



## FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST SUNDAY, JUNE 28<sup>TH</sup>, 2020

### God in Question



**The Sacrifice of Isaac, Caravaggio, 1598**

In this period of the Christian year after all the feasts and festivals culminating in Pentecost and Trinity, we dig deep and focus upon the practical side of the life of the Christian. Last week in Pentecost 3, we centred on the fundamental Christian ethic of *hospitality* underscored in our then Gospel reading (Matthew 10:24-39), where Jesus rejects, deconstructs and reconstructs the predominant social arrangement of his day – clannishness – where family loyalty excluded all others. Jesus calls for love that is much broader than mere clan solidarity.

Today, we continue to focus on the Christian life; but this time *on the place of God within it through the disturbing Hebrew reading of the sacrifice of Isaac*. In much of western history, the place of God has been assured. In modern times however, that place has been challenged. Toby Young, one of the movers among the New Atheists in Britain, wrote in his column in the Spectator that spiritual belief is “nonsense on stilts”. For Young and others, a good part of the case against God concerns the moral: the contention that God is not worth considering, because his moral character is clouded. The question is, in the light of human suffering, how can God be justified as love? A significant part of this argument against God, finds its natural haunt in the famous story about Abraham and the ‘almost’ murder of his son Isaac at God’s instruction: our Hebrew reading for this morning. Traditionally, this story has been interpreted in terms of faith in God and our willingness to take him on trust, to do what he requires of us, through ‘thick or thin’. More recently however the pendulum has swung. Over the last few hundred years, the story has raised other questions: not about the Christian’s faithfulness to God, but God’s *good faith with us*. What sort of God could possibly require infanticide; it is asked? What does this say about the God we claim as love?

## GATHERING

**Preparation:** Come Holy Spirit (Veni Sancte Spiritus, Julie Gaulke, Taizé)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4J\\_EP72ZfQA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4J_EP72ZfQA)

### Welcome

In the name of God,  
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit

The Lord be with you

***And also with you***

**A Trinitarian Hymn:** Holy, Holy, Holy (TiS 132, Nicea, Reginald Heber)

### **A Meditation that Betrays Several Messy Experiences of Sacrifice**

Sacrifice is a difficult idea and experience: mine, yours and God's through Christ. The Hebrew reading for today about Abraham and Isaac, makes it no easier, but that said, to think about sacrifice, we best do it thinking about our own and indeed those close to us. Let us listen to the effect of the story of Abraham and Isaac, upon a Sunday school class of children and adults, as each person began to think through their experiences.

I decided to show a recent Hebrew film about the story of the sacrifice of Isaac. Afterwards, my colleague would work with the children in a learning activity connected to the story, and I would discuss its meaning with the adults. Helen had some misgivings, but I said, "It's only a Bible story. What harm can it do?"

They watched in silence as the story unfolded. I stopped the DVD and the learning began...but not as I had expected.

"Who knows what the word 'sacrifice' means?", Helen asked the kids. A definition was attempted here and there. But then, we got down to "tin-tacks"

"My daddy and mummy are doctors at Royal North Shore", said a child of 8. They help people to get better. Every day they do operations." "But how is that a sacrifice?", asked Helen. The little girl was not finished.

“I go to the long day care centre after school, and sometimes on Saturdays. Mummy and Daddy want to take me home, but they are busy helping sick people...so lots of times I stay at the Centre. On Sunday mornings though, we sometimes have pancakes”.

Everyone from 6 to 11, nodded in understanding. They knew! Not prepared for such an earthy answer from one so young, I went on talking to the adults. “But what does this old story mean to us moderns, put off by the idea that God would ask anyone to sacrifice his child like this?”

“God still does”, interrupted an older woman; her hands twitching nervously in her lap. “He still does”. We sent our son to college. He got an engineering degree and got involved in a fundamentalist church. He married a girl there and they have a baby...our only grandchild. Now he says, God wants them to go to the Lebanon as Christian missionaries. They will take our baby too”. She sobbed.

The silence was broken again; this time by a middle-aged man. “I’ll tell you the meaning of this story for me. I and my family are going to look for another church”.

“What”? I asked in astonishment. “Why”?

‘Because, when I look at that God, the God of Abraham, He seems real; not the sort of civilized, Rotary Club God we chatter about here on Sunday mornings”.

My mouth dropped. “Oh”, I said.

Someone else was crying now... a newer member of the congregation. The woman sitting next to her, embraced her. “Gloria wanted me to tell you that her husband left her and the two children last week. She wants us to pray for her”.

