

## ***The Ultimate Sacrifice* by Rev John Castle**

A sermon given on Sunday 28 June 2020 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Reading: Genesis 22:1-14

Year A, Proper 8

### **Introduction: Jump!**

A family was woken in the night by their fire alarm, and found that the house was on fire. The father carried his 18-month toddler and dragged his 4-year old son by the hand down the stairs. Suddenly the 4-year-old remembered his teddy, and ran back to his bedroom. In the furore and confusion, the father didn't realise he had gone until he was outside the house, by which time the little boy was trapped by the flames and smoke in his bedroom. Smoke swirled around him and he cried out from the upstairs window, "Daddy, Daddy, help me!" His father yelled out from below, "Jump out of the window, Andy, and I'll catch you". In the darkness and the smoke the little boy yelled back, "But Daddy, I can't see you!" The father replied, "That's OK, son, *I can see you*. Jump!"

I don't know whether this is a true story, but one thing is certain – this was a situation where trust and obedience were needed if the little boy was to be saved. That trust and obedience came out of a long relationship between the boy and his father. And it is trust – or faith – and obedience which are the theme of today's story of Abraham. What Abraham is asked to do in this story from Genesis chapter 22 is the ultimate test of his relationship with God.

### **Abraham's journey**

Over the past 10 chapters we have seen Abraham on a journey – not just the physical journey which involved him leaving his family in Haran and travelling to Canaan, and then moving around as a nomadic herdsman, but a spiritual journey. God has chosen Abraham as a key part of his purposes for the world, and has called him to leave behind his security and trust God to protect him and guide him. On this journey Abraham's faith is tested several times. Sometimes he looks to God for guidance, and other times he does things his own way – often with unfortunate consequences, such as when he passes his wife off as his sister out of fear of the local rulers, or when he goes along with Sarah's suggestion that he has a child with her slave-girl. Jewish tradition says that Abraham's faith was tested ten times. The one we heard about last week was Sarah's demand that he expell her slave-woman Hagar and her son Ishmael, who was, of course, also Abraham's son. The solution that God gives to the problem is not one that Abraham finds easy, but, as Sarah Ashton explained to us last week, Abraham trusts that God knows best, and obeys his instructions. And indeed, God does take care of Hagar and Ishmael.

## The ultimate test

But now, as the narrator tells us in the first verse of chapter 22, God is going to test Abraham again. And this is the biggest test of all. Having sent away Ishmael, Abraham's future and the fulfilment of God's promises depend on Isaac, the son God gave to Sarah and Abraham by a miracle. And right now God tells him to offer Isaac up as a sacrifice, literally, on an altar on a distant mountain. The very thought of doing such a thing would have seemed abhorrent to the original hearers of this story. Child sacrifice happened in some of the nations around Israel, and later in the Old Testament it was strongly condemned by God<sup>1</sup>.

But for Abraham, not only was it abhorrent, but it made no sense at all. Why would God perform a miracle to give you a son and then ask you to kill him? Everything that God has said to you up to now has been about blessing you – but now he wants to take away the son you love. Moreover, God has specifically promised that you will get descendants through this son, and that the rest of the world will be blessed through him; and now God seems to be wrecking the very plan he had revealed to you. Even God can't win this way.

Of course, the writer has told us in verse 1 that all of this is a test. No children will be harmed in the execution of this exercise. God has no intention of allowing Isaac to die. But Abraham doesn't know that. He not only has to prepare the materials for the sacrifice, but he even has to answer his unsuspecting son's question "'The fire and wood are here,' Isaac said, 'but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?'" (22:7<sup>2</sup>)

This is the ultimate challenge for Abraham: how will he respond to a situation which makes no sense at all? Will he argue with God, disobey God, or follow God's instructions? Will he put obedience to God above not only his own interests but the interests – even the life – of his beloved son?

## When life makes no sense

Do you sometimes feel that life makes no sense; that just when you thought you had some stability and you knew how the future would pan out, everything gets turned upside down? Do you sometimes wonder whether God is asleep, has gone on holiday or, even worse, has turned into a cruel dictator, who wants to bring suffering on the undeserving for some kind of cosmic joke? Or do you know someone else who can't square what they learned in Sunday School with the realities of their own life or the situations of others?

If we read the story as it is told us in Genesis, it is all about Abraham's **faith and obedience**. Indeed, in the verses following today's passage, the angel of the Lord appears to Abraham a second time and says,

"I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you ... through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me."  
(Genesis 22:16-18)

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<sup>1</sup> See Leviticus 18:21, Jeremiah 32:35

<sup>2</sup> All references, unless otherwise stated, are from NRSV

In his letters to the Romans and the Galatians, St Paul highlights Abraham's **faith** and quotes Genesis 15:16 which says that when God promised to Abraham that he would have a son, "Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness."<sup>3</sup>

Of course, faith and obedience go together, and this is a point that the letter of James in the New Testament makes strongly. James points out that it was Abraham's **actions** in preparing to sacrifice Isaac that show his faith was real.

Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone. (James 2:21-24 NIV)

Saying you believe in God is one thing: doing what God wants you to do is another. Being a Christian isn't only about believing in God with your head; it's about putting your faith into practice by obeying God in the day-to-day business of living – and also in the one-off, unusual situations where obeying God means plotting an uncertain and risky course. This, of course, is what the test of Abraham is all about.

### **The ultimate sacrifice**

That's all very well, you may say, but I'm still bothered by the thought that God would ask Abraham to sacrifice his child. What kind of a God would do that? If God asked me to sacrifice my child, I'm afraid my answer would be "no".

