Hagar is just plain unfair and what Jesus is saying to his disciples is truly disturbing.

Jesus **IS** trying to put the wind up his disciples. When Jesus says "follow me" did not expect a kinder reception for them than what he already experienced. He does not. He warns them. What they are about to do will be divisive. Their families may disown them. They will face evil households – misinformation, undermining and gaslighting. There will be people who destabilise their confidence and spread false rumours. Jesus warns them, there is a fate worse than death – it is when you feel your soul attacked.⁶ That was probably not what they expected.

And yet he says, what is whispered in your ear, proclaim in the daylight. God hears. God cares. Do not be afraid – you are worth it. If the sparrows get that much attention how much more for you and your sons and daughters. Fear God but fear not any human authority. There are eternal consequences – way beyond this day. Again, they knew what they were supposed to do but they could never know we would read their stories thousands of years later nor how their actions impact on people today. People who pray and ascribe good fortune to the saints.

It could be said that Matthew's Gospel is one long commentary on what it means to acknowledge or deny Jesus. From the call of the disciples to the great commission, the text presents characters who say 'yes' or 'no', with stories of faithfulness and unfaithfulness and with parables exposing both devotion and defiance.⁷ This is not Jesus meek and mild. He is bringing a radical message that will challenge the structures and power bases of the old order. There will be push-back.

⁵ Matthew 13:10-16

⁶ And that is what causes moral injury

⁷ Texts for preaching, Brueggeman, Cousar et al. Year A, p. 378

And for every action – there is a reaction. One of the unintended consequences was that peace and love did not automatically convert the world. There is no excusing the cruelty and horror of the crusades but that they are a consequence of Christian churches no one saw coming. When the powerless become the power they exert it, And when the old order of the church has been challenged – even in modern times, the push back has been anything but loving. We became the power that tried to quash the voices.

And now to Hagar, the slave girl impregnated without her permission and turned out into the desert because of a jealous wife⁸. This is not a nice story, is it? The eldest son inherits the farm – that’s the law! In this story, Hagar’s child, Abrahams eldest son, is supposed to inherit the farm but apparently, during the celebration of his weaning, Sarah claimed she saw... “the son whom Hagar, the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking.” Come on! How old is a child when they are weaned? Do you really think he was making fun of Sarah? Sarah was determined that Isaac would inherit the dynasty – no matter what the law said. She demands that the boy and his mother be cast out.⁹

So Abraham does what he should – he takes it to God. God says, don’t worry “through Isaac your offspring will be reckoned” – “I will make the son of the slave a nation also because he is your offspring”.

And so he did – Islam. Genesis in which this story appears was written about 1000 years before Jesus. Islam is one of the world’s youngest major religions began formally around 700 years after Jesus. There is a whole chapter in the Quran about Jesus. Who knew? The unintended consequences creating two faiths of the same father, recognising the same Old Testament and prophets, maintaining similar dietary rules and sabbaths but at war with each other on and off for 1300 years.

Were these unintended consequences the result of an extraordinary story? No. It is only extraordinary because it’s here in the Old Testament and speaks of God’s intent but the domestic situation, the wife, the slave, the illegitimate children – all part of ordinary domestic life of the period. Perhaps a relatively wealthy household but nothing special. A normal household.

Abraham and Sarah thought they knew God’s plan. But humans can never fully know God’s plan. It may not surprise you to know that the basic tenets of Islam are: there is only one God; believe in the prophet and Love thy neighbour. The five pillars of faith will be familiar to you too: Profess your faith; pray (5 times a day); give a portion of your income; fast (during Ramadan); and make a pilgrimage (to Mecca). Do we not

⁸ Let’s not even begin to talk about generational trauma- but simply look at the Middle East today

⁹ Look at the bright side. In any other dynasty, she would have killed him and poisoned his mother

believe that we must profess our faith? Pray? Give to the church? and for some, fast during Lent? Do I have to list the pilgrimages around the world and how profoundly moved Christians are when they visit the Holy Land?

I believe as I have always believed that God's plan in creating all religions is reconciliation of all things. That each faith's basic tenets are the same doesn't surprise me. Ultimately, they are designed to bring us together. It is humans and history that get in the way. That such a plan could grow out of an ordinary domestic quarrel – well that's extraordinary.

The next 20 weeks are an “invitation to follow God through the everyday landscapes of our lives” – domestic disputes and all. “But it isn't a call to the spiritually humdrum. Instead, *following* in the midst of the ordinary is to awaken ourselves to the extraordinariness that surrounds us. We're invited to find the unusual, the unbelievable, and the wonder of daily life. We journey through the prosaic to discover the poetry of faith. The mundane is transfigured and magical.

For all the hoopla of Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost, the truth of the matter is that God is the God of Ordinary Time. All the ordinary, regular, forgettable years. It has all been a journey. Both Matthew and Abram's calls began with a journey. Sometimes we just haven't noticed.

All along, we've been traveling to a new land — even if we haven't gone far — that place where tax collectors and sinners are friends, where touching a hem heals, and where wakes become celebrations.”¹⁰

It is the ordinary things we say; the cast off lines to the side, careless statements; unthinking and unremembered generous acts; overheard stale comments; unconscious compliments; smiles and frowns; the times we listened and the times we refused – all the forgettable transactions of living – all have unexpected consequences. Many much grander than we can imagine.

Let us wallow in this extraordinary ordinary time.

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¹⁰ Diana Butler Bass from The Cottage dianabutlerbass@substack.com, 11 June 2023

