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Pentecost 2

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Genesis 22:1-14; Romans 6:13-23; Matthew 10: 40-42

I wish I didn't have to do this – but I do. The story of the sacrifice – or better said the binding of Isaac is an Old Testament passage people generally prefer to avoid. It is a difficult passage – not because it's complicated, but because it's terrifying. One writer has spoken about "texts of terror" in the Bible and this is one of them: to be commanded to sacrifice your own son! Yet at the same time it is a story of extraordinary and tender beauty, and the beauty and the terror go together.

So people prefer to avoid it, but we can't – at least, I can't. Because whether you think of it as a fact – as something that actually happened once, in a particular place and time – or whether you think of it as an archetypal story expressing an eternal truth, actually doesn't matter, because either way it does show us, in the Biblical perspective, how things are. It does it as clearly as the story of Eden and the Fall in Genesis 2 – 3, and as clearly as the Cross and Resurrection of Christ. This is how it is, between us and God.

In the first of C.S.Lewis's Narnia stories, the children were being told about Aslan the Lion, the Lord of the Wood, and they ask rather nervously "Is he quite safe?" And they are told: "Of course he's not safe, he's a lion. But he's good!" It's with similar assurance that we read this story.

What do we need to know if we are to understand it? Two things, I think:

One of them is about sacrifice – which for us is a word with all sorts of unpleasant associations, about blood and loss. But fundamentally sacrifice is about taking a little of what God gives and offering it back to God with thanks. If you've been to Bali you see this on every street, women weaving little baskets out of leaves, filling them with rice and flowers and placing them reverently before God, (in a doorway or on a stand) with an upward movement of the hand. So people give thanks for God's blessings, as we might say grace, and they do this with their crops and with their cattle. The Jews did this also.

When it comes to children, the principle is clear – we need to give thanks *especially* for the gift of a child. But you don't offer a child, you make another offering instead. And what will be a suitable symbolic offering to give thanks for the gift of a child? Usually a lamb or a sum of money (5 shekels) or else, rarely, the dedication of the child to God's service, as the child, Samuel, was dedicated to God in his temple.

To understand this story today we need to see that sacrifice is about thanksgiving and love and not about any intentional suffering, and your child, especially your firstborn son, is your most precious possession – the one through whom your name will live after you.

We also need to place this event in the flow of Abraham's life which fills Genesis 11 – 25. In chapter 12, Abraham is given a command from God "Arise and go – go to the land that I will show you" – with a promise "I will make of you a great nation". And Abraham went. So here's the pattern: Command and obedience. In chapter 15 he asks God how this promise is to come about – how will he become a great nation, since he is childless and getting old. He is given a repeat of the same promise – "Look at the stars" – "Your descendants will be that many" and we're told he trusted God, believed the promise. So here's the pattern: Promise and Belief. In the next chapters God comes and does indeed give Abraham and Sarah a son even in their old age, Isaac, who will be the ancestor of a great nation. Abraham's obedience and faith have been rewarded.

Is everything achieved? But now, in chapter 22, God comes again – with the same phrase "Arise and go" – and commands Abraham to give back to God in sacrifice the son through whom God has said categorically that the promise will be fulfilled in his infinite mercy. So there is Abraham's dilemma: his son – his only son, whom he loves as passionately as he loves his own life – that son came from God, to fulfil the promise. But if Isaac dies, the promise will fail. Yet God has proved faithful – beyond everything he could have hoped for. Will he trust God to be faithful again and bring good out of there somehow? Would you? Would I?

This is crisis time, this is the test – and like every test it's filled with the anxiety of failure – what if I don't get it right? In a test what counts, we hope, is how well we've prepared but we won't know that until the end. How will it end?

Now one of the mysterious elements as this story unfolds is that we don't get access to what Abraham is thinking. Usually he's quite verbal, even argumentative with God, but here there's a frozen silence. The

only words he says to God are: "Here I am" – but he does what God commands.

While some things are left completely mysterious what is Abraham thinking? Why is God doing this? What will be the outcome? Other things are given huge emphasis:

- the direct relationship: God said "Abraham" and he said "Here I am"
- The fourfold naming of "your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love"
- and a whole bevy of commonplace actions like saddling donkeys and chopping wood, so much easier to focus on than thinking about what's really at stake.

