

## Tell me a story

Heather Smith *reflects on* Genesis 21:8-21

The story of Hagar and Ishmael is shocking. Sent off into the desert on Sarah's instructions to, one fears, almost certain death, Ishmael's life seems destined to be cut short along with his mother's. Hagar is not the first woman to be abandoned by a man when a child was an inconvenience, nor the last. Neither Abraham nor Sarah emerge well from the story. Sarah is vindictive and jealous and Abraham is too weak to stick up for Hagar and make proper arrangements for the care of her and their child.

God saves the day. The Jewish nation arose from Isaac, but Hagar was not abandoned. Alone in the desert with Ishmael, God directs her to a well so that she and the child can quench their thirst and survive.

Christians know the story of Isaac well, but the story of Ishmael forms a central part of the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca. Pilgrims re-enact the Islamic tradition that Hagar ran back and forth between the hills of Safa and Marwa seven times, looking for water. For them, Abraham and Ishmael represent the foundation of Islam.

We do not own our stories. Others may find different meaning in the stories of our religion, our history or our lives. But despite the different interpretations, God is there, as for Hagar and Ishmael, Abraham, Sarah and Isaac. When our stories drive us apart, the knowledge of God's presence should bring us together again. 🌈

**When we struggle to find common ground, Lord, help us to understand that you are the loving force that brings us together, always there at the centre, ready to heal and reconcile. Amen.**

## Writing the journeys we never wanted to make

*Part 1 – what is a journal?*

by Julia McGuinness

"After my father died, my mother found a diary he had kept as a schoolboy. It was a printed pocket diary for 1942, with a small space allocated for each day. 'It wasn't a very eventful year,' my mother memorably commented, as she put it my hands..."

We may be familiar with diaries, perhaps from our own childhood. But as someone said to me: "I don't know what journalling is – it just sounds American."

Unlike a diary's daily log of activities, a journal is a place to write whatever is important to us. It helps to write it regularly, but

that might not be daily. Journalling might include expressing our feelings, processing a problem, setting goals, or celebrating. We might note significant words from scripture, or explore how God might be guiding us, our prayers and how they have been answered. A journal is our own uniquely personal companion.

*Julia is a lay reader licensed to Chester Cathedral, where she was formerly poet-in-residence. Her book – Writing the Journeys We Never Wanted to Make: a guide to journalling for resilience – is published by Wellness Books. 🌈*

“All the time keep before you the thought of our Lord.”

Theophan the Recluse (1815-1894), saint in the Russian Orthodox Church

## Summer reading

*The Seven-Storey Mountain,*

by Thomas Merton

*Recommended by* Caroline Hodgson

*The Seven Storey Mountain* is a spiritual memoir that has become a modern classic. Published in 1948, the title was inspired by Dante's *Purgatorio*, symbolising the soul's ascent towards divine union.

The book chronicles Merton's journey from a restless, worldly youth to a Trappist monk. Born in France in 1915 to bohemian artist parents, he was raised in Europe and the US. At the end of chapter two, with the world on the brink of war, he stumbles into a church service where,

on realising that his "whole life was at a crisis", he commits to becoming a priest. He describes his powerful religious conversion as praying "not with my lips... but... out of the very roots of my life and of my very being". He goes on to enter the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, where he embraces the monastic life.

Written with honesty, integrity and astonishing candour, the book will inspire anyone wanting to go deeper into their own spiritual journey. 🌈