But of course, God wouldn't ask you to do that. This story of Abraham is in many ways unique. And it comes from an ancient culture in which human sacrifice actually happened. And as we know from verse 1, God never intends any harm to come to Isaac. It's an extreme story that is there to make a point. Abraham's relationship with God is so strong by now that he is willing to trust God without understanding how God is going to make it all work. The test is not for God's benefit, as though God needs to find out what Abraham is made of. God knows everything. The test is to strengthen Abraham's faith and cement his commitment to God. Abraham's obedience shows that there is nothing that he is not willing to do for God.

And the reason Abraham obeys God and is willing to trust him is that Abraham has discovered that God loves him. In the story of the boy trapped in the blazing house which I told at the beginning, the boy will jump because he trusts his Dad to catch him, and he trusts him because he knows that his father loves him and only wants the best for him.

Abraham has got to know God over the years, and through all the ups and downs, trials and dangers, he has seen how God has blessed him. And so when God asks him to make the ultimate sacrifice, to give up "your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love"<sup>4</sup>, Abraham obeys.

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<sup>3</sup> Romans 4:3, Galatians 3:6

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 22:2

The thing is, God does not ask Abraham to do anything that he himself is not willing to do. St Paul is almost certainly thinking of this story when he writes in the letter to the Romans, “He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?”<sup>5</sup> Abraham did not in the end have to sacrifice his son. But God did sacrifice his Son. On the Cross, Jesus died as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the whole world.

Unlike Isaac, who didn't have a choice, Jesus willingly went to the Cross for you and me. The modern hymn “The Servant King” speaks of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane choosing to obey God, even in the face of appalling suffering:

*There in the garden of tears,  
my heavy load he chose to bear;  
his heart with sorrow was torn,  
'Yet not my will but yours,' he said.*

The death of Jesus seemed at the time a terrible tragedy, a senseless waste of an amazing human life. For his friends and family, it must have seemed to make no more sense than God's instruction to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. This was the Messiah, the longed for Redeemer, sent by God to save his people, and God had allowed him to be murdered by his enemies! In Jesus' case, there was no last-minute reprieve, no ram conveniently caught in a thicket to be substituted for the sacrifice. As the nails were hammered into his hands, as his twisted body was lifted up on the cross, and as his life ebbed away and he finally gave up his spirit, it must have seemed to anyone of faith that God had gone mad.

Strangely, according to tradition, the place where the crucifixion took place was only a few hundred yards away from the site where, many hundreds of years before, Abraham had bound his son and laid him on the altar. If you visit the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem today, you will see the rock on which, according to Muslims, Abraham made the altar to sacrifice his son.

This time, though, things were the other way round. It was *God's* Son who was being sacrificed, and, like the ram in the story of Abraham, it was he who was the substitute for others – for each of us, and for every man, woman and child who has ever lived on this earth. It was Jesus' faith in God and his obedience to his Father which took him to the Cross.

### **So what about us?**

So what does all this mean for us? I'm sure your journey of faith has been very different from Abraham's. (I certainly hope so!) But I've no doubt you've had a bumpy ride at times. Ill health, redundancy, family problems can all test our faith in God. Sometimes seeing another person suffer is more challenging for faith than your own troubles.

Abraham is held up as an example of faith for us to follow. But we mustn't forget that the most important lesson from Abraham's story is not Abraham's faith but

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<sup>5</sup> Romans 8:32

*God's faithfulness.* God calls Abraham and has a great plan for him and his descendants. God protects him, gets him out of difficult situations and blesses him. And so Abraham learns that God is to be trusted.

Unlike Abraham, we have the benefit of knowing the gospel of God's love shown in Jesus Christ. We can look back to the Cross and give thanks for the ultimate sacrifice that Jesus made for us, to forgive us our sins and to reconcile us to God, so that we can know him as our loving heavenly Father, just as intimately as Abraham did, if not more so.

How are we responding to that love of God? Are you willing to listen to his voice, to trust him with your future? Are you willing to do anything for God - even if that means giving up something you love or something you are relying on for your security? If God challenges you about your trust in material possessions, or your response to the needs of others, if he allows your security to be stripped away from you and takes you through a valley of deep darkness, will you still trust him? Will you follow him, even if you don't understand what is happening or how he will make everything come right?

St Paul had more than his fair share of troubles, but he writes in his letter to the Romans, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." (Romans 8:28).

God's purposes are good and will bring blessing, but the whys and wherefores of how he seeks to achieve them are not available for inspection by human beings.

Where are you now on your journey of faith? Are you at the early stages, just tuning in to the voice of God and wondering where he is going to lead you? Or have you been journeying a long time? Have you grown closer to God over the years, or drifted away from the closeness you once had? How important is your relationship with God to you? Have you committed your life to him, and begun to discover the vastness of his love and faithfulness?

Wherever we are now, we can choose how we will continue. So, are you willing to trust God with your life, your future, your loved ones? Are you willing to depend on him alone, and not on material security or your own wisdom?

The hymn *Amazing Grace* speaks of a journey in which we experience God's grace in our lives. I will finish by reading 2 verses and leaving you with a moment of silence for your own prayer to God.

First, I invite you to take a moment to look back on your life. Can you see where God has been with you on your journey? *Pause*

Through many dangers, toils and snares  
I have already come;  
'Tis grace that brought me safe thus far,  
And grace will lead me home.

And now, if you would like to, use these words as the start of your prayer of commitment, or re-commitment, to God.

The Lord has promised good to me,  
His word my hope secures;  
He will my shield and portion be  
As long as life endures.<sup>6</sup>

May God bless you, guide you and protect you as you continue on your journey, following the one who gave up his life for us, but rose again and reigns for evermore, Jesus Christ our Lord. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> *Amazing Grace* by John Newton (1725-1807)