**I will sing to the Lord because he has dealt bountifully with me**

These final words from our Psalm this morning neatly bring together the message of each of our readings. And if you are unsure as to the meaning of ‘bountiful’, then an alternative word that you might prefer is - abundance or generosity.

If you consider this in the context of our Genesis reading, we have this week another somewhat strange incident in the lives of Abraham and his son Isaac. Last week we read the account of Isaac being deprived of the company of his half-brother Ishmael when his mother insisted that Hagar and her son are cast out into the wilderness only to be rescued by a bountiful God and now we find Abraham taking his son Isaac on a journey, at the behest of God – “take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burn-offering on one of the mountains I will show” , and Abraham, without question, does that, obeying everything God tells him to do. Absolutely extraordinary. When Abraham answered Isaac’s enquiry about the lamb for the sacrifice: “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt-offering” did he really think that or did he say that to provide assurance to an anxious Isaac wondering what his father was up to. How can and how should we make sense of it!

The narrative of the sacrifice of Isaac is often described as a ‘type’ of the atonement. We have a father, in this case, Abraham, prepared to offer up his son, without question, even though everything he is and hopes for depends upon this son, and everything he knows or feels about God, is bound up in this child, Isaac.

Now, where else do we find such an example of the Father prepared and willing to sacrifice his son, his beloved son. And of course, we hear echoes that should be helpful in our understanding of the way of the cross especially if we see Jesus not only as God but as both Abraham and Isaac.

Jesus goes to his cross in obedience-

 although all that he was sent to be and do is at stake

although it makes no apparent sense

although he longs to have misunderstood what is required.

However, because Jesus is also God, he is himself the sacrifice that God provides, he is both priest and victim, both the one who commands and the one who obeys. ‘Mind the gap’ does not apply here because there is no gap between what the Son wills and the Father wills, no merciless Father and broken Son, only the costly and faithful action of God.

What’s the context of this in Abraham’s own life? Because, as I have already said, it is a most extraordinary event – does he follow God’s instructions because he believes he deserves to be punished because of the way he cast out Hagar and their son Ishmael so much so that he must now lose Isaac? Or does he truly believe that God will provide the sacrificial lamb as he told Isaac. In the light of the crucifixion that is quite an interesting thought. If it is the former, then, what he discovers is what we also discover in approaching the cross: the God who provides from his own mercy all that we need to be forgiven and restored, the sacrificial lamb.

Can Paul add something to help in our understanding of this message? Well, he talks initially about not letting sin dominate us, making us obey its requirements. Instead, we should bring ourselves before God as ones who have been rescued from death and bought to full life, lives where sin is not holding us in its grip because of the grace we have received through Christ’s sacrifice.

The phrase here that pops out of this reading for me is: “the wages of sin is death” which you often used to see pasted onto boards and paraded around high streets by street preachers exhorting people to repent and follow Christ in order to be saved from eternal damnation. Of course, through repentance we are liberated from sin. But the word ‘sin’ is frequently seen as a bit churchy, which may not be very helpful to our secular world, but it is in fact fundamental to our understanding of what it is we are talking about, which is that through the forgiveness of sin, humans are clothed with the mantle of Christ-likeness.

At its most fundamental, sin can be explained as the breaking of a community’s moral code. This kind of moral code is important for the healthy flow of communication respect and progress towards a goal. Most businesses now have ethical codes of conduct, the mission statement, to which its employees are required to adhere, a common standard of ‘morality’. A contemporary alternative to the word ‘sin’, could perhaps be: breaking the rules of the workplace ethics or breaching the code of conduct. If you break those workplace rules then if you ‘come clean’ or admit a fault, then you might expect some compassion or leniency from senior managers and so avoid sanction. By contrast, repeated offending or lack of remorse may well lead to dismissal.

In the context of God though, it is different. Because sin is more than simply breaking a code of morality; it’s the removal of trust and can be the cause of great hurt. Forgiveness is a renewable and unrestricted gift. Sin is forgiven each time remorse is shown and that is the reason it is seen as being a churchy or religious word because of course, the forgiveness from sin is something that no corporate organisation can offer – only God.

No wonder the words from the Psalmist are apt because if that is what God does for us, we should indeed sing to the Lord because of the generosity he has shown in dealing with me. And, ‘truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward”

Having tackled the word ‘sin’ we now turn to the word ‘reward’ which seems out of place in the framework of religious faith. But that is probably because of how we look at ‘rewards’ – normally a ‘prize’ or a financial benefit for having achieved a task that has demanded much effort, again, looking at our previous example of the workplace, this time it’s the rewards we receive for our efforts – that big bonus for bringing in the most commissions for the month or year.

But that is not the meaning that Jesus is placing on the word when we look at its translation from the Greek. In this context, reward is fundamentally the fulfilling of the promise of God, the keeping of his covenant with his people and the manifestation of his mercy and kindness. And it is hard to equate ‘reward’ with a recognition of how wide God’s mercy really is.

Sometimes, we beat ourselves up, well I do anyway, because we may feel that we should be more generous, more hospitable, more compassionate, more……..well just more, to be acceptable to God and worthy of being saved. And yet this reading suggests that minimal hospitality, generosity and compassion on our part is enough for God to keep his faithful promise to us. No matter where we are in our journey towards God, God will meet us there.

God never breaks a promise or destroys the covenant that he has made with us through the person of Christ and that should affirm us in the knowledge that even the little that we do to help others see the faintest of glimpses of God in the thick dark patches is more than a sign of his in-breaking kingdom of love and peace. Maybe Abraham understood this when he said to Isaac: “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son”.

“I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.

I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me”

Amen