

'So, Sarah laughed to herself' (Genesis 18:12)

A peculiar human characteristic is laughter. There is nothing more delightful than hearing the laughter of small children playing or the feel-good factor of watching a romantic comedy on TV or just having a really good laugh with friends. But, being human means that we don't just have one form of laughter, there is a whole subtle range of other forms of laughter. It is good when we can laugh at ourselves and not take ourselves too seriously or laugh at a mistake. There is the less admirable sarcastic laugh, the ironic laugh and the hollow laugh.

So, when God promised Abraham in Genesis 17 that he would have a child with Sarah in their old age and well beyond her child-bearing age, Abraham had every reason to laugh.

It was not laughter out of mirth or that he was enjoying a joke with God, rather it was the laughter of disbelief – the kind of laughter a parent makes when a their particularly messy child promises that they *will* tidy their room.

Odd, though, that Abraham laughs at God's promises.

Odd, though, that Abraham failed to tell his wife of God's extraordinary promise of a child.

So, in a kind of repeat performance of Genesis 17, in Genesis 18 God appears to Abraham and to Sarah as three visitors or as three angels. Without fully understanding who they are, Abraham senses that they are particularly important, he sets about fulfilling his role as host with extravagant generosity. He gets Sarah to bake cakes with the finest flour and he serves meat from the prize calf. But the travellers are not really interested in Abraham, it is Sarah they want to see. As she is not in the tent, one of the travellers announces that he will return later and then Sarah will have a child. You will note the echoes of Gabriel's announcement to Mary that she will have a child.

But whereas Mary obediently accepts the promise, Sarah - who has been eavesdropping by the door of the tent, laughs to herself. It is not a laugh of joy or mirth but a hollow laugh of disbelief.

However, the last laugh is with God. For Sarah does have a child and his name Isaac means 'one who laughs'.

An important aspect of the story is that God's creation holds huge potential which we have to unlock with God's aid. Some of these potentials might appear laughable, but we shouldn't be dissuaded by disbelief but rather spurred on to find new possibilities as yet undreamed of. This is what Jesus meant when he compared the Kingdom of God to the householder who brought out treasures old and new (Mt 13:52).

Now, although Martha is not described as laughing, we can imagine her sarcastic laughing tone when she says to Jesus: 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?' (Lk 10:40)

In a way Martha is quite right to pour contempt on her sister. Her incredulity, like Sarah's, is that at that time no woman could become a pupil of a rabbi with the aim to teach and preach. But the promises of the Kingdom are that new treasures are always possible – it has in this case taken a very long time to get to the stage when the ministry of women and men is equal!

Jesus' words though appeared to have cause controversy from a very early time. In Acts 6 the Hellenistic Christians and Jewish Christians were at logger heads as to who could be a minister/deacon. The Apostles' initial solution was to create two kinds of ministry – those who were to serve at table (6:3) – presumably helping at the Eucharist; and those who were to preach and teach (6:4). So perhaps, the Mary and Martha story represents the two kinds of ministry.

Possibly, but in fact many early Christian women may have carried out both roles – Tabitha, Lydia, Damaris and Prisca to name but a few. But, would they all have laughed at the idea that women could become bishops?

The Lord said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh...?' (Gen 18:13)

How must God see us? I imagine God must laugh at our own incredulity at what He offers us.

A few weeks ago, my eldest daughter and I were lifting up the carpet in our front room. Below it was carefully laid newspaper. The first piece I picked up caused me to chuckle. It was dated Sunday 20 July, 1969 and showed a large grainy picture of Neil Armstrong on the moon. Yesterday, marked exactly fifty years since this historic event, and his famous 'that's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind'. When we think how the computer used for the mission was less powerful than the one in our phones today, we get some idea how much we have developed the potentials of God's world, probably beyond Armstrong's wildest dreams.

For the first time from the cabin of Apollo 11 the Earth could be seen in all its fragile glory, teeming with life, beauty and potentials - rather different from the moon. When Sarah laughed to herself, the most natural and common of human reactions to new possibilities, she expresses what we all from time to time think about our Christian beliefs. It is only when we reflect on these moments seriously that we can see where they can and will take us.