

Genesis 22: 1 to 14 9.30 am

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord our strength and our redeemer Amen.

Today I'm preaching on Genesis chapter 22 a story where Abraham was prepared, in obedience to God, to sacrifice Isaac.

It's a story that can provoke heated debate, because is it a story about the abuse of children or about obedience to God, or is it a story indicating the change from human sacrifice to animal sacrifice, I'm in favour of the latter.

A man was walking along a narrow path, not paying much attention to where he was going. Suddenly he slipped over the edge of a cliff. As he fell, he grabbed a branch growing from the side of the cliff.

Realizing that he couldn't hang on for long, he called for help. "Is anybody up there"? And a voice answered, "Yes, I'm here"! The man asked, "Who's that"? The voice replied, "The Lord".

The man said, "Lord help me"! The Lord replied, "I will, let go of the branch". The man replied, "What"? The Lord repeated what he said, "let go of the branch". After a long pause the man replied, "Is anybody else up there"?

In 1996/7 I was standing by this pulpit when Alan Wilson our then rector asked me if I had ever considered ordination, and I replied that I hadn't; to which Alan replied well please think about it.

About two to three months went by and I thought Alan had forgotten all about it, and I have to say I felt slightly relieved.

But then one day he said have you thought about ordination and I said yes, but that I didn't know enough about it to make the right decision, so he gave me the name of a person to go and speak too, and I went to see him, and on the way home I said yes to the Lord.

The rest is history as they say. But initially I felt a bit like the man on the cliff or like Abraham must have felt that God was asking too much of me.

One of the things which is quite often said by people, especially when they are recruiting for some job or other in the church, and that is, God will not ask you to do something which you can't do, if that is the case God must have known Abraham very well indeed, because what God asked of Abraham to do was a very big ask.

But clearly God knew Abraham very well to have asked him in the first place, and equally Abraham must have known God, to have trusted him and obeyed him so readily.

There is another aspect to testing which I want to speak about before I move away from the opportunity and that is the value and necessity of being tested.

Athletes who perform at the Olympic games, for example, have to practice everyday and be tested frequently because if they are not then they don't improve, and it's only through being stretched and tested that they become the best in the world.

Our faith in God will not grow if we are not tested, if we are not stretched by God our faith will not grow.

I've known people who don't do things on the basis that if they don't do it they can't make a mistake, but it can also be by mistakes that we learn and improve.

When I was a teenager I fell off my motor bike and I was worried what my dad would say when he found out. He actually said, "Now you're a better rider".

We need to experience God to get to know him and you can only experience God by being in his company.

For example it is my experience of God that I know that God will not let me down, and I'm sure for many of you that too is your experience.

Because that wasn't something that someone told us, it is something that has become very evident through our personal experience of God.

The first 5 verses of our reading is where we are told that God tested Abraham, by calling him and telling him to sacrifice his only son in the land of Moriah.

And I have to say that I am struck by the way that Abraham doesn't object one little bit about agreeing to sacrificing his son.

But perhaps we shouldn't be too surprised at that because right from chapter 11 we have been hearing stories of Abraham's great faith and obedience to God.

For example the way at the beginning of chapter 12 how Abraham, in obedience to God left his country, his family and his father's house and went to live in a land that he knew nothing about.

That was a brave thing to have done because almost certainly he wouldn't have known anything about a land that he had never been in, and the inhabitants may not have even spoken the same language.

But getting back to Abraham and Isaac, now it is almost certain that child sacrifices, in the Middle East were quite common 4,000 years ago.

Child sacrifices certainly went on at that time in many cultures and archaeological evidence has also confirmed the existence of human sacrifice.

And it may well be that this story was God putting an end to human sacrifice once and for all in Israelite society, which would have been no bad thing.

However there is a strong suggestion that the Baal worshippers in Elijah's day, about 875 BC, were still sacrificing human beings, which may well be why God, through Elijah, laid siege to the priests of Baal and destroyed them.

And some Israelites who had gone native in Canaan had reverted back to worshipping Baal gods and participating in child sacrifices and the Lord was angry with his people and abandoned them to the heathen, see Psalm 106 verse 36 on.

While Abraham as an Israelite may have sacrificed a son at that time he still would not have normally sacrificed a son whom he loved and who he knew, due to his age, he could never replace.

So whether sacrifices were or were not common place; Abraham still showed extraordinary obedience to God in preparing to do so, especially if you remember that God had told him that he would be the father of a great nation, and to do that he had to have a son.

And God acknowledged Abraham's faith and obedience in verse 12 when God ordered Abraham not to hurt the boy or do anything to him.

And then God congratulated Abraham by saying, "Now I know that you honour and obey God, because you have not kept back your only son from me".

But then God supplied a ram caught by its horns in a bush, and Abraham offered that as a burnt offering instead of his son.

In supplying a ram God was not only putting an end to human sacrifice but he was also supplying an alternative to human sacrifices, which was essential if human sacrificing was to really stop.

Now while other animals and birds were also sacrificed lambs were the preferred animals which were sacrificed right up to the destruction of the temple in AD 70.

The most notable of a lamb sacrifice in the Old Testament was of course recorded in the book of Exodus when the Israelites were to smear the blood of lambs on their door frames so that the angel of death would pass over and not destroy the first born of the family.

The next significant mention of lambs in the Bible for me, is in St. John's gospel chapter 1 verse 29 where John the baptist, in response to seeing Jesus, says, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world".

And then, about two thousand years ago, a sacrificial event took place that would even make animal sacrifices redundant, it was of course when, John's prediction came true, and Jesus, in absolute obedience to God, sacrificed himself once and for all to take away our sins, so that we might live.

Some years later, after Jesus' death, St. Paul wrote to the Romans chapter 6 from verse 3, "We who are baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death". "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his".

Now we have eternal life through faith in the blood of Christ sacrificed for all man kind.

People sometimes say I was saved on a specific day when I suddenly saw the light or whatever, but they are wrong, we were all saved when Jesus died on the cross at calvary and rose again on the third day.

As we sit let us pray for children who are still subject to abuse and ill treatment.

Father we pray for all children everywhere who have been abused and cruelly treated. Give them your healing and sense of worth that comes from knowing that each one of them is loved and valued in your eyes.

We ask this in the name of Jesus our Lord and Saviour,

Amen