

Second Sunday in Lent Year B 2021

Genesis 22, Romans 8:31-34, Mark 9:2-10

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The story of Abraham and the abortive sacrifice of Isaac is one of the most vivid narratives in the Old Testament. It is a bizarre and deeply unsettling story which has captivated centuries of interpreters, not just in theological writing but in philosophy, in art, literature and music up to our own time. Significant among these interpreters are the writers of the New Testament, and especially St Paul.

The attention to detail is striking – the preparations for the journey, the separation of the two protagonists from the fellow travelling servants, the narrowing of the focus towards the father and son and the sacrifice itself. Perhaps most striking about these storytelling techniques is their effect in building the dramatic irony whereby the Lord, who demands the sacrifice, has no intention of following it through to the end, but

leaves the tested one, Abraham, with no inkling of this happy outcome, merely the most dreadful of all the demands that could be made on faith and obedience: offer up that which will cost you the most, the Son whom you love.

Abraham and Isaac are also major characters in Paul's Letter to the Romans, though their presence is often not explicit. Paul's example of the life of faith is Abraham himself. Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. What was it, Paul asks, that Abraham believed, what was the substance of his faith, his trust? It was the conviction that the Lord, Yahweh, the God of Israel, is the God of life, the God who brings life where there is none, who makes the barren – in this case, Abraham and his wife Sarah – into something and someone who bears fruit. Not just a single life, but the very life of the world, because through after Abraham and Isaac is born Jacob, the one called Israel. Through Abraham is born the people through whom God will work to unite humankind to

his own life in the person who creates the new Israel, Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

The demand for human sacrifice is terrible enough. To ask a father to kill his own son is unbearable. As if this were not enough, the death of Isaac will be the death of the people whom God has promised to create and found. Having brought a single life and a nation's life out of nothing, God now seems to demand that life, the life of Isaac, the boy who personifies creation and life-giving itself.

Unfortunately for us, the lectionary made a key omission with this morning's reading. We did not hear the verse which is for Christian interpreters, the key to the narrative. It is Isaac's question to his father, and the answer Abraham gives. The enquiry is as natural as can be: here are the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering? The answer summarises Abraham's triumph of faith: God himself will provide the lamb". To Paul and other Jewish Christians, that simple phrase carries enormous

weight. God did not require the death of Isaac, of Abraham's son. What he required was Abraham's faith and trust, the assurance that Abraham did not prize that which he loved most on earth above the promises of God himself.

There is no demand of love greater than that which God makes upon himself. His love, overflowing in creation bringing life where there was none, is in Christ poured out again beyond his own self, so that life can be re-created, and a new life can be brought in place of the death of sin. Thus Paul's wonderful rhetorical question: If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his only son, a phrase which does not simply remind us of Abraham and Isaac, it belongs entirely in the context of that earlier story. By referring to God not sparing his own Son Paul is making clear that the appalling demand which God seemed to make on Abraham he made fully and completely on himself, and thus the crucial words in the original narrative must be "God himself will provide a lamb".

We see in this story, and the use which Paul makes of it, something of the organic nature of scripture as it is received by the church. Our understanding of one scriptural passage – the story in Genesis – is inevitably coloured by the interpretation which is given by the early Christian apostle, and was preserved in what we call the New Testament itself. As we learn more about the Abraham story, so we understand better Paul's Christian exegesis. What for Paul is the key to interpreting the story – God providing his own sacrifice in order to bring life from death – then allows us to understand other stories with that interpretive key.

Much the same thing is happening when we read the gospels. Our lectionary chooses each year to present us with the Transfiguration on the second Sunday of Lent. Jesus's transfigured humanity is shown to his closest disciples, while he talks with Moses and Elijah, the representatives of the law and the prophets, of the religion of Israel itself. The Isaac theme is present: the

Father's voice is heard to say this is my beloved son, and every time that phrase is used in the gospels, the sacrifice of Isaac lies behind it. But where the story of Abraham and Isaac seemed to threaten us with the worst of humanity, with the human assumption that death and killing are basic to our existence, and required by a vengeful God, here we need no sacrifice, except that which God offers of himself.

The transfiguration is not, as is sometimes thought, a glimpse of Jesus' divinity at the expense of his humanity, as if the mask of his flesh had slipped and we see the true God underneath, but this understanding isn't helpful. Rather, the Transfiguration shows us the true goal of all humanity, the transformation of human life which is possible through our participation in the life of God. This is why the Eastern theological tradition makes so much of this particular gospel story – the divinization of all humanity is the consequence of the incarnation, and the fulfilment of what it means to be human is to be more than human in the body of Christ.

If the appeasement of human sacrifice is the worst that we can do, the life and death of Christ is clearly the best. And not just the life and death, but the life beyond death which Paul finds in the stories of Abraham and Isaac. In the story of Sarah, life is brought forth where there was none, and the offspring of that life is the redeemed people of God, the whole of humanity transformed. In the transfiguration we see the effects of that transformation, the Son of the God of Israel, the one who brings life from death. The disciples are told to say nothing, until the Son of man has risen from the dead. The transfiguration is a clue, a pointer, a signpost towards something which will not be understood until Jerusalem and Golgotha are reached and overcome, until life is brought from death, and until the new Isaac, the one who brings the new Israel to birth is, sacrificed and reborn.