

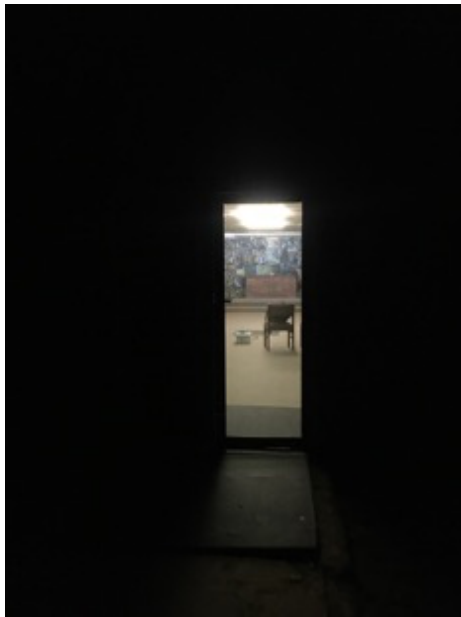
Do to her that which is good in your eyes...



Detail from a hanging in the side chapel at St Mary's

22 April, Celia Kemp, Benedictus

Genesis 16



St Mary's Chapel

A church which sets great store by tangible fulfilment, spiritual security, hopes satisfied – is bound to be like this – a warm little house on an enormous black moor, inside, warm and content, outside, weeping and loss, intensified by the very presence of the unattainable little haven.

*Rowan Williams
A Truce of God*

TO START A DREAM

I had a dream about a year back.

I was on a holiday and was staying with a group in a rented house.

And it was a lovely house, Scandinavian, lots of pale wood and full of light.

One day we came back from touring around and there was water on the floor.

I thought oh, this house will be hard to keep clean because it is so pale and all.

And was about to wipe it up but looking closer it was mucky and I started to wonder why it was there.

I realised it was a trail left by someone and I followed it and it took me out of the house, to a sort of apocalyptic landscape behind with towering rubbish heaps of ash everywhere.

I found the person – a relative of mine - cowering, terrified, in a hole in the ground.

I thought it was insanely risky, the ash heaps were liable to fall and smother them, and so the dream ended with me trying to persuade them to come back inside.

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I am part of a group from *Mpartnwe*, Alice Springs, called *Streams in the Desert* and this is the second of a two-part series where I take you to where we meet and the sorts of things we discuss.



Swimming at Atherreyurre at the Telegraph Station, 2023

We meet just now in the riverbed by the original “Alice Springs” at the top end of town, this is next to the original telegraph station, which later became the Bungalow, a home for what we would now call stolen generation children, who lived there in the 1930s and early 1940s.

The Todd River (or *Lhere Mparntwe*) runs down through town and at the bottom it runs past what was the St Mary's Children's Home.

This is where we met in 2021/2 (and here is a picture of the Todd in full flood running past it).



*But let justice run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream.
Amos 5:24*

St Mary's was run by the Anglican church and the government from 1946 til 1972 and maybe 3-400 what they then called 'half caste' children lived there.



St Mary's Hostel in the 1950s

The first Anglican priest here was a chaplain to the Bungalow and helped found St Mary's so this history is very much an Anglican one.

You will likely have heard of some of the people that grew up at St Mary's.

Freda Glynn who founded CAAMA radio and is the mother of the film-makers Erica Glynn and Warwick Thornton did, so did Rosalie Kunoth Monks.

In October last year the Anglican Diocese of the NT announced they were selling St Mary's.



Plaque on the Outside of St Mary's Chapel

The St Mary's Stolen Generation Group have been seeking to return to the site to work for remembrance, healing and for educating the future generations for a number of years now.

All our footprints are all around St Mary's, that was our home,
and all our footprints are still trying to lead us back to it.

Ronda Ross

Member of the St Mary's Stolen Generation Group¹

They were not consulted about the sale and have, thus far, not been able to convince the church to give them any guarantees at all of ongoing connection to it.

