

Sacrifice – Genesis 22:1-14

“Take your son, your only son, whom you love - Isaac...”

This is not what we expect from God, is it? God who made us, God who loves us, God who saves us. And here, God goes to his faithful servant Abraham, and tells him to kill his son.

What can we make of this? What does it mean for us today? Do we worry that God is going to ask us to make a similar sacrifice?

The reading begins, “Some time later...”, so it’s worth thinking about what those things were. We have a reasonable amount of detail on Abraham’s life recorded in the book of Genesis, and immediately before our reading, in chapter 21, we have the birth of Isaac – the long promised son of Abraham and Sarah, the sending away of Ishmael (who was Abraham’s son by Hagar), and the treaty with the nearby kings Abimelech.

Today’s reading occurs “some time later”, but we don’t know how long and we don’t know how old Isaac was. Traditionally, we picture him as a ‘boy’, and that was certainly the impression I got when first heard this story in Sunday School. All we know is, according to verse 6, Isaac was now old enough to carry “the wood of the burnt offering”, which would be a reasonable amount - it may be that that Isaac was a young man at the time. We just don’t know.

And then we read that “...God tested Abraham....” And it seems that God’s testing of Abraham was to show the faith and faithfulness of Abraham. God gave this test to Abraham to see if he would follow his instruction. But... to sacrifice a child?

[God] said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” God said, “Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.” (22:2)

The command that God gave to Abraham was a complex one: it wasn’t simply ‘kill your son’ and to follow it didn’t just require obedience, but it required an ongoing commitment to carry out the command. Take Isaac, go to another land, and sacrifice him in a particular way, in a particular place.

God’s test is hard for us to come to grips with. It just seems so foreign to how we encounter God. But if it’s hard for us, imagine what must it have been like for Abraham? Because, after all, we know that it all turns out right in the end.

God’s order would have been terrifying to Abraham, but also – on the face of it at least – entirely out of character for God who Abraham knew very well. After all, Isaac was the son God had promised to Abraham. God had given Isaac to Abraham against all likelihood.

And now God wanted Abraham to offer his son as a burnt offering?

I don’t know about you, but I would be keen to have a conversation with God about such a request. That’s putting it mildly: I would be arguing with God. I would be coming up with all sorts of reasons not to sacrifice Isaac. And I’d try and find a loophole in God’s request.

But Abraham doesn’t argue, he doesn’t try to convince God that God is wrong, he doesn’t try to find a loophole or a way around God’s request. In fact, Abraham doesn’t say anything – instead we read that obediently “Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about.” (22:3)

How do you think Abraham was feeling? He had a long time to think about it – we learn in the next verse that it was a three-day journey.

We know how the story ends, but for Abraham there would have been two possibilities:

Firstly, that God had changed. That the kind and loving and faithful God that Abraham knew, was no longer kind and loving and faithful. That God had given him Isaac, and now God had decided to take him away – and be so mean that he would make Abraham do it himself. Surely that possibility had weighed on Abraham's mind on that journey.

But there was a second possibility, too. That God hadn't changed – that God was being loving in testing Abraham. After all, Abraham had doubted God before – he didn't think God would deliver he and Sarah a child as God had promised, and Abraham had doubted God and gone and had a child by Hagar.

Abraham had not trusted God back then, so maybe now he realised that he should...that he should trust God, even when given a seemingly terrible command.

Whatever was going on Abraham's mind, he kept trusting God, he kept going for those three days, to within sight of the mountain in Moriah. Abraham trusted in God, even though he didn't know what God's plan was. He had faith in God. His experience was that God was good, and he had faith that God would continue to be good.

Throughout Abraham's life, God had shown Abraham that he could be trusted, so Abraham believed God and obeyed him, even though he could not understand the how God would resolve the situation.

We don't typically receive clear and concise instructions from God (at least, not verbally), but I'm sure we've all had times in our lives when God's solutions aren't obvious. And times when following God's commands seems crazy. People sometimes say things like "A loving God wouldn't let this thing happen" ... but maybe a loving God would.

