

Pentecost 17
11/9/2016

Mark the Evangelist

Genesis 22:1-14
Romans 4:1-3, 13-17
Matthew 3:7-10

Abraham and the Ultimate Test

Sermon preached by Rev. Bruce Barber

A word or two of explanation about what follows is necessary before we begin. You may, or may not, know of the very large painting by Rupert Bunny of the sacrifice of Isaac, which hangs in the narthex of Wesley Church in the city. Three weeks ago, the OT lecturer at the CTM offered a study of this text before the evening service. Alistair McCrae asked me to preach on this text at the service which followed. I happily agreed. In more than fifty years of attempting to write sermons, to the best of my memory I have never had a previous opportunity to do so with this text. Craig suggested that I offer it to you this morning, so with some changes this is what I prepared then.

Without doubt, this story is one of the most confronting we can imagine: the call to Abraham by his God to kill his only son is surely something humanly unimaginable. But that is the least of it. What is far more troubling is its implication about Abraham's God. For this is the God who had earlier made the epoch making promise that the already aged Abraham would be the father of many generations – a promise heightened by the laughable response to that announcement by his equally aged wife Sarah of the humanly impossible birth of a son called Isaac. Isaac's life, therefore, would surely appear to be the most *not* negotiable of any human life at all.

So what are to make of this apparently monstrous affair? Here as is always the case with Biblical texts, we can have confidence in a solution when we know something of its background. We have already referred to the significance of the promise "*that in Abraham all the families of the earth will be blessed*", a promise that is the foundation of everything not only for Jews, but just as much for Christians, and Muslims as well for that matter.

The monumental significance of this promise rests in its repeated sentence from 10 chapters earlier, standing as it does at the very beginning of recorded history: "*Now the Lord said to Abraham: **Go**... so Abraham **went***".

These two single syllable words: "go" and "went" are the two most important words in the Bible. With them a revolution was set in motion. They represent the beginning of a new history, not only for the Hebrew people, not only therefore for the Church, but equally for two millennia of Western culture. If Abraham had not gone, our society literally would not be here today in any recognisable form. Why can I say this with such boldness? Because before the summons "go", and Abraham's obedient "going", the only reality was the fateful immersion of human life in a precarious world: a world of nature that was literally dripping with divinity. In the storm, the mountain, the river, the rock you met the residing god. Since so many gods inhabited the whole of the natural world, you could never know what they might do next. We can readily understand why the Canaanite god of the rain – whom we know as Baal, was the most mercurial. No rain, no life. This was a life of sheer unpredictability – everything human depended on the eternal return of the cycle of the seasons of the natural world: summer,

autumn, winter, spring. So the gods had to be cajoled to work if life was to occur at all; even more, they had to be placated so that they would not work to harm human beings. It was a world of a frightening fate for human beings to be immersed in the unpredictable actions of the gods of the natural world.

But then in the face of all this, an absolute miracle occurs: "*Abraham went*". And he took us with him. The nearest equivalent of his going might be that of the explorer figure of Christopher Columbus setting out in 1492 to find the new World, very likely with the shouting of the crowd ringing in his ears: "You'll fall off!"

So it is that these original mutual promises by Abraham and his God at the very beginning of recorded history are sealed once more in the miraculous birth of Isaac. And now Isaac is to be killed by his father's hand, and therefore, we, in his loins, as it were, are about to expire with him. And most people are shocked, appalled, disgusted.

But even more affronting, the text is devoid of what at the very least we would want to hear, assuming that we are prepared to give it any hearing at all. It is all so unfeeling. At no point does Abraham's God give any possible motive for the sacrifice of Isaac. Indeed quite the reverse. He cruelly rubs it in: "*Take your son, whom you love...*" Is the implication on Yahweh's part: not me? Who knows? And what of Abraham? No weeping or wailing in protest. We would surely be looking for even a hint of something like this. The C19 philosopher/theologian Soren Kierkegaard wrote a monograph on this text which he called "Fear and Trembling", but there is no sign in the text by either party of any fear and trembling. Any fear and trembling potentially and rightly belong to us the hearers of the story.

Listen again to the cool and clinical unfolding of the narrative: God says to Abraham: "*Take your son, whom you love... and go*" – there it is again: Go. And since we know that Abraham has a track record of reliability, it is no surprise to be told that, with no trace of protest or anguish: "*Abraham rose and went*".