I am working with the Group at this time and *Streams* has been wrestling with the theological implications of the Stolen Generations - and so this talk today.

AND TO SCRIPTURE

Genesis 16 is a difficult read.

God has promised Abram (who later became Abraham) that he will be the father of countless descendants.

In his defence it *has been* 11 years since he received this promise, he and Sarai *still* don't have a child and they are old.

Also, in the world view back then, Hagar belonged to Sarai, and this was a common way of procuring children.

And we are told Hagar has become uppity; her pregnancy is clearly affecting relationships in the camp.

¹ <http://stmarysstolengeneration.org/quotes.html>

And yet, and yet, Sarai and Abram are the chosen people carrying the covenant promise of God.

Abram becomes Abraham the father of, and the exemplar of, faith.

And they behave like *this*.

It is written so we know it is bad.



Tree in the Riverbed alongside St Mary's

Hagar is....passed from person to person. Neither Abram nor Sarai ever calls her by her name. They treat her as a slave, not a person, and to recognise that she is also a person would get in the way of their plans.

Tikva Frymer-Kensky

Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of their Stories

Abram tells Sarai to do 'what is good in your eyes' and what is good in Sarai's eyes is afflicting Hagar so badly she runs away.

Neither Abram or Sarai really see Hagar as a person at all.

Nor - at this time -do they see God clearly and in particular the power of his promise.

But God sees Hagar.

And Hagar sees God.

And this passage sharply raises the question who is seen? And who isn't seen?

(The Hebrew word translated spring is ayin, which also means eyes.)

Scripturally a spring is life bubbling up both now but also into the future.

This is the first spring carrying such a promise.

This is the first announcement of the birth of a child with a special role in God's design of history.

This is the first appearance of an angel.

Hagar is the only woman in Hebrew Scripture to be told her descendants will be numerous (like Abraham was).

She is the only woman whose experience is enshrined in a place name.

God is speaking directly to Hagar, three times we are told:

The angel of the Lord said to her
The angel of the Lord said to her
And the angel of the Lord said to her

And Hagar speaks back, she is the only person in the whole of Scripture who gives God a name; El roi, the God who sees.

Hagar is a theologian, you could say.

In her darkness God comes bringing life, a way and a future truth, a promise, she can hold to.

Hagar matters.

But neither Hagar, nor her son, are the chosen people.

And Hagar is sent right back into her oppressive situation.

When Paul looks back at the promise of children to an aged Abraham in Romans 4 he says, in a passage pivotally important for the Protestant church:

Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed, and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be". Without weakening in the faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead – since he was about a hundred years old – and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. This is why "it was credited to him as righteousness".

Romans 4:18-21

This is... not at all what we see in Genesis 16.

What do we make of this?

TURNING NOW TO OUR STOLEN GENERATIONS HISTORY

Gordon Briscoe was born at the Bungalow and he lays out its origins like this:

The Native institutions were originally created because of what was perceived as the growing 'half-caste problem'. The population explosion was mainly the result of enforced and sometimes casual sexual relationships between European, Asian and Afghan men and Aboriginal women of all ages.

Many of these transport camps created around freshwater were without governance and the children and women suffered throughout their lives as a result of living in places where there was no "rule of law"....As the half-caste population grew, the small number of white women...began to panic. They panicked not only because they saw the presence of half-caste children in the same classrooms as disadvantaging their white children, but also because their white husbands had sired these same children. The increasing presence of half-caste children aroused deep-seated fears and anxiety in the settler women. Their men were equally intent on denying the existence of these same offspring...Meanwhile, the children themselves were forced to rely on these same belligerent, brutal and racist males, their fathers, for food...

Gordon Briscoe

Racial Folly: A twentieth century Aboriginal Family

(Disclaimer; this is of course not every story, humans are relentlessly particularly, there were couples who stayed together, though marriage was illegal, and raised their kids, there were men who kept connection with their kids etc)

The Aboriginal families of the children, and particularly their mothers (who include what we would call aunts) had no say at all in the creation of the laws and policies that removed their kids.

