

Pentecost 7
29/06/2008

Mark the Evangelist

Genesis 22:1-14

Abraham offers Isaac

Psalms 13

A Psalm of David

Romans 6:12-23

Grace, Love, Eternal Life

Matthew 10:40-42

Rewards

Sermon by Elizabeth Brown

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen .

Come journey with me through time, and as we travel keep in mind that our living God is beyond space and time (even 24/7!!), yet everywhere and always now. We begin our journey some two thousand years or so before the birth of Jesus.

How did you re-act to the reading from the Hebrew Scriptures? We know that with a few glitches Abraham has already proved himself to be a man of obedience and faith. Yet more is demanded of him!

The question we ask ourselves is how in today's society, can we, do we want to, follow the example of Abraham's total faith and obedience, and respond as he did to God's testing?

At night, while Abraham is sleeping, God commands him to offer his son, (his only son, - that miracle, that unimaginable gift from the Lord) as a burnt offering - a burnt offering!! Did he confide in his wife - we know not. The next morning he set off with two servants, a loaded donkey and his son on what was to be a three day journey. What mental anguish did Abraham suffer on the way, how would any father feel? Reflecting today's Psalm, did he cry in his heart: 'How long, how long, O Lord will you test me?'

Earlier in the book of Genesis, we are told how Abraham pleaded with God in an endeavour to save Sodom and Gomorrah from God's wrath; but here we are not told of resentment or pleading; but of testing, demanding, soul wrenching obedience until the very moment preceding the death of the sacrifice, when God intervenes. Abraham once again has shown that in faith he will obey, and at the last moment is reprieved. Today, this story does not sit lightly with us! What kind of a God would demand this sacrifice from a father who has already proved that he is a man of faith?? How do we in this 21st century react?

We know that this God let his only beloved Son die an agonizing death on a cross - so he was demanding no more from Abraham than He was prepared to do and suffer Himself.

We believe that this unspeakable, horrendous death of God's Son, (a sacrifice made once and for all time), was followed by the defeat of death in the resurrection to new life, was for us and for all human-kind, so that we through God's gracious gift of faith might

inherit eternal life

How can we, modern day disciples, make a connection between the Hebrew scripture telling of Abraham's faith and Matthew's final few verses of Jesus' specific teaching to his disciples. What would being a modern Abraham mean in our consumer driven society?

Let me tell you a story set two thousand years, more or less, after the time of Abraham and before our modern day.

The story of the other Wise Man - I'm about to reduce a beautiful story to a few sentences. Four wise men planned to follow the star to Jerusalem and pay homage to the new-born king. The fourth, Artaban, lived a ten day's ride further east than the others, and was to meet them in Babylon. After nine days riding, on the outskirts of the city, his horse suddenly stopped and there at its feet was a Hebrew, who was dying from a deadly fever. What was Artaban to do?? If he stayed to help, he would miss his friends, who would not wait. He stayed and revived the Hebrew who told him that the King was to be born, not in Jerusalem, but in Bethlehem. When he arrived in Babylon his friends had departed; so, re-equipping himself, he rode to Bethlehem and began his own search for the royal baby; but with no success.

His search continued for thirty long years, during which he ministered to the needs of those who crossed his path. Old, sad and disconsolate, he arrives in Jerusalem, on the eve of Passover, to find the town in a greater state of disturbance than usual - three criminals are about to be crucified! Suddenly, the sky grows dark, the earth shudders and Artaban, hit on the temple by falling debris, collapses to the ground. Faintly, as if from far away he hears a voice and stumbly replies: 'How can it be Lord? I've searched for you for thirty-three years and never found you.' And the reply: 'Whenever you helped one of my brethren, you did it unto me!' With great joy, Artaban realized that he had found the King.

Today, another two thousand years later, we know the story of this King, this Son of God - his teachings and his example. During the month of June, the readings from the Gospel of Matthew, have related the final preparation of the disciples for their ministry, and have reminded us of all facets of Jesus ministry - his healing, his continual support for the 'underdogs' of his society, accompanied by his unending assertions that no human was outside the bounds of his concern and attention, be they, as Paul wrote, Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female. As the Rev. Norma Brown writes in 'With Love to the World', Matthew has chosen some of the most disadvantaged in his society to show how free and inclusive was Jesus' approach to his fellow humans.

Today's Gospel reading almost carries on the last conversation of Artaban - when you welcome another human being, you welcome me. When you offer hospitality, even a cup of cold water, in my name, you are serving me. Sounds simple, doesn't it? But it isn't! As Leunig says in one of his prayers: 'God give us strength. Strength to hold on and strength to let go.' And it so hard to let go - to be willing to change!!

Yet if we believe in a Triune God, the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in all; then we, created in the image of God, must know, as the Fourth Wise Man could not, that all our relationships with creation are with our Creator God - so we welcome and offer hospitality to our Creator through his creation.

This is what life is all about- the searching, the sharing, the giving, not only of one's wealth, but more importantly of oneself to other humans - acknowledging their worth and our relationship with them as fellow human beings. This is what Jesus exemplified so well during his short ministry.- his relationships with his fellow humans showed his concern, his understanding of their need for healing, love and acceptance; but never could he countenance arrogance, pride or evil. Is this the way we live - not self-consciously determined to do good; but through prayer allowing our Creator, and his divine grace, to ever be our guide in all our relationships, believing as did Abraham: 'The Lord will provide.'

Earlier this month, a middle-aged doctor, head of St.Vincent's Emergency Department, died. In one of the many references to his great professional skill, was the comment that each person who attended for emergency care was treated as a human being of worth!!

Jesus' free and inclusive approach was and continues to be an example to us all. So let us believe in the deepest parts of our being that we and all are unconditionally loved, with a love beyond our imagining - that all our fellow human beings are so loved and are of worth!!

If we are honest we know in our hearts, how difficult this is; we are comfortable in our own network; we don't want to change! Later we will joyfully pass the peace to each other; but how often do we do it during the week? Yet through courage and the grace of faith we can transcend from our strength to God's, growing in discernment, self-understanding and mutual grace.

George McLeod of Iona sums it up:

Invisible we see You, Christ above us.
But with the eye of faith, we know you reign.

Inapprehensible we know you Christ beside us.
**But with the eye of faith, we know you dwell
in each of us**

We are your living temple,

By grace alone we are your living body....

[George MacLeod, The Whole World Shall Cry Glory, 1985].