

In the name of God; Father and Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

I give grateful thanks to the bloggers Dan Clendinen and Linda Fabian Pepe for ideas underlying this homily. A few years ago now, I was standing at the side of a grave in Robie St. Cemetery. A group of strangers had gathered from around the province for the burial of a man unknown to me; I was filling in for another priest. The dead man had been a gay man and a well-known and flamboyant drag queen. I had been informed that he had asked a woman to sing a song that was special to him at the graveside service. Since she was a jazz singer, I wondered what popular song she would present. Imagine my surprise when she stepped up to the grave, opened her mouth and belted out with amazing passion *"I sing because I'm happy, I sing because I'm free, for his eye is on the sparrow and I know he watches me."* Where I did not expect it, it was a powerful message about trust in God from a dead man to his living friends. And it gave me chills. Most you will know that *His Eye is on the Sparrow* is an old gospel tune, and it comes from Jesus' words in this morning's gospel reading from **Matthew**. There Jesus is instructing his disciples as he sends them out to proclaim the message of God's love, grace and care for the first time on their own. He warns them that they will likely be persecuted, ridiculed and disregarded. He tells them **"Do not be afraid."** And he explains why: because God's care is always over them, as it is for the smallest of creatures, like the sparrows; the cheapest and least valued form of life in the Jerusalem market place – but important in the sight of the Creator. And the hairs of our heads, says Jesus, are counted. We can assume that holds true whether there be many of them or just a few. God sees, God hears, God knows. The message – we matter, hugely, to the one who creates and sustains us in life. That is the bedrock and foundation of all creative, courageous and fear-free living. It is also a particular way of looking at the world and other people. Now, some would say that this care of God is not evident when people are persecuted, abandoned, made to flee their country, tortured, or killed as we see every day on the news. Jesus responds that the care is present even then and perhaps especially then. Our task is to have eyes to perceive it.

That is the message I take from the first reading today in the book of **Genesis**. Some background to set up the story. Last week, we heard of God's promise to Abraham and Sarah of a child in their

old age. Of course, they laughed and did not believe this was possible. And because they didn't believe, they took matters into their own hands. Sarah insisted that Abraham father a child with her Egyptian slave Hagar, so that they could get the child God had promised. But the resulting pregnancy made Sarah jealous and so Hagar was banished to the desert to die. The story goes that God's angel found Hagar there and told her to return, promising her descendants too numerous to mention through this child, a promise very like the one made to Abraham and Sarah. Then the story tells of two wonderful namings. The child to be born will be called *Ishmael* which means *God hears*. And Hagar then names the God who has spoken to her, a rare privilege in these Hebrew Scriptures. She calls God "*the living One who sees me.*" Even for this woman in the worst of circumstances; enslaved, banished, and left alone to die, the experience of God's presence is powerfully there. She understands that God sees her and knows her and values her. These names foreshadow the gospel and the care for the sparrow and the hairs of our heads: God hears, God sees.

Then, fifteen years after Hagar was first banished to the desert, comes today's story. God's promise to Abraham and Sarah is fulfilled in God's time and without human manipulation. Baby Isaac is born and begins to flourish. But the celebrations reopen old wounds and competition breaks out again between Hagar and Sarah. So once again Hagar is banished, taking the teenage Ishmael with her to the desert. Wandering in the wilderness, their water skins become empty, and mother abandons son and waits at a distance because she cannot bear to watch him die. The Genesis text then makes a pun on Ishmael's name. It reads, "**God heard the boy crying.**" This is like it is saying "*God heard the boy named God hears.*" God then promises Hagar again "**I will make him a great nation**". It is clear that it is not the end for Hagar and Ishmael. The text says that God tells Hagar not to be afraid, to hold on to hope and then that God opens Hagar's eyes to reveal a spring of water. And so mother and son are saved. Ishmael, the story says, lived in the wilderness, became skilled with the bow, and married a woman from Egypt. The text tells us "**God was with the boy.**" What it does not tell us is that Ishmael comes to be regarded as the ancestor of the Islamic peoples, a cousin to Jews and Christians, as all three trace their ancestry to Abraham. But Ishmael is significant to us all because he bears the name *God hears*, which is a sacred promise to every human person born.

What we learn from Ishmael's story is that God is not blind, or deaf or dumb. God hears, God sees. No matter the circumstances played out in the world by human choices and human sinfulness, (and this Genesis story is full of them). No matter how we are treated by others, how uncertain our future may look, how deeply we are in grief or how helpless we may feel, God sees, God hears. No one is ever really alone, or without recourse to God's aid and care. From human error, evil, disbelief, jealousy and sin, God is always seeking to bring goodness, life and health. And most times, God is using other human beings, with all their flaws and their wonder, to repair and rebuild what has been so harmed and nearly destroyed. What is so important is that our eyes be opened, like Hagar's were, to see the spring of life giving water, to see the care of God. What is so important is that our eyes be opened, like Hagar's were, to be the care of God for others when we are called to be. It is when we see the care and become the care of God, that we know, as Jesus did, the infinite and unfailing eye of love and concern that is on us and on the hairs of our heads, on the whole world with its griefs and joys, and indeed on the smallest sparrow.

Thanks be to God for this marvellous grace. **Amen**