

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost – 2 Jul 2023

Genesis 22:1-14

Some time later God tested Abraham; he called to him, "Abraham!" And Abraham answered, "Yes, here I am!" 2 "Take your son," God said, "your only son, Isaac, whom you love so much, and go to the land of Moriah. There on a mountain that I will show you, offer him as a sacrifice to me." 3 Early the next morning Abraham cut some wood for the sacrifice, loaded his donkey, and took Isaac and two servants with him. They started out for the place that God had told him about. 4 On the third day Abraham saw the place in the distance. 5 Then he said to the servants, "Stay here with the donkey. The boy and I will go over there and worship, and then we will come back to you." 6 Abraham made Isaac carry the wood for the sacrifice, and he himself carried a knife and live coals for starting the fire. As they walked along together, 7 Isaac spoke up, "Father!" He answered, "Yes, my son?" Isaac asked, "I see that you have the coals and the wood, but where is the lamb for the sacrifice?" 8 Abraham answered, "God himself will provide one." And the two of them walked on together. 9 When they came to the place which God had told him about, Abraham built an altar and arranged the wood on it. He tied up his son and placed him on the altar, on top of the wood. 10 Then he picked up the knife to kill him. 11 But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, "Abraham, Abraham!" He answered, "Yes, here I am." 12 "Don't hurt the boy or do anything to him," he said. "Now I know that you honour and obey God, because you have not kept back your only son from him." 13 Abraham looked around and saw a ram caught in a bush by its horns. He went and got it and offered it as a burnt offering instead of his son. 14 Abraham named that place "The Lord Provides." And even today people say, "On the Lord's mountain he provides."

Matthew 10:40-42

40 "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. 41 Whoever welcomes God's messenger because he is God's messenger, will share in his reward. And whoever welcomes a good man because he is good, will share in his reward. 42 You can be sure that whoever gives even a drink of cold water to one of the least of these my followers because he is my follower, will certainly receive a reward."

Focus: Having a solid relationship with Christ

Function: To help listeners understand that a solid relationship with Christ is fundamental to having trust & faith in God for whatever lies ahead in life.

Today we shall focus on the first reading, the Old Testament reading from Genesis 22. I guess many people may feel uncomfortable with the image or idea in this Genesis story that God had asked Abraham to offer his son as a sacrifice to God. It sounds horrendous! How could our God, who is loving and faithful, do that, we wonder? Even if this was a test, what would happen if the angel failed to stop Abraham in time and Isaac was killed? And after this test, wouldn't it destroy Isaac's relationship with Abraham? Indeed, there are so few words said by Abraham and Isaac in the story, leaving us wondering and filling in the gaps with possible scenarios, trying to make sense of them. So it seems that the more we wonder, the more unreal this story becomes to us.

However, we should understand that this story was written in (and for people of) a very different context and worldview from ours. So, let us put aside what we find jarring to discover the message for us today.

This story begins by clearly stating God tested Abraham.

I am sure all of us have been tested before: in school and university, in getting our driver's license, trade license or professional license. A surgeon is tested with the life of the patient in their hands in the first few surgeries. And the list goes on.

In John 21, when the disciples were out on the Sea of Tiberius fishing and subsequently encountered the risen Jesus by the beach, after having their grilled fish breakfast, Jesus asked Simon Peter, "Do you love me more than these?" And Peter replied, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Then after asking Peter the same question the second time, and the same answer from Peter, Jesus asked again in verse 17, "Do you love me?" for the third time, [but] Peter felt hurt and he said to Jesus, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you. ..."

Similarly, Jesus tested Simon Peter before entrusting him to feed his lamb and tend his sheep.

So, this Genesis story is about God testing Abraham's faith, obedience and trust in God, and whether he would seek God first over everything else in life. And indeed, Abraham's faith in God and God's provision was displayed throughout the story, from recognising God's voice, to accepting God's will and setting off with his son Isaac immediately early next morning, to obediently doing what he had been instructed. Abraham was prepared to give up his son while believing that God had a purpose, God would be faithful to God's promise to him, and trusting that God would provide.

When they reached the mountain at Moriah, Abraham told the servants, saying, "Stay here with the donkey. The boy and I will go over there and worship, and then WE will come back to you." This indicates that deep in Abraham's mind, he and Isaac would return together after offering the sacrifice to God. How? He

didn't know. Perhaps God would bring Isaac back to life, perhaps? Truly, he didn't have a clue, but he simply believed that God himself would provide. This was his answer to Isaac when he asked, "Father, I see that you have the coals and the wood, but where is the lamb for the sacrifice?" Indeed, Abraham firmly believed that God would provide for him.

According to the author of Hebrews, in chapter 11, when talking about faith, in verse 17 (NRSV), he says, "By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son." By this, the author points out that the sacrifice was NOT actually made but considered a completed act from Abraham's perspective of faith because, in his will and purpose, he sacrificed his son to comply with God's command. And from God's perspective also, the act was complete; God accepted the sacrifice and was pleased.

Therefore in the story, as we find this demand for Isaac's life appalling, let us not dismiss this story but read it from the perspective of faith because this demand had challenged Abraham's faith as it threatened the integrity of God's promise of countless descendants through Isaac (see Gen 21:12). This testing of Abraham contradicted his faith, God's promise, and the character of God. How can these contradictions be reconciled? Abraham did what we all should do: he obeyed the command and let God take care of the promise. God was more than able to do this. Indeed, Hebrews 11:19 emphasizes that "Abraham considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead — and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back." In other words, Abraham's receiving back of Isaac from virtual death is a parable pointing forward to the future resurrection from the dead through Christ Jesus. Perhaps that is why Jesus said, in John 8:56, "Your father Abraham rejoiced that he was to see the time of my coming; he saw it and was glad."

