

### 4th Sunday Trinity

Genesis 22.1-14; Romans 6:12-23

Matthew 10:40-42

2nd July 2023

*May I speak in the name of God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

The beating heart of our Scripture Readings for this Sunday is found within the tension, anxiety and excitement of Sacrifice.

We have heard the heart wrenching narrative of Abraham being tested by God. Called by name, “Abraham”, he responds: “Here I am”.

“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...”

What kind of thing is this for God to ask of Abraham? How would we feel if we walked alongside our child who is unknowingly helping us carry the fuel for the fire on which we shall burn their body?

How would our hearts sink as they ask us innocently; “Papa, Mama, we have fire and we have wood, but where is the lamb for the offering?”

It’s an agonising scene and masterfully told by a writer who has no desire to make it somehow palatable, for in the face of such a difficult scenario attempts to soften it by offering some form of explanation or justification would ring hollow. No, for Abraham and indeed for Isaac, bound and trussed up on the pyre, this was a disturbing and traumatic moment which God has led them to. And we, we are supposed to acknowledge, to imagine and to wonder at such a scene. The stakes are high; “this is your son, your only son *whom you love.*” And now as it comes to its climax atop the hill time seems to slow down as individual moments are described.

“Abraham built an altar,  
And laid the wood  
In order.  
He bound his son Isaac,  
And laid him on the altar,  
On top of the wood.

Then  
Abraham reached out his hand  
And took the knife  
To kill his son.

It's no wonder that this scene has been painted so many times; it's so vivid that we can imagine every last detail. The glint of sunlight on the knife, the struggling wimpers of Isaac, the sudden movement from Abraham as he commits himself against all hope to do the terrible deed and kill his only beloved son.

And just as this test began with God calling, "Abraham". So now he calls again: "Abraham, Abraham!"

"Here I am", he said.

The Angel of the Lord said: "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me."

It's interesting that the scene ends with this echo of its beginning: Abraham is called at the start and again at the climax.

At the start God says: "your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love." And at the end, "you have not withheld your son, your only son." There is no mention here of Isaac's name nor of Abraham's love for him. Perhaps a suggestion that to steel yourself to be able to kill your son you have to no longer view them as who they are, you have to somehow forget your love for them as your son and instead treat them as a creature whose purpose is to be sacrificed.

The beating heart of sacrifice lies in the unspoken reality that sacrifice is not just about the thing which is sacrificed, but the impact which sacrificing it has upon our innermost being. If it does not in some way affect or change you then it is no true sacrifice.

This is what David realises in Psalm 51 when he writes:

*For thou desirest no sacrifice, else I would I give it thee : but thou delightest not in burnt-offerings.  
The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit : a broken and contrite heart, O God, shalt thou not despise. (BCP)*

*For you desire no sacrifice, else I would give it;  
You take no delight in burnt offerings.  
The sacrifice of God is a broken spirit; A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. (CW)<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> This was preached at 8am and 11am, used BCP at 8am etc.

Earlier Isaac had asked innocently, ‘where is the lamb?’ Now looking up, Abraham sees a Ram caught in a thicket by its horns and he went and took the ram and offered it up as a sacrifice instead of his son. So Abraham called that place: “The Lord will provide.”

Abraham’s earlier response to Isaac had said that God would provide a young animal though in his heart he believed that would be Isaac. Perhaps here the Ram, a grown male sheep, partially acknowledges that Isaac is no longer an innocent young boy but has in this experience grown up. There’s much speculation about the impact and change in Isaac and Abraham’s relationship as they return down the mountain and return once again to Sarah. Yet in truth, on this the Scriptures are silent.

The ram or lamb of the sacrifice however foreshadows another sacrifice which itself is agonising for those involved and indeed for us as we read and ponder the scriptures; for it contrasts sublimely with the passion of Christ.

For Christ’s ministry begins by being called by God as he is baptised in the Jordan; “Behold this is my son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

As Abraham and Isaac left the donkey with the hired hands, Jesus leaves the donkey and the crowds as he heads into increasing isolation in the garden of gethsemane, finding himself alone despite his friends being only a stone's throw away for they are falling asleep. He unlike Isaac knows what is coming, but like Isaac asks his father a question: “My father, if it is possible let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.”<sup>2</sup> We cannot help but wonder if he was hoping that there might somehow be a ram in the thicket of the garden which might suffice instead.

As the scene of the sacrifice of Isaac seemed to slow down, so too the accounts of Jesus’ life slows and becomes more attentive to every detail. No longer are we hopping from miracle to parable from town to town around galilee. Now every moment is saturated with meaning and emotion.

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 26:39

He prays in the garden. Is betrayed with a kiss. Arrested, questioned and beaten before being unjustly sentenced to death to appease an angry crowd despite Pilate's attempts to suggest that he be swapped out for Barabbas. Jesus is beaten, is mocked, is crucified on a cross made of wood he carried himself.

Even on the cross there is hope that perhaps this is not the end, perhaps the love of God for his son will bring him down from the cross before it is too late.

Abraham's knife stretched out to his Son's throat is intercepted by the Angel of God who shows mercy. Can an Angel of God intervene now?

As Jesus says to Peter in the garden at his arrest, *"Do you think I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?"*

*But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?"*<sup>3</sup>

For God's sake, Abraham turned his heart away from his love for his Son Isaac, treating him as a creature to be sacrificed for a greater mystery.

Likewise here, God turns his heart away from the love which he has for his only begotten Son Jesus, treating him in this moment upon the cross as the one on whom lies the full stench and stain of our sin. For our sakes, he gave his only begotten son that all that believe in him might not perish but have eternal life.

It's quite something when we journey through the angst and discomfort of the difficult mystery Abraham's attempted sacrifice of Isaac, and then realise that God himself embraces this agony, this passion so that he might reach into our hearts and claim us for his own, to become children of God redeemed and sanctified by the blood of Jesus who is for us the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the World.

This is baffling. It is incomprehensible.

And in the resurrection of Christ God's love for his son overcomes his hatred of our sin and establishes him as an eternally living promise of his love for us.

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 26:53-54 (John names Peter as the disciple in 18:10)

How are we to respond to such love, to such commitment?

Well in Revelation 5, John writes of seeing Jesus as first the Lion of Judah, and then as a lamb 'standing as if it had been slaughtered' and before him the company of heaven fall before him, offering bowls of incense, which are the prayers of the saints, as they sing a new song: *"You are worthy... for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and nation; you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth."*

*Then I looked, John writes, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with full voice:*

*"Worthy is the lamb that was slaughtered  
To receive power and wealth and wisdom and might  
And honour and glory and blessing!"*

*Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea and all that is in them, singing: To the one seated on the throne and to the lamb be*

*blessing and honour and glory and might forever and ever!*

*And the four living creatures said Amen! And the elders fell down and worshipped.'*

This is how we are invited to respond to the sacrifice of Christ our passover Lamb, our saviour who has died to set us free from Sin. Our end is eternal life,<sup>4</sup> 'For sin will have no dominion over you'.<sup>5</sup> The wages of sin are death, but we have received the free gift of God; eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.<sup>6</sup>

So let us, as we come to the Eucharist, sing with the angels: **Holy Holy Holy**, and as we remember Jesus Christ who died for us and lives for us, we are even now in his eternally living presence, surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who sing unceasing his endless hymn of praise. **Amen. Amen.**

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<sup>4</sup> Romans 6:22b

<sup>5</sup> Romans 6:14

<sup>6</sup> Romans 6:23