And so their consent was not required nor was there any official requirement for the maintenance of any sort of ongoing relationship at all.

Like Hagar, the women are good for sleeping with but are not fully persons somehow.

A significant percentage of the population ended up in these institutions and these policies have a huge and ongoing influence here.

The children, now elderly, also struggle to be seen and heard.

Whilst not every child came to be in the homes in the same way it is indisputable that many children were removed against the wishes of their families (and this pattern occurred Australia wide and in colonies overseas).

And yet when they describe what happened to them they are told they were not 'stolen', they are making it up. Still. When I talk about what is going on people tell me this too.

Nor do we seem to be able to fully grapple with what it was to grow up in the homes.

The argument can run we 'meant well', there were some very good people involved and the children were educated so it must have been, well, 'all good'.

I still have a lot to learn about this but it was not 'all good'.

Both the Bungalow and St Mary's had child sexual abuse for some periods. Both places had very poor conditions and inadequate food for periods. Both places had some of the most extraordinary carers – blackfella and whitefella – as well as some of the worst.

I would say the Bungalow was very troubled, Bob Randall (who wrote the Stolen Generations Anthem 'Brown Skinned Baby') describes it like this:

We were beautiful children because we had a beautiful culture [and] then we found ourselves in this institution where we were never anything but trash...

Bob Randall (re the Bungalow)²

And St Mary's was a very good home for some periods of its history (the start and the end in particular) – by the standard of children's homes - but not in other periods.

There *was* love and care and sacrifice and life-long connections made.

And many raised in both places went on to do extraordinary things.

But a generation of children were institutionalised, with all that means, and many grew up apart from the love of family.

And a generation of families were shattered by the removal of their children.

So it isn't a simple story. None of our stories are.

Given all this our moral evaluation of it all is often strangely thin.

Yes good people can be grace amidst troubled things, but the trouble remains real.

Or we can step in to do a good thing but somehow also become complicit in harmful policies.

And the stories from those who had power can be both truthful but mistaken- we are often blind to the parts of reality that bring into question the goodness of us and ours.

Sarai, after all, did what was good in her eyes.

Strangely our theological discussions in 2023 can seem incapable of the complexity shown in Genesis 16.

BACK TO THEOLOGY

There is something...interesting about God's promise in Genesis 16.

Hagar mothers her own line.

There is no suggestion Ishmael should be part of what becomes Israel.

The promise of God is that he will be separate but in their face.

² <https://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2013/10/10/3866182.htm>

Tikva Frymer-Kensky describes this as Ishmael being Israel's 'God-approved alter ego'.³

Israel is going to have to live out its destiny next to, but never assimilating, Ishmael.

The poor behaviour of Sarai and Abram results in ongoing difference built in and it is meant to be that way.

Abram and Sarai must have listened to Hagar's voice when she went back.

The boy *was* named Ishmael.

The site *was* named El Roi.

The encounter, and the promise, is right there in Scripture and we read it today.

And yet in Genesis 21 Hagar and Ishmael are driven out again.

I am still wrestling with what all this says about what it means to be 'chosen'.

And what are we to make of all this post Christ?

Looking back you would have to say the Christ-figure in this Chapter is Hagar, afflicted and unjustly driven out.

Or as Phyllis Trible provocatively puts it:

This Egyptian slave woman is stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted for the transgressions of Israel. She is bruised for the iniquities of Sarah and Abraham; upon her is the chastisement that makes them whole.

Phyllis Trible, Texts of Terror



Back fence at St Mary's

Or, less controversially, God coming as way, truth and life to Hagar is – well Christ, is it not?

³ Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of their Stories

But it is Isaac the child of Abraham and Sarah that carries forward the story that has Moses and the Torah David, the prophets and eventually Jesus.