When we're told: "So Abraham arose early in the morning, and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him ... and his son Isaac", it's as though Abraham, and the narrator, would like to accidentally forget to take Isaac along – but there's no way round it. And we listen to the awful slowness of their one conversation in Verse 7 as they set off up the hill in silence, and we're told twice "So the two of them walked on together". Isaac's words come even more hesitantly than the printed translation suggests:

"And Isaac said to his father Abraham, and he said "My Father!"
and he said "Here I am, my son".

We hear a child, a father, who don't dare to speak the horror that's in their minds. And then the awful question: "Where is the lamb?" and the answer: "God will provide the lamb – my son". How did Abraham say that, knowing what he knew? Evasion or faith? But nothing has changed. We're told again: "So the two of them walked on together" (What were they each thinking?).

Then when they reach the place, there's again much activity with building the altar and laying the wood in order, binding the boy, and then the scene goes into slow motion like a movie, as a simple action is stretched out over a whole verse "Then Abraham reached out his hand – and took the knife – to kill his son" until into this agony a voice from heaven speaks insistently "Abraham, Abraham!" Abraham's response is guarded: "Here I am" but the trial is over, the thing is done.

It seems that God needed to know and to show that for this man, Abraham, father of the nation, archetype of faith – that his faith really would be proof against anything, the worst that the forces of life or death could throw at him – and it was.

And it's interesting that when the boy is unbound the substitute offering is not a lamb, as we might expect for a child (and as Isaac rightly expected earlier). No, this is his trial, not Isaac's, so the animal is fully grown, a ram, symbolising Abraham himself and his offering of faith. "A ram caught in a thicket" is a very good metaphor of the dilemma Abraham has been stuck in and has now come through.

It's important if we are to read the story rightly, that we see this triumph as the outcome God not only intended but foresaw. God knew that Abraham would prove faithful. But Abraham, being human, could only find that out by going through it step by step, by facing his doubts and fears, and overcoming them. Being human too, we share his agony as we read. But if we share his faith, too, we need to claim the story's truth: that God is faithful and deserves us to know that living faithfully is possible for humankind. God gave us Abraham and this event as a reminder and assurance of that truth.

In Jewish tradition, this understanding of the story's meaning is expressed in symbol. They say that, at the end of the 6 days of creation, at sunset on the 6th day, the last moment before God rested, God made Ten Things which would play a part in the unfolding of his saving purposes over time. The tablets of the Law were there, and Aaron's budding rod and this ram caught in a thicket, 1 of 10 mysterious objects. If Christians had made such a list it would have included Jesus' cross and tomb. And indeed the NT refers to Jesus as "the lamb...destined from the foundation of the world [1 Peter 1: 21].

For Jews (and therefore for us too) this Binding of Isaac is a critical moment: It stamps God's seal on Abraham the faithful one and the covenant God made through him with all humanity.

The Binding of Isaac is a story that people go back to in time of persecution to find there the good news of God's faithfulness to his faithful ones.

It's a story the New Testament writers go back to because it seems to them like a foretaste, almost a parable, of the death and resurrection of Christ.

The Cross, like the Binding of Isaac, confronts us with the extremity of suffering and a triumph of faith. It too is a story we'd rather not read, it's too painful, but as Christians we know we have to if we are to face the reality of how things are. In each case we have to tell two stories, see the event at two levels at once: In both the Cross and the Binding of Isaac there is an agonising human drama, and there is the unfolding

of a divine mystery. We need to see both levels at once – because the human drama of Jesus' crucifixion, or of Abraham and Isaac, is not complete, perhaps does not even make sense, without the divine purpose being unfolded. And the divine purpose is not complete, and is not true, without the human drama by which it is played out. For whatever God intends it is only in the human lives of Jesus and of Abraham and Isaac, - and of you and me – that God's purposes can be unfolded.

Can we, like Abraham in this story, love our children and delight in them as gifts from God, hold them without possessing them, allow them to have a future we would not have planned?

Can we, like Abraham, live our life as a gift from God, hold it without possessing it, in a way which allows it to be always at God's disposal? So if God comes to us – however God comes – with a promise, a blessing or a command – are we equally ready to respond: "Here I am"?