***They all knew, they had all digested  
even the very young  
the meanings of sacrifice.***

(Inspired by William Willimon's article, "On a Wild and Windy Mountain", The Christian Century, March 16<sup>th</sup>, 1983, pp. 237-238)

**We look back and remember when we first became aware of the sacrifice of Christ, and by extension those times when we have sacrificed for others and others have sacrificed for us**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nXP3oUatFt0>

**Peace: we greet each other**

## LET'S HEAR THE WORD

### **Genesis 22:1-18 (The Good News Translation)**

In Jewish tradition, this story is known as the Akedah, the binding of Isaac. Genesis 22 is a journey into the darkness for Abraham, into a place of God forsakenness. It speaks of a place where faith is pushed to the limit, and where even God seems to oppose God's own promises and will. God has called Abraham to a place where the divine promises upon which Abraham has built his life, seem to have no future. All possibilities for an heir and descendants, as Abraham viewed it, have disappeared. Abraham had favoured Ishmael, his son by the servant Hagar, over Isaac from Sarah, but Ishmael was lost to him, and now his only possibility, Isaac, is to die at God's insistence. In addition to this question of Abraham's faith journey – and by extension, ours – there is the more contemporary ethical question: how could it be that God would require of Abraham, the murder of his own child, an innocent? This has become the question for modern debate, turning on the very character of God.

**22** Sometime later God tested Abraham; he called to him, "Abraham!" And Abraham answered, "Yes, here I am!"

<sup>2</sup> "Take your son," God said, "your only son, Isaac, whom you love so much, and go to the land of Moriah. There on a mountain that I will show you, offer him as a sacrifice to me."

<sup>3</sup> Early the next morning Abraham cut some wood for the sacrifice, loaded his donkey, and took Isaac and two servants with him. They started out for the place that God had told him about. <sup>4</sup> On the third day Abraham saw the place in the distance. <sup>5</sup> Then he said to the servants, "Stay here with the donkey. The boy and I will go over there and worship, and then we will come back to you."

<sup>6</sup> Abraham made Isaac carry the wood for the sacrifice, and he himself carried a knife and live coals for starting the fire. As they walked along together, <sup>7</sup> Isaac spoke up, "Father!"

He answered, “Yes, my son?”

Isaac asked, “I see that you have the coals and the wood, but where is the lamb for the sacrifice?”

<sup>8</sup> Abraham answered, “God himself will provide one.” And the two of them walked on together.

<sup>9</sup> When they came to the place which God had told him about, Abraham built an altar and arranged the wood on it. He tied up his son and placed him on the altar, on top of the wood. <sup>10</sup> Then he picked up the knife to kill him. <sup>11</sup> But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, “Abraham, Abraham!”

He answered, “Yes, here I am.”

<sup>12</sup> “Don't hurt the boy or do anything to him,” he said. “Now I know that you honour and obey God, because you have not kept back your only son from him.”

<sup>13</sup> Abraham looked around and saw a ram caught in a bush by its horns. He went and got it and offered it as a burnt offering instead of his son. <sup>14</sup> Abraham named that place “The LORD Provides. And even today people say, “On the LORD's mountain he provides.

<sup>15</sup> The angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven a second time, <sup>16</sup> “I make a vow by my own name—the LORD is speaking—that I will richly bless you. Because you did this and did not keep back your only son from me, <sup>17</sup> I promise that I will give you as many descendants as there are stars in the sky or grains of sand along the seashore. Your descendants will conquer their enemies. <sup>18</sup> All the nations will ask me to bless them as I have blessed your descendants—all because you obeyed my command.”

The word of the Lord

### ***Thanks be to God***

#### **Psalm 13 (The Good News Translation)**

Psalm 13 is a short lament psalm. Some dire situation, which is not specified, faces the psalmist and they speak to God about it. The psalm begins with a series of questions addressed to God. Each one asks the haunting question: ‘how long?’ As we might expect there are questions of how long the psalmist must continue to suffer and have their ‘enemy’, which could be a metaphor for some ailment or hindrance in life (v. 2). But we notice that more important for the psalmist is the question of ‘how long’ will

God disregard or fail to address the psalmist's situation. The psalmist's complaint is primarily against God (v. 1). God's apparent disregard for the psalmist's plight undergirds the pain, sorrow, and humiliation, which the psalmist bears.

In this prayer there is an assumption that God is powerful enough to effect some change in the psalmist's plight. It is the way of God to transform life. Not even the psalmist's sinfulness can stop the transformative activity of God (cf. Ps 69:5). On the other hand, the psalmist has freedom to question God when it seems God has not used that power. The sense of urgency generated in Ps 13:1-2 is maintained in v. 3 by the use of the abrupt imperatives 'consider and answer'. The psalmist demands an answer from God, although the psalmist understands clearly that God will only act at a time acceptable to God (Ps 69:13).

**13** How much longer will you forget me, LORD? Forever?

How much longer will you hide yourself from me?

**2** How long must I endure trouble?

How long will sorrow fill my heart day and night?

How long will my enemies triumph over me?

**3** Look at me, O LORD my God, and answer me.

Restore my strength; don't let me die.

**4** Don't let my enemies say, "We have defeated him."

Don't let them gloat over my downfall.

**5** I rely on your constant love;

I will be glad, because you will rescue me.

**6** I will sing to you, O LORD,

because you have been good to me.

