

Pentecost 4A, Sunday, June 28<sup>th</sup>, 2020

Readings: Genesis 22:1-14, Psalm 13, Romans 6:12-23, Matthew 10:40-42

## God in Question, God in the Dock

### Introduction

The story of Abraham bent over his young son, Isaac, ready to cut his throat, at God's instruction is about as disturbing as it gets. Usually, the reading is politely avoided in puzzled silence, as preachers look to something else, anything else to occupy the minds of their communities. What can we say about this reading, knowing that it throws up a screaming problem: the gulf, the gap, between the protective moral responsibility of a father to a son, and the faith commitment that requires an action that kills Isaac, the victim and dehumanizes Abraham, the killer. This is so at odds with modern Christian consciousness where faith and love, where faith and compassion are one and the same, where the Christian lexicon states that God is love and Love is God!

But that is not the only issue. While the story is a nightmare for Christians, it is an irrefutable political weapon for today's newly militant atheism, as the not unreasonable question is put, "what God worthy of the name, would require infanticide? This story's deployment, also reflects the increasingly pointy edge of the wary relationship between faith and secularism: the Christian church, a little like the dog, uneasy about the tightening embrace of the considerably larger bear. This story, arms the charge of faith's opponents that spiritual belief is "*nonsense on stilts*".

I want to do two things this morning: first, to explore how this story of Abraham and Isaac has morphed, has changed in meaning over time; and second to re-establish its legitimacy in the Christian lexicon, its positive meaning.

*First: to the question of the changing meaning.* While the Bible remains the same, in the sense of the stories and accounts that we read, its meaning changes, its sense transmutes over time in response to the new questions we put to it. These new questions arise from our own changing consciousness, our own evolving way of seeing the world and ourselves within it. The story of Abraham and Isaac, what the Hebrews call, the *akedah*, the binding of Isaac, was for much of Hebrew and Christian history, interpreted as *the* story about the single-mindedness of faith. But times change, and the question changed from one of human faith's resilience, to one of God's good faith with us: God's integrity, God's ethical nature.

The interesting thing is that this changing question, this changing way of reading the story, which raised the ethical question of God's character, did not begin from some atheistic agenda, but from this guy: the extraordinary Dane, Soren Kierkegaard, the Christian philosopher and theologian of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, who shaped so much of modern western thought. It was Kierkegaard, who so mesmerized by the binding of Isaac, wrote a whole book called "Fear and Trembling". Kierkegaard examines a whole range of interpretations – it is a fascinating read – but he ultimately resists the idea that Abraham can be a legitimate model of Christian faith. Abraham may be religiously justified, he suggests, but ethically speaking he is a murderer: he was ready to execute Isaac. Kierkegaard insists that religious commitment must depend upon, must be contingent

upon, moral justifiability: "Abraham makes himself a murderer for God: the blade is drawn, the commitment made" ...no more, no less, he says. It is then to Kierkegaard, the deeply honest Christian, that modern atheism is indebted.

*But, is this story of Abraham and Isaac so devoid of merit that we must simply cast it into the garbage bin, leaving it to the atheist and secularists to cavort, to prance, to frolic with? Well, no! I think this story has merit, is important: but to get that, we need to rethink it.*

That is precisely what this guy, Rene Girard, the Christian anthropologist has done. Within the context of his wider thought, Girard honed in on a biblical insight that Hebrew scholars had missed for centuries. Girard, points out to us that in this story, there are two terms for God, there are in fact two Gods. The first, the generic *Elohim* is the God who requires sacrifice, who drags Abraham and Isaac for three days up the slopes of Mt Moriah for the purpose of infanticide. It is this *Elohim* who harks back to the ancient East's common practice of human sacrifice as a measure for placating the god's thirst for blood. It is this *Elohim* who Abraham has in mind as he prepares to murder his son. However, by the end of the story, it is *Yahweh*, who stays Abraham's hand, who stops Isaac's murder, who puts an end to sacred violence. This is the *Yahweh* of the Exodus, the God who frees his beloved slaves (*apiru*) from suffering. This is the *Yahweh* of the Hebrew prophets, who wants compassionate justice. This is the *Yahweh* of Jesus who in our Gospel reading of Matthew, invites the Christian community, as a matter of priority, to defend the "little ones". Later we hear that imperative of mission again:

I was hungry and you fed me,  
I was thirsty and you gave me a drink,  
I was homeless and you gave me a room,  
I was shivering and you gave me clothes,  
I was sick and you stopped to visit,  
I was in prison and you came to me.'

This story, rather than serving the death knell of faith, as the atheist and secularist contend, marks a change of consciousness *in faith*: Abraham discovers *this other God*, Jesus' God, our God! The God of life!