

Gen 22: 1-14

Most of the stories we tell are life-affirming and a celebration of our hope and faith. And therefore they last for ages.

And then there are stories which challenge everything we believe, stories that haunt us because they challenge the very heart of our hope and faith. And therefore they last for all eternity.

The story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac is such a story. Exactly because it defies explanation it has challenged each new generation to wrestle with it and try to extract some or other meaning from it. Of course, no one has so much invested in this story as the Jewish people. And therefore, like few other stories in the Hebrew bible, the *Akeiah* (or the binding), has become one of the defining stories of Jewish fate and identity.

Reflecting on this, Elie Wiesel, the Nobel laureate for peace, says: "Here is a story that contains Jewish destiny in its totality, just as the flame is contained in the single spark by which it comes to life. Every major theme, every passion and obsession that make Judaism the adventure that it is, can be traced back to it: man's anguish when he finds himself face to face with God, his quest for purity and purpose, the conflict of having to choose between dreams of the past and dreams of the future, between absolute faith and absolute justice, between the need to obey God's will and to rebel against it; between his yearnings for freedom and for sacrifice, his desire to justify hope and despair with words and silence – the same words and the same silence. It is all there."

The story begins with the seemingly innocent words: "After these things...the Lord tested Abraham". What are "*these things*"? These things are everything that has happened since Gen 12. These things are Abraham's calling, the promise of a name, a blessing, an offspring, a land. These things are Abraham's passing off of Sarah as his sister to the Pharaoh, his sending away of Hagar and Ishmael, Sarah's laughter about the news that she was going to have a child in her old age and Abraham's plea for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah.

The Lord's testing turns out to be something almost inconceivable. Listen closely to the words: "Take *your son*, your *only son*, *Isaac*, whom you love...and go and offer him as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I shall show you."

It is as if the author want to lead us into asking the question: What kind of god is it who addresses man, but not any man, the man who is his friend, to whom he talks like he talked to no other and commands him: *Take your son and offer him as a burnt offering?*

In Judaism Abraham is honoured and revered as the first believer. However notwithstanding his total faith in God and his justice, His kindness, he did not hesitate for a moment to take God to task as he tried to save two condemned cities from destruction. Just four chapters prior to this one he not only dared to query God, but he bargained and pleaded with him for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. And God listened and answered him.

So why did he not intercede for his own son, his only son, the son whom he loved? Why did he just accept God's command? In Judaism even God is bound to his own law and his

law clearly states: *"You shall not kill"*

In this context the accusation often levelled at believers in general, but Christians in particular, that faith is nothing but a crutch, appears almost laughable. A crutch? Faith seems more like a furnace, a crucible than a crutch. Abraham's faith spared him neither anguish nor pain. If challenged him in a way that twenty first century's sensitivities would regard as brutal, almost barbaric.

The film, "The believer" (released about 10 years ago) is based on actual events. In 1965 a journalist from the New York Times received the hint that a young man who was arrested at a Ku Klux Klan demonstration and who had previously been a member of the Nazi Party, was in fact a Jew.

The movie is about this contradiction. How can a Jew be a Nazi? Or as the director, Henry Bean puts it: *"Danny is living an extraordinary double life: by day, he gives anti-Semitic speeches, raises money for neo-facist causes, and develops plans to bomb synagogues. By night, he studies torah, wears his tallis, and teaches his girlfriend, Carla, Hebrew. Danny is a Jew and a Nazi at once, living an impossible – and unsustainable – contradiction."*

There is one line that runs like a golden thread through the whole movie: God's words to Abraham: *Take your son, your only Isaac, whom you love and go to the land Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering...*

Towards the end of the movie Danny explains his hatred for his own people. Why did Abraham not challenge God? Why did he not object to God's command? Why do the Jews accept suffering? Why do they identify with the weak?

What kind of a father is it that allows this to happen? What kind of a father is it sacrifices his only son?

There is one key scene which becomes the most poignant commentary on religion in our day. Danny finds himself in a kind of neo-Nazi boot camp where he is trained in the use of firearms. As targets, three life size human figures, clearly Jews – a father, mother and child – have been set up. Danny's first shot seems to be all over the place. At the bemused question of his instructor "where did you aim?" he gave the chilling answer: "I aimed at the father."

