

MINISTRY RESOURCES FOR SUNDAY 28 FEBRUARY 2021

This service was prepared for the Tuesday congregation at St Stephen's. As the cards fell in a particular set of circumstances, the Biblical passage to be considered was surely one of the most difficult of all – God's call to Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. Some Christians glibly dismiss this as "all about faith", not a problem; others recognise the horror inherent in the story. I hope you find the reflection here helpful.

1 Prayers of Adoration and Confession

(From Psalm 22)

Let us pray.

You who fear the LORD, praise him!

All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him;

stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!

For he did not despise or abhor

the affliction of the afflicted;

he did not hide his face from me,

but heard when I cried to him.

From you comes my praise in the great congregation;

my vows I will pay before those who fear him.

The poor shall eat and be satisfied;

those who seek him shall praise the LORD.

Lord our God, with the psalmist, we do indeed praise you.

We fall on our knees before you with prayers of adoration and love.

And of confession.

For we are neglectful of our faith and careless with your gifts.

We relegate our "spiritual" selves to convenient corners of our lives,
while we allow the concerns of this world to distract us and drive us.

We rest too easily in your promise of forgiveness and grace,
forgetting that it is the gift that is given with repentance.

We are guilty of crying, "Lord! Lord!", invoking Jesus,
while we remain in our sinful lives, ever reluctant to follow where he leads.

Forgive us our shallowness, our fickleness and our lethargy, we pray.

Strengthen our spiritual muscle and our penitent resolve,
that we might be more worthy of the great gift of salvation
which is in our saviour Jesus.

For we ask it in his name,

Amen

2 Declaration of Forgiveness

Jesus was indeed *handed over to death for our trespasses*
and was raised for our justification.

It is the inexplicable, wondrous, gracious gift of God
that in Christ Jesus, the resurrected One,
our sins are forgiven.

Thanks be to God.

3 Bible Reading –

Genesis 22:1-18

4 Sermon: See below

5 **Prayers of the People and Lord's Prayer**

Lord our God,
Well may we pray, "Save us from the time of trial",
because we know too well our weakness and our inherent sinfulness.
So, in this time of Lent, as we contemplate our lives,
and confront our true selves,
we pray that you will strengthen us against the allures of this world.
We pray, wherever possible, that we might be spared from times of testing;
but we know that life is not like that,
and that temptation cannot always be avoided.
So grant us the wisdom to avoid situations that might lead us into sinful desires;
and the courage and discipline to overcome such temptations
when they do confront us.
May we care less about what the world thinks of us,
than about doing what we know to be right;
and may we be obedient to our Saviour's injunction
that we live lives characterised by our selfless love for others.
May this season of Lent be for us a time of renewed resolve,
informed by complete honesty about our true selves.

Our father in heaven,
Hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come;
Your will be done
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread,
and forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil,
for the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
now and forever.
Amen

5 **Blessing and Dismissal**

The Lord bless you and keep you.
The Lord make his face to shine upon you,
and be gracious unto you.
The Lord lift up his countenance upon you,
and give you peace.
Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
Amen.

SERMON

The day I sat down to write this sermon, my son was taken to hospital and underwent an emergency operation. As I sat with him awaiting the doctor's diagnosis and treatment plan, I thought of the deeply disturbing passage from Genesis which lay ahead of me to try to make sense of – a passage about a God who demanded that a man sacrifice his son, and a man who seemed perfectly prepared to comply with that demand. Sitting in that emergency department, it scarcely seemed conceivable.

And yet the story is there, and we've read it again today. It's the story of a frightening game of brinkmanship. God calls Abraham and orders him to offer up his son Isaac as a burnt offering. Without argument, Abraham prepares for the journey, saddling the donkey and even loading it with firewood, lest there be insufficient where they were going. Abraham, Isaac and two other young men set off, travelling for three days. When they finally reach the place God has indicated, the donkey and the young men are left behind, while the father and son climb the mountain.

