

Second Sunday of Lent
Fr Jonathan Jong

Genesis 22.1-2, 9-18

Romans 8.31-34

Mark 9.2-10

+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

They go up together to the high country, and there the old man builds an altar to his god, who has asked him to do this most impossible thing. His son has come with him, dutifully bearing wood for the fire, for the sacrifice.

“My father”, he says.

“My son”, his father replies, “I’m right here”.

Truth be told, it is hard to hear this story as anything besides a parable of the dangers of religious fundamentalism. This is not how we are encouraged to receive it, of course. Instead, Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son is praised, and we are meant to see in him an example for our own lives. And yet, who among us does not desperately hope to be spared from such a trial? And, when it comes down to it, who among us

would really celebrate Abraham, let alone emulate him, if he had gone ahead and killed his son because a voice in his head told him to?

Isaac lives, and we are relieved not to have to answer the question.

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They go up together to the high country, and there they see him anew, as they could never have imagined. The Law is there too, as are the Prophets, and the disciples are sore afraid.

“Let us make booths”, Peter says; James and John would have fared no better, and neither would you have, nor I.

And then a cloud, and then a voice.

“My son”, he says.

And then it is just him, who bids them silence.

We will be forgiven for observing the oddness of this coupling of stories, about men on hills and the strange things that happened to them there. The Transfiguration in particular feels out of place here in early Lent, feels like a rude interruption of our annual

abstinences. Penitential purple is this season's colour, not glowing white; did they not get the memo?

And yet, of course, it is superficially obvious that we should be given these images now, as we prepare to accompany Jesus to Jerusalem, and beyond her city limits, up yet another hill. Clearly, they are meant to help us to recognise what we will see there, who this man is and what strange things will happen to him there.

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In Lent—through our fasting and praying, our meditation upon the Stations of the Cross, our participation in the drama of Holy Week to come—we go up with Jesus and the soldiers and the crowd, where God has asked him to do this most impossible thing. This time no angel will stay the execution, and we are therefore not now spared the difficult questions, about why good men get killed, about why we kill them: questions upon which all the Law and Prophets hang. There is no parental voice from above these clouds, only the noise of a bloodthirsty viewing public below, and the rattling of gamblers' dice, and the gasped revulsions of the thieves beside him.

“My God, my God”, he says.

And then he was dead.

And then he was more alive than you can even imagine.

We cannot know what to make of such a thing, and our talk of *ransom* or *sacrifice* or *substitution* or *victory*—our so-called theories of the atonement—all express our utter inability to comprehend the mystery of our salvation more than they could possibly enlighten us about its mechanism.

And so it is that we have not been given theories by the lectionary, but pictures. But these pictures cannot really be taken seriously as instruments of understanding. It is true that the binding of Isaac has long been associated with the sacrifice of Jesus: the miracle son of Abraham who bore his own pyre, and the miracle son of Mary who bore his own cross. But it turns out that Jesus isn't Isaac after all, but the creature with its head stuck in thorns, God's own sacrifice. Furthermore, God's initial demand of Abraham is less than helpful for analogising. God *does* demand from us our lives—let's never underplay the moral demands of Christian faith—but the death of Jesus hardly exempts us from our own dyings to

ourselves in the way that the providential ram does allow Isaac to live. Quite the contrary: the death of Jesus is both what necessitates and renders possible our own offering of ourselves as living sacrifices to God. If Moriah helps us to see Calvary more clearly at all, it is as a foil.

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The Transfiguration is no more enlightening than the Aqedah. It is often said and is probably true that its location here early in Lent is intended as a reminder of where all this leads, this fasting and praying with Jesus toward his passion and death. The Transfiguration is meant to set our eyes beyond his great suffering and our meagre ones, and to the light of the resurrection, and further still to its consummation, the new creation in glory.

With all due respect to the putters-together of the lectionary, it is odd that anyone would think that we might forget the resurrection, blinkered perhaps by the intensity of our Lenten devotion. If anything, quite the opposite is true: we tend to pass too quickly from Good Friday to Easter, failing to permit ourselves proper time and space to sit in the darkness of the

thing. The same observation may be made about how we mark death, with liturgies that move swiftly on from the pain of loss to confidence in the promises and consolations of immortality. And so it is also with today's pairing of Isaac's near death experience and Jesus's transfiguration. *Don't worry, the lectionary seems to want to assure us, no one really ends up dead, and all this dreary stuff about humiliation and suffering will soon enough be transfigured into glory.*

But if this is truly the idea, then it is surely wrong-headed; as wrong-headed as the idea that the transfiguration marks a change in Jesus—from humanity to divinity—or the subtler heresy that it reveals who Jesus truly is, not really properly human after all, but a sort of glowing extra-terrestrial. Or as wrong-headed as the idea that the resurrection is a plot twist that turns the bad news of the crucifixion into good, or worse still, its reversal.

Doubtless, it is *easier* to take the transfigured Christ in all his cosmic splendour and glory as our consolation during these sorrows of Lent, than it is to consider that it is the Cross that enables us to interpret the Transfiguration, not the other way around. What the juxtaposition of the Transfiguration and Crucifixion

does is to confront us with another uncomfortable question: What if this is what *glory* is?

This is precisely what St John's Gospel does, which, incidentally, differs from the three synoptic evangelists, in that John does not include a telling of the Transfiguration. For him, the glorification of Christ is not best described in blinding bleached whiteness, not best located either exclusively or primarily at the resurrection. Rather, glorification begins at Jesus's "raising up" on the cross, through to his rising from death, and his ascension to the Father. These are, as it were, one single upward motion, or—better—a single act of self-donation, and with it we are given also the mystery of what it could mean that the Cross too is glory, and even its heart and source.

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The Transfiguration should indeed focus our attentions in Lent, but not to any consolatory light at the end of the tunnels of our pious austerity. Rather, it stands as a reminder that the Cross indicts our commonly received notions of power and glory, which are revealed as perversions of the real thing, which is self-donation. We must not suppose that our value

systems, or the ones we take for granted in our daily lives and our jobs and our liberal democratic systems, are immune from this critique. The clamouring for credit or property or individuality on which our politics and economics run are appropriate targets for Lenten scrutiny.

After all, the promise we have been given is not that, at the end of our journeys, we will find financial freedom or self-fulfilment, any more than it is that we will find ourselves glowing in the dark, beaming with the good news that we never have to buy bleach again. No, the kingdom of God is justice and peace, which is to say that we will find our joy in our giving up of ourselves to one another. Lent is practice: it does not end in reprieve, so much as consummation. Look, therefore, to the mountaintop, to Christ in his glory, and see there the gifted ram crowned with thorns, the Son of God who gives himself to us. And in receiving him, let us give ourselves up to the world.

+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**