These things are the heart of my life, as is meeting as church with others who also care about them.

It is easy to critique organised groupings of people but the fact remains we need them as we ever did.

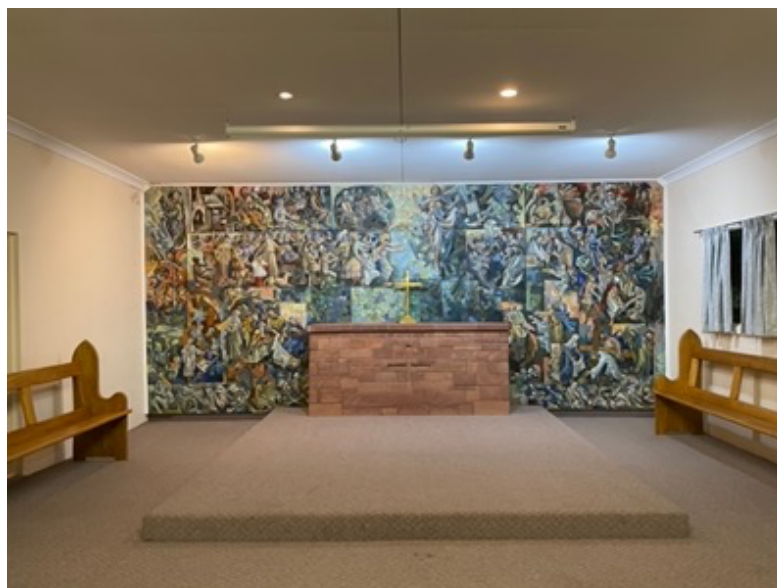
And any group has limits and boundaries.

(All groups have a myriad of rules, mostly unwritten, but enforced just the same. And that is necessary.)

And so, as church in all the places, we continue to have walls, whilst knowing full well that Christ comes outside our walls.

If we hurt people, and they leave, we don't try to cajole them back in without considering what drove them out in the first place – like I did in my dream.

Or just clean up the trail they made as they went and forge on without them.



The Robert Czakó Mural in the Chapel at St Mary's

We are all devastated and hurt that it is being sold. We feel like it is just wiping out the history of our childhood. Like 'get rid of that we'll get rid of the problem. Erase it. If we erase the buildings we are going to erase the problems.

*Eileen Moseley
Member of the St Mary's Stolen Generation Group⁴*

Christ comes in the cry of the afflicted, particularly in those we ourselves have afflicted.

We remain connected to those we hurt and that connection holds truth about who we are.

⁴ <http://stmarysstolengeneration.org/quotes.html>

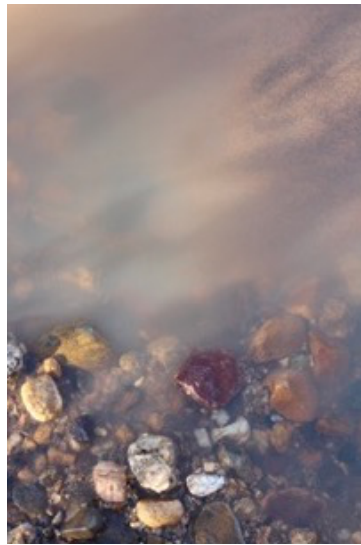
I believe we need to stand in this truth before we can find a living way forward.

And so the work the St Mary's Stolen Generation Group are seeking to do – you might say it is 'truth-telling about history' to quote the Uluru Statement from the Heart - is both a gift and a necessary work of the church.

IN CONCLUSION

For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ.

1 Corinthians 10:4



The River running just north of St Mary's

Christ is a rock who is also a living stream.

And so he is on the move and he comes where he comes.

And Christianity is recognising, listening to and following the living Christ, whether he is found in our midst or outside our boundaries.



Detail from the Robert Czakó Mural in St Mary's Chapel

For more information on St Mary's go to <http://stmarysstolengeneration.org/>



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