

The Binding of Isaac

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 29 June 2014, by David Gill. The readings were Genesis 22:1-14, Romans 6:12-23 and St Matthew 10:40-42.

Today's first reading is a shocker.

Abraham was the revered patriarch, the almost mythical father figure, not only of the Jewish people but of all three so-called "Abrahamic faiths" – Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Abraham's relationship with God had been a long and complex saga of journeys, conflict, loss and violence. It involved many marching orders: leave here, go there, move on. It brought the promise of many descendants who would be blessed, who in turn would be a blessing to many nations.

The Abraham saga culminates in the episode we heard this morning. In Jewish tradition it is called "The Binding" (of Isaac). The passage begins with God giving what, by then, must have been a familiar order: "Go!" But the instruction that follows leaves us stunned. "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love. Go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains."

Abraham doesn't argue, doesn't hesitate, doesn't even talk with the boy's mother. He saddles up, collects Isaac, gathers some firewood and goes. Three days later they near the place of sacrifice. We are caught by the pathos of the boy's question: "But where is the lamb for sacrifice?" No worries, replies his father, the Lord will provide. They build an altar and stack the wood. Isaac is bound and placed upon it. At the very last minute, God intervenes and a sheep is sacrificed instead.

We hear this story and we think: what in God's name did that man think he was doing? How could he have imagined that sacrificing his son might win divine approval? Was Abraham unhinged? Why does the Bible present his near-infanticide as somehow commendable? What's this strange episode doing in the Bible anyway?

The story shocks us. It must have shaken those early Jews even more. Isaac after all was special. He was not just any child, but the one through whom God's promise of blessing was to be fulfilled. If Isaac had been killed, their future, their special identity, their hope for divine blessing would have died with him.

What on earth are we to make of this hair-raising incident?

Whenever reading the Bible lands you with a question like that, the trick is to take a step backwards. Try to get into the thinking of people who had very different minds to ours and lived in a very different world. Ask what they made of the episode, why they told the story around their campfires, passed it on to their children, eventually wrote it into their sacred story. What did it mean for them?

The clue is there in the book of Genesis, but we missed it because the passage set for this morning cuts out three verses too soon. Had we read on, we would have heard God telling Abraham that, because of his willingness to sacrifice even his son, he and his offspring would be blessed. The story was received, told and re-told, cherished, and eventually written into Genesis as a story about the cost of obeying God and the blessing that may flow from it. There is the brush with death, certainly. But there is also, and in consequence, the promise of life.

The cost of obedience. Last Sunday I mentioned again Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian martyred for his opposition to Hitler. Bonhoeffer's best known book has a title with particular poignancy. In English translation, it is *The Cost of Discipleship*. Who would have known that cost better than he?

Never forget the cost. Be on guard against cut-price Christianity. The temptation to slacken off, to put one's feet up, to put a veil over the cross, is always there. With spiritual discipline, as with other aspects of life, it's only natural to want to make things easier for oneself.

It's natural, too, that we tend to underestimate ourselves. Obedience? What difference could my little life possibly make to God? But God has a purpose for everyone, every day. You included.

We'd like to make things easier ourselves. Easier for others, too. After all, we don't want to frighten people away from the Christian faith, do we? We don't want to revive the bad old days of rampant religious judgementalism. So, let's not unsettle people. Be gentle. Tune out the disturbance. Cushion the shock. Turn down the volume. Mute the piercing demand of divine love.

Before we know it we're offering the world, and one another, a watered down gospel, what Bonhoeffer denounced as "cheap grace". And we don't even notice what we're doing.

Perhaps Australia's Christians need a lesson from some of our neighbours, people who take the issue of obedience to God very seriously indeed.

Today our Muslim friends begin Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar. They will be fasting between dawn and sunset, praying, reading the Koran, giving to the needy, meeting people. These are externals that can be seen. More important is what we will not see: their self-examination, tougher than the usually lukewarm Lent of our Christian calendar, and their attempt to focus again on the obedience God may require.

[Incidentally, among the events of Ramadan are so-called iftar dinners, evening meals when the fast is broken at sunset. Special food is prepared. Often they are communal events that bring together friends and neighbours. In Indonesia, sometimes, families invite in groups of orphans to share their meal.

A few years ago, here in Australia, Muslims began inviting non-Muslims to their iftar dinners. Now we are reciprocating –and you will be pleased to know that St Stephen's is part of the action. In July, the Uniting Church's national leaders will be hosting an iftar dinner, in our hall downstairs, for Muslim but also Jewish and other religious leaders. Roll on, good neighbourliness!]

But I digress. I was saying that Muslims may have a thing or two to teach us about the spiritual discipline and the costliness of obedience.

Costliness? Alas, some of our brothers and sisters in Christ don't see things in these terms at all. They have a happily uncomplicated understanding of what follows from commitment to Christ. Theirs is a so-called prosperity gospel. Give your life to the Lord, goes their message, and everything thereafter will be beer and skittles. The believer will prosper. The family that prays together stays together. The nation that follows the ways of righteousness will see its economy flourish and its regiments triumph.

That direct linkage of obedience and blessing is not only simplistic, it is politically loaded. The rich are rich because they are pleasing to God. The poor are poor because they're not. The affluence of the former, therefore, should be protected and reinforced. The poverty of the latter is their own fault and nobody else's problem. Theologically this is dangerous nonsense, but it provides a comfortable religious home for those who find themselves on the far right of Australian politics.

Obedience equals prosperity? No, that's not the way it works. If you don't believe me, believe the man of the cross. Believe Peter and Paul, apostles and

martyrs – in the Church’s calendar, this is their day. Believe Bonhoeffer. Believe the vast army of martyrs. Obedience may mean travelling into darkness, into a place of Godforsakenness. It may mean faith being pushed to the limit, and beyond.

Those who grappled with the story of Abraham and Isaac knew this.

Those who wrote the Psalms knew it too. [Let me say, in another parenthesis, that the Psalms, the prayer book of the Jewish people, are a wonderful spiritual resource. Like many Uniting Church congregations, we at St Stephen’s are neglecting them. We should use them more, in one form or another. But again, I digress]. The Lectionary says we should be using Psalm 13 today, in response to the binding of Isaac. It is a cry of anguish:

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? Consider and answer me, O Lord my God! Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death, and my enemy will say, “I have prevailed”.

Whoever wrote that knew the dark places into which God sometimes leads us.

Other psalmists knew the dark places too. So did Job. So did the man of Nazareth: “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” The grim knowledge that obedience may mean Godforesakenness is built into the very foundations of Judaism. That knowledge has been relearned, painfully, many times since.

It was certainly relearned in the twentieth century. An unknown Jewish prisoner in one of Hitler’s death camps spoke for a whole generation when he carved into his cell wall the words: “If there is a God, he will have to beg my forgiveness”.

Nicole Krauss, in her bestselling novel about a Holocaust survivor entitled “The History of Love” says perceptively, “When a Jew prays, he is asking God a question that has no end”.

Not Jews only. As Pope Francis remarked a couple of weeks ago, “Inside every Christian is a Jew”. When we pray, there are -- sometimes whispered, sometimes silent – many questions that have no end. God, why? Where are you in all this? Do you hear me? Do you care?

Which, curiously, are questions Abraham apparently did not ask. “Go!” said God. And it was enough. Abraham went.

A prayer for the grace of obedience. It comes from St Ignatius Loyola:

*Teach us, good Lord, to serve you as you deserve:
to give, and not to count the cost;
to fight, and not to heed the wounds;
to toil, and not to seek for rest;
to labour, and not to ask for any reward,
except that of knowing that we do your holy will;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen*

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