Frederick Buechner, in one of his sermons, tells the following story: It is about a boy of twelve or thirteen who, in fit of crazy anger and depression, got hold of a gun and fired it at his father, who died not right away but soon afterward. When the authorities asked the boy why he had done it, he said that it was because he could not stand his father, because his father demanded too much of him, because he was always after him, because he hated his father. And then later on, after he had been placed in a house of detention somewhere, a guard was walking past his room late one night when he heard sounds from inside - he stopped to listen. The words that he heard the boy sobbing out in the dark were: "I want my father, I want my father."

Who can bear a God that demands everything...and who can bear to be without Him?

It is in this contradiction that the story of Abraham and Isaac is played out. It is in this contradiction that we have to live.

Of course, one of the peculiar things about Abraham in this story, is his silence. He scarcely say anything at all. No protest, no questioning. Almost the only thing he says is contained in a single Hebrew word, repeated three times throughout the story. All three times it is simply in response to either God, or Isaac calling his name. And every time he simply says: "*hinenni*" - "here I am"

One explanation could of course be that Abraham did indeed trust God; that he trusted in God's greater mercy, that He trusted that God could never be untrue to his promises. And if that is the case, then Abraham had indeed learned a lot since "these things". For earlier he questioned God; earlier he intervened, earlier he reminded God of his promises.

The other explanation is something altogether different. It is something that a number of Jewish observers have picked up on. At the end of the story it becomes clear that this test didn't change Abraham at all. When he says "the Lord will provide" it not something that he understands for the first time. He merely affirms what he has experienced earlier. The story merely confirms that Abraham knew and trusted that God had his well-being at heart.

In fact the only one that has learned anything from the test is God. The only change of awareness is on God's side. In verse 12 God says: "now I can see that you trust God, since you have not kept your son, your only son from me."

On the basis of this, Lipmann Bodoff, a Jew from the orthodox tradition, argues that this was as much a test that Abraham put to God as it was God testing Abraham. Also, Elie Wiesel, along the same lines: "(this is) A double-edged test. God subjected Abraham to it, yet at the same time Abraham forced it on God. As though Abraham had said: I defy you, Lord. I shall submit to Your will, but let us see whether You shall go to the end, whether you shall remain passive and remain silent when the life of my son – who is also Your son – is at stake!"

This is almost as much a contest as it is a test. It is as if Abraham's silence and his passive compliance betray something of his confidence. Almost as if he is saying: let's see who blinks first.

Of course, putting God to the test is neither in the Jewish tradition nor in the bible a foreign idea. In fact, in Malachi 3 God issues the invitation himself: Bring your offerings to the temple and put me to the test, God says.

The Midrash goes even further: God loves to be defeated by his children.

The one thing that I would like to avoid at all costs, is to suggest that we have somehow solved a riddle here; that this explains everything and that God has therefore been absolved.

In saying that the God who tested Abraham is the same God who allows Abraham to test him doesn't smooth everything out. What it does do, is that it subverts our neat packaged ideas of God. It means on the one hand that God is neither the highest ideal of Western liberalism nor is God the one who demands justice on the basis of sacrifice and the spilling of blood.

It means that Jesus Christ is neither the smiling face of a fuzzy feel-good spirituality and nor is he the tortured face of divine atonement, the burnt offering that God did not spare for

himself what he did spare for Abraham.

But it does mean that Jesus Christ is God's way of inverting and subverting our sense of justice.

Because Jesus set out to unmask and transform the underlying dynamics of human relations premised upon power and exclusions, drawing them out into the light through his sayings and deeds of hospitality and judgement, he himself became a victim... By raising him from the dead, God subverts the sacrificial process from within... Jesus did not volunteer to get into God's justice machine. God volunteered to get into ours.¹

In Jesus Christ we receive the reward of the righteous (Matt 11). It means that God has faced the final test himself. It means our faith is based on the confidence of God's justice – not on the confidence of our obedience.

And finally it means that sometimes one has to go into the darkness of God's guidance and providence to discover the light of God's love.

¹ Brian Robinette, *The Gift of the forgiving victim*. In *Grammars of Resurrection: A Christian Theology of Presence and Absence* (New York: Cross Roads Publishing Company 2009). 297-298