Readings – Genesis 22.1-14 and John 4.46-54

‘Signs’

It cannot have escaped your attention that there are an awful lot of road diversions at present and some of them are very poor so that the signs end up being unhelpful. *(give examples of Henley Rd and Penn Rd, photographed and mulled over).*

Signs are something that John uses. Throughout his Gospel, he shares seven signs that Jesus performs, each revealing something significant about Jesus’ identity and mission. Earlier in the Gospel, Jesus turns water into wine – and not just wine, but the best wine in vast quantities – revealing the profound abundance of God in Jesus, [ what is earlier described as ‘grace upon grace’ (1.16)]. In this scene, Jesus heals the son of a royal official revealing his opposition to those things that keep abundant life from the children of God and his ability to restore health and life.

The story is somewhat self-explanatory but notice the emphasis on *life in verses 50,51 and 53.*  To Nicodemus Jesus had spoken of a rebirth to a new life; to the Samaritan, of living water springing up to eternal life and here we have the climax of restored life.

The official is a man used to giving orders and probably a pagan although John never indicates that. Nevertheless, he comes begging for Jesus to save the life of his child. Jesus seems irritated that miracles and signs are needed before people believe, but the man doesn’t seem to hear and just wants help. Such open love and honest raw need is the path that leads to healing. He doesn’t enter doctrinal or language games with Jesus in order to get a miracle and have his faith confirmed.

John is engaged in presenting the Big Picture. The **word** has become flesh but the danger is that we become preoccupied with asking **what was going on** in Jesus’ ministry rather than learning to make proper and appropriate use of the ‘signs’ that we are given.

In my example at the start, diversion signs are designed to lead us away from the road closure it is there for rather than directing us to it and sometimes we are diverted away from discovering the truth contained in the gospels.

At this point of the Gospel Jesus appears to be displaying signs of anxiety that the welcome he is receiving is purely superficial. People are sitting down to read the clues rather than follow them. A bit like me photographing the diversion signs to the road closure rather than viewing them as way out. The people want a messiah who will perform miracles to order rather than moving on to the real faith which will grasp Jesus’ hidden identity, the Word dwelling in the flesh.

So the question is, what is the right, the proper response to these signs? The proper response is the one he got from the official in verses 50 and 53. The man *believed the word* which Jesus spoke to him. The fact that he set off home without insisting that Jesus come with him from Cana to Capernaum is a clear indication that his faith didn’t happen because he saw miracles but because he heard Jesus’ word. When the word was confirmed by the actual healing, taking place at the same moment but at a distance, he and his whole family believed. The word Jesus had spoken had become flesh.

The distinction between believing because we have seen something and believing on the strength of Jesus’ words remains important throughout the gospel and reaches it dramatic conclusion with the statement in Jesus’ gentle rebuke to Thomas in 20.29: ‘have you believed because you’ve seen? Blessed are those who haven’t seen, and yet believe!’

This seems the appropriate moment to consider our Genesis reading. The sacrifice of Isaac, in Hebrew the *akedah*, i.e., the *binding* of Isaac, is one of the Bible’s most dramatic stories. In its extreme brevity, the narrative is in outline, not fleshed out by personal details or human feelings and as such It lends itself to innumerable theological explanations, philosophical readings and psychological interpretations.

Abraham receives an amazing direction from God – “take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you’. And without question he follows God’s directions. What a challenge.

This is of course not Abraham’s first experience with God who had already revealed himself to Abraham many times through Abraham’s successes and failures, his faith and fear, in promises and forgiveness. Abraham knew the character of God. Once, he even asked God, “Will not the judge of all the earth do right?” and after this encounter, perhaps Abraham settled this question in his mind once and for all. Abraham obeyed God’s unexpected command because he trusted God’s promise and knew him to be good and trustworthy.

This is without doubt a very troubling reading but we need to note that when the Bible depicts violence, things are often not what they seem at first glance. A surface reading may hide a character’s motivations and intentions and referencing other points in the biblical tradition can shed light on difficult passages. The important point from this account and which connects neatly with our Gospel account is that, like the royal official, Abraham trusted God implicitly. His journey with God enabled him to navigate this troubling encounter in full confidence that God would provide the sacrifice; as he said to Isaac, who by his basic question “but where is the lamb for the burnt-offering” was probably not quite so sanguine about the situation as his father, said with full confidence “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son.’

This is the challenge we are presented by the gospel. We are not invited to believe in an abstract idea or a nebulous feeling or an indefinable spiritual experience. We are invited to believe in the Word become flesh. But genuine faith is always seeking the Word hidden in the flesh, not using the Word simply as a way of getting at the flesh. As John’s story unfolds, we are constantly reminded that, if on the one hand, ‘God loved the world so much’ (3.16) this is not because our life must remain bounded by the present world. When the world is embraced by God in his love, this happens so that we who live in the present world, dark and corrupt as it now is, may learn to love in return the God who has loved us. The question we need to ask about these signs is, what is the right response

God tells Abraham to go to the land of Moriah (possibly meaning the land of the Amorites, the land of worship, or the teaching-place of God) and offer his beloved son Isaac for a burnt offering. Abraham does not question his God, with whom he has sealed a covenant. He has been promised that he will “multiply exceedingly,” and become a father of many nations. He binds his son Isaac and lays him upon the wood on the altar he has built, but when raising his knife, the angel calls upon him not to slay his son. He has passed God’s test of devotion, and a ram is offered in place of Isaac.

John’s gospel is the gospel of creation and new creation, of “witness” to Jesus and thence to the father. The signs in his gospel all point to the foot of the cross and to the resurrection as a sign of the new creation.

That “witness’ is John’s way of showing us that the events concerning Jesus make sense of the world, not about escaping that creation so much as about its fulfilment. John is telling us what the creation has done, is doing and will do through his son and his spirit to put things right.

The gospel of John is a book of signs pointing to the recklessly loving grace of God. Like the Bible, life itself is to be read by us with attentiveness so we can read the love between the lines and find ourselves full of gratitude, which, when it comes, is not only a miracle in itself but allows us to see so many more. Then all the signposts and direction signs will be pointing us in the right direction.

Amen

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