After all, human reasoning says that a loving God wouldn't command his follower to sacrifice his son, would he? But a loving God did give his follower that command. (We do need to remember that in the end Abraham didn't make the sacrifice of his son, though – God did provide a way out).

In fact, it's just like human reasoning says that all powerful God wouldn't sacrifice his own son to save his fallen creation.

So Abraham, Isaac and the young men get to within sight of the mountain, and Abraham tells the young men "Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you."

Note what Abraham says: We will worship, and then we will come back to you.

He was following God's command – and although God's command including sacrificing Isaac, he was also trusting that God would provide some way to look after Isaac.

We will worship, and then we (both of us: Isaac and I) will come back to you.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews tells us, "By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, of whom he had been told, "It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you." He considered the fact that God

is able even to raise someone from the dead—and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.” (Hebrews 11:17–19)

So Abraham and Isaac went up the mountain, and we read that...

“Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, “Father?”

“Yes, my son?” Abraham replied.

“The fire and wood are here,” Isaac said, “but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?”

Abraham answered, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son...” (22:6-8a)

While Abraham had faith in God, I’m sure that there were some doubts nibbling away at the edges of his mind too. Even as he said “God himself will provide the lamb” I’m sure he would have been only too aware that God himself had provided Isaac.

When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. (22:9).

Up until this point, I’ve been focused on what Abraham would have been thinking, but what about Isaac?

Isaac let his dad tie him up and lay him on the altar. There’s no indication that he argued or resisted. Instead, it seems he trusted Abraham, just as Abraham had trusted God.

And Abraham continued to trust God going as far – as we read in verse 10 – to reach out his hand and take the knife to slay his son. His son, who was compliantly lying there.

This was the last moment. Every bit of faith that Abraham had in God had led him to that moment and he was ready to take his son’s life.

But the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, “Abraham! Abraham!”

“Here I am,” he replied. (22:11).

Which is what happened at the start of our reading. God said “Abraham!” and Abraham said “Here I am.” This time the angel says “Abraham!” and Abraham again says “Here I am”.

The angel says “Do not lay a hand on the boy, ... Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.”

‘Fearing God’ is always an interesting concept. It’s not so much about being afraid of God – it’s more about being in awe of God. Knowing God’s power. Knowing God’s love. Knowing God’s ability to do the seemingly impossible. And responding to God with obedience.

That’s what Abraham experiences here. He’d trusted and obeyed God all the way to the point of having a knife at the throat of his son, and God’s love and power delivered a way out:

Verse 13 says, “Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son..”

God had provided. Abraham had faith that God would provide, but he had no idea how God would provide.

At the end of our reading we heard that “...Abraham called that place “The Lord Will Provide”.

In that moment, the most important thing that God provided Isaac was that ram, but everything that Abraham had came from God. Abraham understood that.

And so it is for us too. All that we have comes from God.

You'll probably remember those lines inspired by 1 Corinthians 12 in induction and commissioning services:

There are diverse gifts:

but it is the same Spirit who gives them.

There are different ways of serving God:

but it is the same Lord who is served.

...

Each one of us is given a gift by the Spirit

and there is no gift without its corresponding service.

We need to think about the gifts we have – whether spiritual or material – and think about what our corresponding service might be. I'm pretty sure that we won't be asked to sacrifice our children, but we will be asked to make sacrifices.

We have heard today the example of Abraham's faithfulness. He trusted God even though he couldn't see what the resolution would be. And it's the same with us – we need to trust God, even though we can't see what the resolution to the problems of our lives and of our world might be.

And we can look beyond Abraham's faithfulness to Jesus' own faithfulness. We read in Paul's letter to the Philippians that he “he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.”

And just like Abraham did not withhold his only son from God, God did not withhold his only son from us: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

Abraham's faithfulness, trust and obedience are important. But far more important is God's faithfulness to provide everything for those who turn to him in faith.

Amen.