Is there anything being said to us in this absence of any hint of anguish? Perhaps this. That all that matters when the Word of God is heard is obedience. Even here, especially here, human emotion has to recede into the background. That might be part of the price that has to be paid. Certainly the history of the Church demonstrates that countless martyrs have felt the force of Abraham's unprotesting example. One recalls the voice of the Orthodox priest about to be martyred. "*I salute you dead men; I go to the living ones*". Or Dietrich Bonhoeffer calmly and quietly led to the gallows: "*This is the end, for me the beginning of life*".

So we journey on with father and son, only to learn that Isaac is carrying his own funeral pyre - just as centuries later we hear that Jesus, too, will carry his own cross. And then the dramatic arrival: '*on the third day Abraham saw the place of sacrifice*'. "*The third day*" – that phrase should ring some bells. "*The third day*" appears eleven times in the Old Testament. The crucial thing for us to understand is that "*the third day*" is not so much a space in time as it is an announcement for a surprising event of salvation that is just about to occur: supremely for Easter day, for example, "*on the third day*".

And so it is here. Arriving at the chosen place, on the third day, in all innocence, Isaac understandably asks: "*Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?*", only to receive Abraham's enigmatic reply: "*God will provide*". What was Abraham thinking? Do we know? No, we don't. He has no apparent warrant for such a last reprieve; nothing is at hand to provide any confident anticipation of a happy outcome for what looks like an

immediate tragedy. So the text unfolds itself dispassionately, all coming to us as part of a piece.

But then the dramatic resolution, the cataclysmic revelation: a snared lamb as a potential replacement for Isaac. As we travel with Abraham and Isaac to their third day rendezvous we surely have no need of being reminded of what is here being anticipated: Jesus, as a son of Abraham, was to find no substitute as Abraham did. On the contrary, he became the slaughtered lamb himself.

But now what about this? Look at the picture on the front of the Order of Service, and read the text: a Sumerian nature god from 2600 BC, the ram in the thicket, predating Abraham by at least a thousand years is now the central character in the story. What is going on here? Surely this. By virtue of the obedience of Abraham, a substitute sacrifice of the god of the surrounding culture, the ram in the thicket, replaces Isaac: an idol, a god of natural world, is to be consumed by the fire of the God of history - and all because of Abraham's obedience.

You ask: what does it all mean? This is what it means: *that Abraham was prepared to kill the gift of God at the word of God*. The question with which the text confronts the Church, and each of us, is this. Are we so prepared? Whether as Church or individually, are we prepared to crucify for a greater gift, all that has made us? Are we prepared to sell all our religious pearls for the pearl of great price? The texts are unrelenting.

Are we then surprised to hear in the gospel today the rebuke of John the Baptist to his opponents: *'Do not say: "we have Abraham as our Father" for I tell you God is able to raise up from these stones children of Abraham'*. It is tempting to imagine that here John might be pointing to the ruins of the temple, the place of worship, now reduced to a heap of stones - heavy, inert, passive, lifeless. But that is impossible - with the Baptist that crisis is still some way off, and in any case we are with this imagery far from Jerusalem. Nevertheless, this metaphor seeks a timely correspondence for us as a congregation - all the crisis about buildings that has been before us last week, and which continues to exercise us, is ultimately about a heap of stones. But then the truth must be that they, too, exist only to raise up children of Abraham. To be Abraham's child is to know ourselves as being contemporary with him; to require him no longer to be merely some austere distant patriarch of long ago, but instead to permit him to come to us as one in whom we recognise our original: as the faithful one who risked absolutely everything, even a willingness to kill all that he knew to be the certainty of the gift of God, in the greater confidence that "God will provide". To be a child of Abraham is especially good news for us today as we wrestle with the problem of a future for stones.

The truth is that without the *faith* of Abraham, without the prospect of a terrifying sacrifice of Isaac, not to speak of that of Jesus, only stones lie in wait to trip us up. But with trust like his, a new creation can be ours; a new gift lying before us at every moment.

I had a dream as I started to prepare for the service at Wesley. Scripture encourages young men to see visions, but it also permits old men to dream. It was a dream equally appropriate, I like to think, for us too. In my reworked dream, without any authority, I asked Gus, an enthusiastic bike rider, to go to K Mart to buy 50 bicycle helmets. We would put the helmets on a table inside the door, with the name of each member of the congregation on the outside. Each Sunday, after receiving a hymn book, every member would put on their helmet, since it is an accident waiting to happen to fall into the hands

of the living God. For unlike Abraham, we lesser mortals need protection from the Word of God. We need to put on our particular helmet, because one day in Church our sleeping God may wake and take offense. But it gets even better. Like Abraham, “for us and for our salvation”, the waking God may draw us to a new place of which today we have no advance notice. A place from which we can never return.

As I say – it was a dream!
