

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, June 25, 2017
Rev. Andrew Reid
Genesis 21:8-21; Matthew 10:24-31
“More value than many sparrows”

Every preacher loves it when the Spirit moves and leads, and a sermon just flows onto the paper. When that happens, the balance in sermon preparation shifts from the usual 10% inspiration and 90% perspiration to 90% inspiration to 10% perspiration. Which is great. Though it would be even greater if the Spirit would give some indication ahead of time that that was going to happen.

You see, I thought I knew where this sermon was going to go. It would focus on the Gospel passage and those wonderful words of Jesus that talk about comfort, assurance and care, and how the hairs of our heads are numbered, and how *‘you are of more value than many sparrows.’* But not so. Let me explain.

On Thursday afternoon, Frank Walsh and I attended the Donor Appreciation Reception and Annual General Meeting of Mission Services London. We were there to represent both you, the congregation, and the Thomas Kent Trust, for the financial support that we – that you – give to Mission Services.

As I always am at a meeting like that, I was enormously impressed with the work that Mission Services does in London. The Men’s Mission and Rehabilitation Centre; Rotholme Women’s and Family Shelter; Community Mental Health Programs; Addictions Treatment at Quintin Warner House; and the Mission Store: all, in the words of Mission Services’ mission statement, actively responding to people experiencing need, affirming human dignity and inspiring hope.

Then on Friday morning, I sat down to write the sermon I thought I was

going to write. But I found myself reading the texts for today in a different way, with what I had heard the day before about Mission Services ringing in my ears. So I turned back a few chapters in Genesis and read the whole story of Hagar. And I was struck by how much of what Hagar faced and experienced is still being faced and experienced by people today, people right here in London. And this sermon went in a completely different direction.

The story of Hagar begins with fertility issues, and the strain that infertility places on personal self-esteem and on marital relationships. Genesis 16:1: *now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children.*

It continues with it being socially acceptable to pay less than a living wage. In fact, it goes farther than that, to the extreme of slavery. Genesis 16:2: *(Sarai) had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar . . .*

Then there is xenophobia, racial prejudice, ethnic discrimination. Genesis 16:2: *(Sarai, a Hebrew woman) had an **Egyptian** slave-girl . . .*

There is the sexual exploitation of a vulnerable individual, something that sounds remarkably like what we would call human trafficking. Genesis 16:2: *Sarai said to Abram, 'Go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.'*

There are the inevitable conflicts and jealousies that are created by trying to maintain a double family life. Genesis 16:4,6: *when (Hagar) saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. When Sarai complained about this to Abram, he said to Sarai, 'Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please.' Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she ran away from her.*

There is the legal question of the rights of stepchild to inherit from her or his parents. Genesis 21:9-10: *Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. So she said to*

Abraham, 'Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.'

There is weak parenting on Abraham's part. He still caved in to Sarah's demands and let her do as she wished. Even though we are told in Genesis 21:11: *The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son.*

There is failure to make adequate provision for the welfare of the helpless and vulnerable. Genesis 21:14: *Abraham took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away.*

There is food poverty. Genesis 21:15: *the water in the skin was gone.*

There is homelessness. Genesis 21:15: *Hagar cast the child under one of the bushes.*

There is child abandonment. Genesis 21:15-16: *Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off.*

There is hunger to the point of starvation. Genesis 21:16: *'Do not let me look on the death of the child.'*

There is utter and abject emotional despair. Genesis 21:16: *Hagar lifted up her voice and wept.*

And finally and at long last, there is advocacy for the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the vulnerable, the abandoned, the rejected, the exploited, the abused and the mistreated. Genesis 21:17: *God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, 'What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. . .'*

How many of these issues are people facing today? How many of these issues are people in London facing today? How many of these issues are Mission Services London working to address? I suspect the answer to each of these questions is the same: all of them.

And through your support for Mission Services as a congregation and through the Thomas Kent Trust, and through all the other missions that New St James and its people support – all 82 of them that you read about in the last issue of the New Connection – you are working to address them too. At the very least, you are partners with Mission Services through your financial support, and through the hours of effort many of you personally give, either to Mission Services or to the other agencies that you work for.

Mission Services' vision is: That all people are accepted, valued, and can thrive in a caring community. Of course, in an ideal world, there would be no agencies like Mission Services. In an ideal world, there would be no need for agencies like Mission Services.

But God's kingdom is both here and yet to come. And until God's kingdom comes, we will not have an ideal world. So until God's kingdom comes, we must commit ourselves to live and to work in the knowledge that as Jesus said, two sparrows are sold a penny. *'Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.'* Matthew 10:29-31.