What about Isaac?

How old do you think Isaac could be then? Below 10 years old? Between 10 & 15? Between 15 & 20, or above 20?

The Hebrew word נָעַר (na'ar), which we have translated as "boy" or "lad" actually has quite a wide age range according to the Hebrew Lexicon after having examined the usage of this word throughout the Old Testament. Interestingly, the same word was also used to name the servants accompanying Abraham and Isaac to the mountain. Therefore, נָעַר (na'ar) or the "boy" may range from 3 months old to a marriageable age, depending on the biblical context. It is like our usage of the term "young adults" in the church context nowadays, in which the age may range from 18 to 49.

It is noteworthy that in verse 6, we are told that Abraham made Isaac carry the wood for the sacrifice, while he himself carried a knife and live coals to start the fire. And how much wood was Isaac carrying, presumably on his back? I don't think it would simply be a few twigs or branches but a massive lot, enough to create a huge, long-lasting fire to burn an animal completely.

Therefore, Isaac must be reasonably tall and physically strong enough to carry the wood, so I think he would be at least in his late teens. And according to Flavius Josephus, a first-century Roman-Jewish historian, he recorded in *The Antiquities of the Jews* that Isaac was 25 years old at that time (see Book 1, Chapter 13).

My point about Isaac's age is to indicate that he wasn't a naïve little boy not knowing what was going on. He was fully aware of the purpose of the trip and what was needed for the sacrifice. Moreover, since he was strong enough to carry a massive load of wood, he would be strong enough to fight back when someone tried to tie him up. But did he?

If you were Isaac, how would you have reacted?

What would be going through your mind as you're being tied up and laid down on top of the wood? Will you feel confused and terrified as you see Abraham approaching with the knife? Or perhaps in the first instance, would you have resisted being bound up? Would you try to free yourself? Would you beg for mercy?

Nothing was heard from Isaac!

Nothing was mentioned of his reaction – no resistance, struggle, or plea.

He was silent. Why? I think the silence in the story invites us to enter the story, journey with Isaac and Abraham, and gain insights into their spirituality, consistent with the rest of the Scripture.

Unless he was knocked unconscious, like in the movies when someone was kidnapped, Isaac would have struggled or fought back if he was forced to be bound up. Congruently, the silence means that Isaac submitted to his father completely. He had total trust and confidence in his father and, of course, trust in God. He was convinced by his father's reply that "God himself will provide."

Do we have the same kind or level of trust that Abraham and Isaac had exhibited? The reality is that most people tend to trust in themselves more than trusting in God. They think they are in better control of their lives than to entrust in God whom they can't see. Are we the same, trusting in ourselves more than trusting in God? As we look back, have we missed out on many good opportunities in life and hit many walls for going our own way?

Our trust in God and in people needs to be grounded in faith. Without faith, our trust in God and in people will be shaky and will shatter once challenged or tested. And this trust grows with the relationship. When we know someone well and have built a good & strong relationship, we will naturally have mutual trust in each other. It is the same with God.

I was in the city some time ago, waiting for the lights to turn green to cross Swanston Street. Opposite me across the road was a visually-impaired man waiting to cross the road led by a guide dog. It is relatively common nowadays, isn't it? As I pondered on that image while I crossed the road, I thought it was an incredible blessing for the visually-impaired man to walk about in the city without much difficulty with the help of the guide dog. He must have established a good relationship with the dog in order to put his trust in it to guide the way. However, what is remarkable about what I saw that day is that the man was blindfolded to "impair" his vision, and let the dog guide him through the streets, as part of the training or assessment for the dog, I suppose. Because he can see but chooses not to, and letting the dog guide him is an excellent display of trust. He certainly has established an excellent relationship with the dog such that he can trust it completely to lead the way, believing that it has the full ability to guide and lead him to the destination safely.

Is our relationship with God good enough to trust God completely to guide us on our way in life? In fact, God does not simply want to lead our way; God wants to journey with us, accompany us during our joyful and sorrowful moments, give us God's shoulder to cry on, and God's back to carry us when we can't go on. So let's work on our relationship with God, beginning with a consistent prayer life and meditation of God's word.

Generally speaking, the notion of sacrifice is to give up something or someone we treasure very much, if not most, for something or someone less prized. From time to time in life, we make the difficult choice of sacrificing one precious for the other. For instance, some people have to sacrifice their time with family for work, or give up their successful and fulfilling work because of ill health, or leave their family home for a nursing home for better health care, and the list goes on. Whatever we choose to sacrifice, may we always be guided by the Holy Spirit to make the right decision? Let our faith be grounded in Christ and trust in God's plan as it unfolds to us, believing that God himself will provide what we need daily.

This story in Genesis ended with God stopping the tragedy in time and providing a ram for Abraham to offer God the sacrifice. We can be assured that God is watching over us always; we will not be left alone to fend for ourselves when we are in a relationship with God. Moreover, Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 10:13 that "No testing has overtaken us that is not common to everyone. God is

faithful, and he will not let us be tested beyond our strength, but with the testing, God will also provide the way out so that we may be able to endure it.”

Indeed, in having a solid relationship with Christ, we will naturally have complete confidence and trust in God to face whatever life throws at us because our faith in Christ will lead us through. Amen.