

The first lesson this morning is one of the better known, and perhaps best loved stories in the Old Testament: Abraham and Isaac.

This story is not about child-abuse. Nor is it about the practice, in some ancient cultures, of sacrificing members of their youth to appease the gods of the day. And it's not about a God who delights in the destruction of the very creatures He formed in His own Image. It is about *none* of these things.

Among other things, the story of Abraham and Isaac is about the precarious beginnings of the nation of Israel. God had promised Abram that he would father “a multitude of nations” [Gen. 17.4]. At the age of one hundred years Abraham became the father of Isaac, the fruit of Sarah's womb, and the promises made by God began to come true. In the intervening years, Abraham remained a righteous man, interceding on behalf of Sodom in its sin, travelling throughout parts of the Holy Land, forming covenants with other tribal leaders, and so on.

Then came the test. That word is important, because it places the correct interpretation upon the events described in today's reading.

Abraham the righteous man heard the voice of God calling his name, and so he answered, “Here am I”. And God told Abraham to take Isaac, whom Abraham loved, and to travel to the land of Moriah where he was to offer the lad up as a sacrifice to God.

Abraham obeyed. The story unfolds with the boy asking his father where the special animal was that they were going to sacrifice. Abraham's reply? “God will provide.”

God provided the antidote for our sin, today in our generation, and for all the generations that ever existed. He provided His Son, Jesus Christ as the sacrifice. We don't know anything of the conversation between Abraham and his son as Isaac was being prepared for slaughter, but we *do* know something of the conversation between Jesus and the Father just before His arrest and trial. And we know everything Jesus said from the Cross during the slow process of His death.

“Father, forgive them. They know not what they are doing,” are without doubt the most important words ever uttered. They are important to you and to me because God chose to accept the sacrifice of His own Son, and to forgive us.

God demands the most *from* us, because He gives the most *to* us.

Paul understood this. That is why he wrote so strongly about the need for every believer to become holy. Yes, we have the choice, and we are free to exercise that choice. But the best choice we can ever make is the one to obey God. Keep your bodies clean and pure; present yourselves to God as instruments of righteousness, he says. Let this be your sacrifice to God: that you will resist temptation and the Devil, that you will stand up for what is good and pure and holy, and you will not turn your backs on Him. Why should we do this? Because God demands the most *from* us, and gives the most *to* us.

The advantage you get is sanctification, Paul says. The end is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. [Romans 6.23]

Χάρις τῷ θεῷ, εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος. Ἀμήν

ⁱ Elie Wiesel, *Messengers of God*, page 87. Pocket Books. 1977

Place yourself at the scene. An old man tells his beloved son to stand still while he ties him up, and lays him on the pyre at the altar. What were his thoughts? What did Isaac say to his father? Did he struggle? Were there words of recrimination? We don't know. These details are hidden from us, unimportant. Finally, the moment of truth: no doubt Abraham likely began the prayers that would have accompanied any sacrifice. One author describes the scene this way: *“Everything was ready: the wood, the knife, the fire. Slaughterer and victim looked into each other's eyes and for one moment all of creation held its breath. The same fear penetrated the father and the son...”*¹

The Bible tells us that the Angel of the Lord called to Abraham from Heaven, and said, *“Abraham... Do not lay your hand on the lad or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son from me.”* [Gen. 22:11-12] And at that moment there was a ram, caught with its horns in a thicket, and Abraham knew that God had indeed provided the sacrifice.

We sometimes hear of religious despots who think God is telling them to murder their followers before committing suicide themselves. Some of you may remember Jonestown, Guyana in the 1970's, or Waco, Texas in the '90's. Then there was the Solar Temple cult who committed murder-suicide with a spectacular fire near Montréal a few years ago. But we can state with absolute certainty that God does not require the soul of a human being to be sacrificed in the way we've just read, since the sacrifice of Jesus upon the Cross of Calvary is a once-for-all-time sacrifice, the magnitude of which can never be repeated or duplicated. The truth of this story is that God sometimes makes extraordinary demands upon our faith. Genesis celebrates Abraham's faithfulness, which led to the birth of a multitude of nations in his lineage.

And this leads me to the subject of extraordinary claims.

We can read the account of Abraham and Isaac from the point of view of what happened. We can fast-forward to the happy ending of the story in which a real animal sacrifice was provided in place of Abraham's beloved son. But if we do, if we simply get to the end of the narrative and move on, then what are we missing?

Genesis is clear about what happened and so is just about every Sunday school student who has heard this story more than once. But *why* did it happen? What is the point of recording it in Holy writ?

To be certain, there is the idea that God will provide. The miraculous happened, and we get a glimpse of God's awesome abilities.

Then there's the idea of the test. God was testing Abraham. The story tells us so. Now the Lord *knew* Abraham feared God, since he did not withhold his son from Him.

To me, however, there is something more to this than just the details. What seems inescapable to me is that God demands the most *from* us, because He gives the most *to* us. God Who demanded and then spared Abraham's son is the same God Who gave us His own Son as a sacrifice. God gave us everything and it cost Him everything.

As Christians, we have the benefit of knowing Christ Jesus as our Lord and Saviour. The benefit comes because Jesus saved us from the eternal consequences of sin. But remember that He did so at great cost. Jesus went to the Cross as the supreme sacrifice to atone for the sin of the whole world, a crushingly heavy load to bear. His suffering and death bought for us life eternal. Jesus proved that God's ability to love and forgive us is greater than Satan's power to tempt and destroy us.