

God's Empathy

(Sermon by Cheryl Williams, preached at Footscray Baptist on June 21st, 2026 – Genesis 21:8-21 & Matthew 10:34-39)

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Banished, ostracised, displaced, sent away, kicked out, excluded. However, you describe it, Hagar is in a difficult place. Abandoned, starving and thirsty, trying to protect her young son, looking death in the face, she is desperate, at her wits end. There are many in our world today that face the same circumstances as Hagar did.

Hagar was an Egyptian woman. Young and fertile, a slave girl who worked in the household of Abraham and Sarah. No doubt, she was part of the possessions Abraham gained when he passed off his wife Sarah as his sister, and she became part of the harem of the Pharaoh. In exchange Abraham received sheep, cattle and slaves.

As time went on it became clear that Sarah could not have children, making it impossible to see how God's promise to have as many descendants as stars in the sky, could come to fruition. So, they decided that Hagar might be used to give Abraham a child. She gave birth to a son called Ishmael, and then, miraculously Sarah has her own child Isaac - that was the subject of last week's sermon.

These children grow up together, play together. Sarah grows increasingly bitter and jealous, thinking both boys will inherit the same things and have the same status - but to her, Isaac was special. Life for Hagar was getting increasingly difficult.

Sarah demands Abraham 'cast out' Hagar and Ishmael, forced displacement as it were. Abraham is caught in a bind - he doesn't want to send one of his son's away, but he also wants to please Sarah. So, he sends them away, with some water and some food.

Wandering in the wilderness, the food and water soon run out. The future is pretty bleak for them both. Hagar knows they probably will not make it, they will die of thirst. So, she places Ishmael under a bush to give him some protection and moves a little way from him, as she can't bear to watch her son die. There she begins to weep, to sob and lifts up her voice, perhaps trying to drown out the cries of pain of her son, perhaps in prayer to the one who will listen.

Perhaps she is praying as Paul suggests in

Romans 8:26 - Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with groanings too deep for words.

God sees and hears the pain of both of them, the name Ishmael actually means - God hears. God rescues them, he opens Hagar's eyes to see water that will revive them both.

God sees and hears and acts. God protects and rescues the ones who have been banished. God sees the ones who others would rather be invisible. No one is excluded from God's love and generosity. All are precious in God's sight. God shows extraordinary empathy, feels and shares their pain. God does not abandon them to the elements. God is their shelter and refuge.

Yesterday was World Refugee Day and I cannot help but notice the parallels between the story of Hagar and Ishmael and the millions of stories of refugees throughout the world.

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Displaced, left to suffer, banished and excluded - the story of Hagar and Ishmael and of millions of others in our world.

At the end of 2025, there were **41.6 million refugees** globally. In addition, there were **68.7 million people displaced** within their own country due to conflict or violence.¹ Some of the largest refugee camps are in the poorest countries in the world. Cox's Bazaar is the largest refugee camp and home to more than 1 million refugees from Myanmar (Rohingya). Almost 2 million Palestinians have been displaced in Gaza since the current war with Israel. All deserve our empathy and understanding, the kind of empathy God shows Hagar and Ishmael.

Refugees have been forced to flee their home country for their own safety and often experience violence, torture and trauma. Many have been forced to flee with little warning and with few belongings.

Last year Australia welcomed its one millionth refugee since 1901. Our response to refugees has changed through the years. In the 1970's when Malcolm Fraser was Prime Minister, he put in systems that were very welcoming to those fleeing Vietnam. Subsequently, our processes have become harsher, and as we know, some people have waited for more than 13 years to have their situation resolved. We have incarcerated people offshore, turned back boats and fought groups of people in the courts. We have called such people 'illegal immigrants' when there is no such thing. We have placed them in detention centres in the middle of the desert. All designed to dehumanise people. All cruel ways to treat people looking for a safe refuge.

This past week we have had to listen to Pauline Hanson double down on such cruelty as she talks about a 'monoculture', that people shouldn't be speaking their mother language at home amongst many other comments. Her preferred system seems to be to exclude rather than show compassion to others. We have in the last twenty or so years moved from offering a generous welcome to sending messages of fear and punishment.

Hagar experienced God's empathetic love. Refugees deserve to experience the same empathetic love.

We follow a God who sees and hears those in distress. We follow a God who doesn't treat people as invisible. We follow a God who doesn't abandon or exclude. We follow a God who understands and shares in the pain of others. We follow a God who provides, refuge and shelter for those who need it. We follow a God who brings life in the midst of despair. We follow a God who provides hope to those who have lost all hope.

We see this in the life of Jesus who calls us to take up our cross and follow him.

Let us be true followers, followers who see and hear the cries of those who have been forgotten, who are victims of other people's war, who flee violence. Let us be true followers of the one who acts to alleviate the pain of others.

¹ Source: UNHCR Global Trends June 11 2026

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Let us make a stand against the Pauline Hanson's of this world and instead stand up for those who have been banished or displaced in our world. Let us continue to welcome all who seek safety, in the midst of a world, full of conflict and let us start today.

Let us show God's empathy to all who need it. Amen.