Abraham appears to be completely compliant and unwavering in his determination; and it would appear that Isaac himself meekly submits to his father's intention. The son is tied up and laid on the pile of firewood; Abraham raises the knife ready to strike the fatal blow. We are within a mere moment of the ghastly deed being done, of God's order being obeyed, when the situation is saved by an angel of the Lord, who stops Abraham. And the angel is, in fact, revealed as God himself when he says,

“Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.”

The situation is saved, but not before we have been to the very brink. We are relieved that Isaac has been spared, but we are appalled that Abraham had been prepared to comply with God's demand; and surely more appalled that God would make such a demand in the first place.

What are we to make of this troubling story?

In traditional Christian circles, you will come across benign explanations. It's all about a test of Abraham's obedience and faith. God didn't *really* want Abraham to sacrifice Isaac; he always knew that he'd intervene before it was too late; and really, Abraham knew that all along too. So where's the problem? There was really never any threat to Isaac. We shouldn't think ill of either Abraham or God; indeed we must *never* think ill of anything God does.

That's an easy way out of this story, but it doesn't really work, I'm afraid. First of all, God is not just asking something *difficult* of Abraham; he is demanding something that is utterly *abhorrent*. Test of faith or not, it's an act that should be simply unthinkable. How could God ask such a heinous thing in any circumstance? Secondly, the story is not just about God testing Abraham. The brinkmanship involved in this stand-off is as much about Abraham testing God, as it is about the other way around. Abraham unflinchingly takes God at his word, and goes to the very brink of his bloody decree being carried out, and it's *God* who's the first one to blink. So who actually comes out on top? Seemingly, it's *Abraham* who called *God's* bluff.

The story certainly appears to be taken that way in Jewish tradition. In Judaism the whole incident is known as “the binding of Isaac”, or simply, “the binding”, the Akedah. It's remembered at the festival of Rosh Ha-Shanah every year, when it's served up to God as a reminder, not only of Abraham's faithful obedience, but also that God *owes* Abraham's and Isaac's descendants because of it. One of the prayers reads in part:

"Remember unto us, O Lord our God, the covenant and the lovingkindness and the oath which Thou swore unto Abraham our father on Mount Moriah: and consider the binding with which Abraham our father bound his son Isaac on the altar, how he suppressed his compassion in order to perform Thy will

That surely is a backhanded way of declaring that, because Abraham played God's bloody game, putting aside his natural paternal instincts, he created an obligation on God's part which must be honoured. It was Abraham who triumphed in the deadly game of brinkmanship.

So we can't get away with unthinking platitudes about this story. On examination they prove deeply unsatisfying.

That is shown by the obvious fact that the Akedah has troubled people down through the ages, and they've come up with other ways to try to explain or excuse its utter horror. For example, in the book of Jubilees that dates from the period just prior to the New Testament, the testing of Abraham isn't God's idea at all. For the author of Jubilees, the suggestion to test Abraham's obedience and faith is made to God by a mythological prince Mastêmâ. God expresses utter faith in Abraham, but he agrees to ask this terrible thing of him. So in Jubilees, the story takes on something of the flavour of Job, a sort of cosmic game of one-upmanship with a human pawn. I have to say that I'm not sure that makes it any better!

For the author of Hebrews in the New Testament, both God's demand, and Abraham's compliance, are excused on the grounds that Abraham knows that God is quite able to *resurrect* Isaac, even were he to die. It's a strange attempt to lower the stakes in the deadly game, but again, I'm not that sure that it works.

There's another explanation that dates back a very long way in Judaism, and is pretty popular today among both Jews and Christians. That suggestion claims the Akedah was God's way of definitively proclaiming that he rejected the idea of human sacrifice. It attempts to turn God's ugly demand into a far more pleasing demonstration of his moral uprightness. In effect, God corrects Abraham's intention by declaring that no human is to be sacrificed. Now that's a comforting way of looking at the Akedah, but it's plainly and simply not true to the text. After all, it is God himself who asks for the sacrifice of Isaac, and God himself who afterwards announces that Abraham has won his favour because of his willingness to perform it.