### **Romans 6:12-23 (Good News Translation)**

It is impossible to understand this passage without knowing what had gone before. Without that context it might sound just like any other moral exhortation: don't sin! But Paul has been addressing a major issue about what liberates people. He believes it is the love shown to us in Christ; in other words: God's goodness and generosity. It is not by telling them to obey commandments. He has just been arguing that when we accept God's generosity, celebrated in baptism, we enter a new way of life. By this he does not mean we turn over a new leaf and try harder from now on. Rather he means we enter a new system, we become part of a new dynamic; we experience a new set of possibilities. These are created by a new relationship with God wherein by opening ourselves to God's goodness we not only experience forgiveness and hope but also begin a journey where that love produces love in and through us. God's goodness and generosity reproduces itself. It is in the light of entering this new life with its dynamic generation of love and goodness that Paul now declares: so, don't let yourself be ruled by the competing system which generates sin. Paul sees sins as the fruit of relationships with God which have gone wrong resulting in alienation from God, from others and from ourselves. When we enter the new life with its new possibilities the old patterns and systems do not shut down. The destructive ruts and routines are still

there. Paul is saying: you don't have to surrender to them because the new life can lift you beyond them.

<sup>12</sup> Sin must no longer rule in your mortal bodies, so that you obey the desires of your natural self. <sup>13</sup> Nor must you surrender any part of yourselves to sin to be used for wicked purposes. Instead, give yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life, and surrender your whole being to him to be used for righteous purposes. <sup>14</sup> Sin must not be your master; for you do not live under law but under God's grace.

<sup>15</sup> What, then? Shall we sin, because we are not under law but under God's grace? By no means! <sup>16</sup> Surely you know that when you surrender yourselves as slaves to obey someone, you are in fact the slaves of the master you obey—either of sin, which results in death, or of obedience, which results in being put right with God. <sup>17</sup> But thanks be to God! For though at one time you were slaves to sin, you have obeyed with all your heart the truths found in the teaching you received. <sup>18</sup> You were set free from sin and became the slaves of righteousness. <sup>19</sup> (I use everyday language because of the weakness of your natural selves.) At one time you surrendered yourselves entirely as slaves to impurity and wickedness for wicked purposes. In the same way you must now surrender yourselves entirely as slaves of righteousness for holy purposes.

<sup>20</sup> When you were the slaves of sin, you were free from righteousness. <sup>21</sup> What did you gain from doing the things that you are now ashamed of? The result of those things is death! <sup>22</sup> But now you have been set free from sin and are the slaves of God. Your gain is a life fully dedicated to him, and the result is eternal life. <sup>23</sup> For sin pays its wage—death; but God's free gift is eternal life in union with Christ Jesus our Lord.

### **Matthew 10:40-42 (NRSV)**

This is a very short Gospel reading, but plays a key role in relation to the whole chapter. In fact, 10:40 is a major theological statement: the person receiving or welcoming you, receives me, and the person receiving me, receives the one who sent me. This is a saying about the importance of envoys. In those times without telecommunications which enable immediate contact, letters were used but not postal systems. In other words, travelling representatives were the medium of communication and had to be authorised to act for their senders. The disciples were God's messengers, reflecting a line of authority. There is something else here as well. Matthew refers to prophets and 'righteous'. Here he undercuts hierarchy: even the ordinary righteous: in other words, the active members of the congregation, those who

are *not on the front line*, are to receive the reward of a prophet. Finally, the ministry of caring for the little ones (*microi*) is taken as seriously as evangelization. This ethical emphasis fits with Matthew's world view, reflected toward the end of his Gospel in his story concerning the sheep and the goats (25:31-46)

<sup>40</sup>“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. <sup>41</sup>Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; <sup>42</sup>and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”

The Gospel of the Lord  
***Praise to you Lord Christ***

**For Meditation after the Readings:** “Prayer of St Francis:  
 A Contemporary Interpretation from students of the Pontifical Catholic University, Santiago de Chile

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nsl28INo8z0>

**Thinking about Christian belief... a conversation**

**Let's Give: Our Offerings**

**Doxology**  
***Praise God, from whom all blessings flow,  
 praise him, all creatures here below,  
 praise him above, ye heavenly host,  
 praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.***

**Prayer of Dedication**

**Prayers of the People**

This week the Ecumenical Prayer Cycle invites us to pray for the peoples of Kenya and Tanzania. Prayers for the two countries are on the website <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/prayer-cycle/week-20-kenya-tanzania>

At the end of each prayer/petition with the words, ***Lord Christ, hear our prayers*** we say ***help us to favour the little ones***

**Closing Hymn: The Church's One Foundation (TiS 457, vs 1,2,3&5, Aurelia, Samuel John Stone)**

**Blessing and Sending Out**

The blessing of God almighty,  
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit  
Be upon you and remain with you always

Our service has ended.  
Go in peace to love and serve the Lord

***In the name of Christ***

**We sing:** May the feet of God walk with you (TiS 779, Aubrey, Aubrey Podlich)

**A Piece Inviting Peace from Contemporary North America sung to "Hey Jude" by The Kiffness**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2dIKQG4e15M&list=RD2dIKQG4e15M&start\\_radio=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2dIKQG4e15M&list=RD2dIKQG4e15M&start_radio=1)

**Organist** Jim Abraham