

Sermon
2020

Sunday 28 June

Lesson Genesis 22: 1 – 14

In his poem, *The Parable of the Old Man and the Young*, the war poet Wilfred Owen wrote:

So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went,
And took the fire with him, and a knife.
And as they sojourned both of them together,
Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father,
Behold the preparations, fire and iron,
But where the lamb for this burnt offering?
Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,
And builded parapets and trenches there,
And stretched forth the knife to slay his son.

Owen uses the brutal and inhumane story of the near slaughter of the boy Isaac by his father Abraham to evoke the horror of the senseless slaughter of young men across Europe during the First World War. In the poem, Abraham ignored God, discards the ram, and kills his son, like ‘half the seed of Europe, one by one’.

As is often the case, the biblical story is most potently portrayed in the majestic language of the Authorised - King James – Version:

Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering....

For some, it was on Mount Moriah that God lifted the dust of the earth to create Adam. It was on Moriah that King Solomon later built his temple and, in Islam, it was on Moriah, the *Noble Sanctuary*, that Mohammed made his mystical ascent to heaven. According to tradition, Moriah lies at the heart of Jerusalem; it is the site of the Dome of the Rock. God commanded Abraham to take his son to the mountain and, once there, offer him as a blood sacrifice.

This ancient story arrests the imagination and its immorality sickens us. The boy was bound and laid on the wood of the altar. Abraham raised his arm, knife in hand; the moment had come to slay his son. It seems that with barely seconds to spare, an angel of the LORD called to Abraham:

Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me.

There are numerous interpretations of the story of Abraham and Isaac. Read closely, we notice that when Abraham first

set out with Isaac he told his men that *they* would return, implying that both of them would return safely. In the Bible story, the day on which Abraham and Isaac reached Moriah, the day on which Isaac was released, his life renewed, was *the third day*. The earliest Jewish Christians will have heard the story of Isaac's new life within the story of Jesus, who rose from the dead on the third day.

It is also worth noting that, though Isaac survived, he disappears from the narrative for some time, for what amounts to many years. When his mother Sarah died, it was only Abraham who mourned and wept for her. Isaac was silent on the altar, silent as he lay on the wood, and he disappeared afterwards. Reading the story imaginatively, not with a secular mind – as if the story were history - but spiritually, what do we see? In the wider Jewish tradition, it was said Abraham sent his son off to meditate and study to the Torah, the teaching of God. In another story, Isaac is said to have been taken from Mount Moriah by God, the Eternal, to the Garden of Eden, remaining there for three years.

In the ancient world and, more recently, in the Inca Empire, child sacrifice was a gruesome reality. To honour a dead emperor or during a famine, the Incas sacrificed children,

typically healthy children, the purest of offerings to the gods. It may be that the story of Abraham and Isaac was a means for the ancient Hebrew people to distance themselves from such a brutal practice.

Some years ago, I was invited to offer the weekly reflection at the opening of the Scottish Parliament. Boldly, I chose this story! I suggested that it was a story about the demands of justice and the imperative of compassion. In Hebrew, God appears five times in the first half of the story, that is, the word 'God'. In the second half of the story, the LORD appears, that is, the word 'LORD'. The Jewish people were not always monotheistic, a faith worshipping one Deity. The word 'God' is the God *El*, while the word LORD is the God *Yahweh*. Over time, the Hebrew people brought these two understandings of God together, in a story such as we have today. *El* is the God of justice and *Yahweh* is the God of compassion. Is it possible that, in part, the vivid story of Abraham and Isaac articulates the wrestling of the Hebrew people with the demands of God's justice and their belief in God's compassion? If so, it seems that compassion has the upper hand. This is the God of Jesus, the One He called 'Father'.

For Wilfred Owen, the story spoke deeply of his experience of the dark hell of the trenches. To the sages of the Jewish tradition, it suggested a period of withdrawal, of meditation and study, by Isaac in much the same way as Jesus ‘disappeared’ from view for forty days into the desert. St Paul also had a time of withdrawal and spiritual renewal. The story maybe a rebuttal of child sacrifice or it may be a people discovering that God is more than a God demanding justice but is truly a God of love, tenderness and compassion.

It was on the *third day* that Isaac was born again. That day began when Abraham ‘lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off’. What does it mean that Abraham lifted his eyes? Is the entire story a mystical vision, a wrestling within the soul of Abraham? Is this an inner vision of his encounter with the Sacred, his discovery that God is more beautiful, more loving than he had been taught? For Abraham, is this his Damascus Road conversion when he matures beyond the God he had first known? In his world, Abraham had grown up being taught that God demands justice. In a terrible revelation, culturally conditioned, he saw the God of compassion.

For us today, too often we feel ourselves to be unworthy, not good enough, and terribly conscious of our failings and

mistakes. Too often, we believe that this is the self that God sees in us: the small, selfish self, the unkind thought, the act of spite, the broken vow, the angry outburst, and the moments of personal embarrassment. Like Abraham, God wrestles within us. God wants us to see which 'God' wins. Let the story speak to your soul: God is our Eternal Lover. There is nothing God cannot face. And God's love, tenderness, understanding and forgiveness always, always have the upper hand.

Had we been in church today we would have celebrated the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. During Communion in the name of Jesus, I extend the invitation to receive from His hand:

Come,
you who have much faith and
 you who have little;
you who have been here often,
 you who have not been for a long time,
 and you for whom this is the first time;
you who have tried to follow
 and you who have failed.

Come, not because I invite you: it is the Lord.
It is His will that those who want Him
 should meet with Him here.

Words of welcome for everyone, wherever you are on your pilgrimage. And, surely, to the tune Blaenwern, we would have sung the hymn, 'Jesus call us here to meet him', with the closing lines:

Share the bread and wine, his body;
share the love of which we sing;
share the feast of saints and sinners
hosted by our Lord and King.

Amen.