... for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.

And it also overlooks the fact that in Exodus (22:29), God commands that the firstborn of all Israelite sons be given to him, along with the firstborn of all the livestock. That's another awkward text that's not often discussed!

So here we are, with a text that is perhaps one of the most challenging in the Bible.

I want to suggest that there is a different way of looking at the Akedah, and that we can actually find something positive in it at this time of Lent.

We need to start by realising that, no matter how we read this story, the intention of the final redactor who has left it to us in its current form would certainly not have been to cast aspersions on the character of either God or of Abraham. The story would have been intended to say something positive to its readers. And if we accept that intention, then there's no doubt that the original point of this story was to demonstrate the faithful obedience of Abraham. Both the world in which the

story is set, and the world of the redactor, were patriarchies in which the head of the clan had complete ownership of, and power over, all of its members. Abraham would have been completely within his prerogatives to have sacrificed Isaac. His unflinching purposefulness represents his patriarchal priestly function, fulfilling the duty of sacrifice. It is not Abraham, but God, who several times emphasises that Isaac is Abraham's only son. It is God who conjures up the human emotion in the story – but the point of that is not to compromise either God or Abraham. The point is to emphasise the great act of obedience Abraham is committing. The intended message is that God-fearing people obey God in faithfulness, whatever is asked, and it is counted to their credit.

However, any story only works in its cultural setting. The way in which British colonisation came to Australia was, for generations, told as an heroic enterprise of the advance of civilisation. That narrative doesn't wash in today's world, when the cultural assumptions are vastly different. Even our fairy tales are the same. Do any of us today want our daughter to grow up to be a Cinderella, thinking that the acme of fulfilment in her life would involve her marrying a wealthy prince charming? You see what I mean. As the cultural assumptions change, stories cease to work as they were intended.

The cultural assumptions of the story about Abraham and Isaac evolved gradually over time. The story jars with *us* so severely because we do *not* live in a patriarchal society – or not *that* patriarchal anyway. No human life is subject to the decree, or the whim, of the head of that family. All human lives are protected by laws against murder. Fathers have no greater rights than their sons, or at least their adult sons. Our courts of law do not accept someone's belief that they were under God's instruction as any kind of defence, except perhaps to prove insanity. So the story of a father, believing that he was responding to an instruction from God, who came very close to murdering his son simply cannot convey any positive message to us, no matter how hard we try to find pious excuses for it. For us, this cannot be a story of obedience and faith.

However, one of the riches of Jewish scholarship is the way the rabbis deal with biblical stories by looking at them through the lenses of different characters. Traditionally, this is a story about Abraham. Isaac is a passive character; the two young men who accompanied Abraham and Isaac are completely silent; and Abraham's wife and Isaac's mother, Sarah, is not present at all. What would we discover if we viewed the story of the Akedah through their eyes?

I'd like to do that with Isaac, because in Isaac's story we can find something positive for our own time, something that can help us on our way through this period of Lent. If you put yourself in Isaac's shoes, what do you experience? You are completely under the power of Abraham your father. While you remain under Abraham's power, your death is inevitable. There is nothing you can do to save yourself. Then out of the blue, unasked and inexplicably, comes the gracious cry of God, intervening to save you, and providing in your place a substitute sacrifice. You are saved by the mercy and grace of God, and by the ram who dies in your place, gifting you with new life. If that sounds familiar, it's because it's the story of the gospel of Jesus Christ. When we were helpless to save ourselves from the inevitability of death, God acted to save us. God provided his son as a sacrifice to take our place, that we might be spared.

We might helpfully understand our journey through Lent as our journey towards that place of foreboding sacrifice. The journey reminds us of our helplessness to free ourselves from our inevitable fate; but ahead of us lies a cross from which the One who was sacrificed in our place cries out, "Abraham, Abraham! Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him." In that, we have a story for our own time.

Amen