

Sermon

Sunday 7th March, 2010

Lessons Genesis 22: 1 – 19 1 Corinthians 10: 1 - 13 St Luke 13: 1 – 9

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

The entrance of Your words give light. Open our minds, O Lord, to the teaching of the Spirit, and enable us to embrace it in singleness of heart; that all the steps of our life day by day, may be ordered by You; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Now it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham, and said to him, ‘Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ Then He said, ‘Take now 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 of which I shall tell you.’

Genesis 22: 1 – 2

On Friday of this week, Anthony Marsh was charged with the murder of his girlfriend, Stephanie Bellinger and her 10-month-old daughter, Lili. In February, Gabrielle Grady, aged five, drowned when her father drove his car into the river. Christopher Grady has been charged with the attempted murder of his children. The murder of children we rightly regard as repugnant. It offends our humanity: it is one of the worst things a human being can do. The vulnerability of children, their desire to love and be loved, is betrayed. The killing of a child provokes a most violent emotional response, yet here in Scripture, in our most sacred texts, the Venerable Father Abraham, father of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, is our father of faith and he is that because he took his son, his only son, to a remote place, bound him and drew his knife to murder him. The Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, says that the story of the binding of Isaac is ‘the best known and theologically most

demanding in the Abraham tradition.’¹ That is not understatement! We are on dangerous ground.

The philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, wrote an entire book on this one incident. It is called *Fear and Trembling*. Kierkegaard said that if Abraham is so great, then we must say why he is great and if it is because of his faith, then we must give a clear picture of what it was that he achieved. The book opens with Kierkegaard himself imagining what he would do if he were Abraham:

It was early morning. Abraham rose in good time, had the asses saddled and left his tent, taking Isaac with him, but Sarah watched them from the window as they went down the valley until she could see them no more. They rode in silence for three days; on the morning of the fourth Abraham still said not a word, but raised his eyes and saw afar the mountain in Moriah. He left the lads behind and went on alone up the mountain with Isaac beside him.

But Abraham said to himself, ‘I won’t conceal from Isaac where this way is leading him.’ He stood still, laid his hand on Isaac’s head to give him a blessing, and Isaac bent down to receive it. And Abraham’s expression was fatherly, his gaze gentle, his speech encouraging. But Isaac could not understand him, his soul could not be uplifted; he clung to Abraham’s knees, pleaded at his feet, begged for his young life.....

Abraham climbed the mountain in Moriah, but Isaac did not understand him. Then he turned away from Isaac for a moment, but when Isaac saw his face a second time it was changed, his gaze was wild, his mien one of horror. He caught Isaac by the chest, threw him to the ground and said, ‘Foolish boy, do you believe I am your father? I am an idolater. Do you believe this is God’s command? No, it is my own desire.’ Then Isaac trembled and in his anguish cried, ‘God in heaven have mercy on me, God of Abraham have mercy on me; if I have no father on earth, then be Thou my father!’ But below his breath Abraham said to himself, ‘Lord

¹ Walter Brueggemann *Interpretation: Genesis* p185

in heaven I thank Thee; it is after all better that he believe I am a monster than that he lose faith in Thee.’

The story of the binding of Isaac is theologically very demanding. We would never want to be associated with a religion which had child sacrifice as part of its heritage. But there is child sacrifice in the Bible, in the Book of Judges. One of the sons of Gilead, a leader, a judge of Israel, is called Jephthah. Jephthah promises Yahweh that if Yahweh secures victory for the Israelites against the Ammonites, then he will sacrifice the first person he sees upon his return home. The first person is his only child, his daughter. He fulfils his vow. The story needs to be read with extreme care. In Leviticus, Deuteronomy and Micah, the LORD expressly forbids child sacrifice. He abhors it! In Deuteronomy, the worship of the LORD is contrasted with the worship of other gods:

God says, ‘You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way; for every abomination of the LORD which He hates they have done to their gods; for they burn even their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods.’

It is an abomination! What makes Abraham so great? What makes him the father of faith? Perhaps before we approach those questions, there is first the problem of God Himself. Abraham is tested or tempted by God. In the New Testament, Jesus is led into the desert to be tempted by the devil; He is led by the Holy Spirit. Abraham is tempted or tested by God. He is invited to kill the son whom God gave to Abraham and Sarah in their old age. Is God mocking

them, toying with their affections? Do they matter so little to Him? To lose Isaac now would be more terrible than if he had never been born but that is what God commands. Luther and Calvin both wrote of the dark command of God and that in the heart of God Himself there is a contradiction: He promises a son, a great future, and fills Abraham's imagination with dreams of descendents more numerous than the stars and He commands the binding and slaughter of Isaac. The biblical scholar, Robert Carroll, said that, though it may offend Christian sensibility, 'most biblical writers had no difficulty in presenting Yahweh/Elohim as the author and source of evil.'² In Isaiah, God says, 'I am Yahweh and there is no other, forming light and creating darkness, making wellbeing and creating evil.' The prophet Amos asks, 'Does evil befall a city, unless Yahweh has done it?' As the Creator of the universe, as a faith which had only one God, the biblical writers were rather stuck with the conclusion that, in some sense at least, darkness and evil must have their origin in God.

In the Book of Jubilees, a work of the second century BC, not a book of the Bible, the story of Abraham and Isaac is re-worked in which the tempting or testing of Abraham is done by Prince Mastema in much the same way as the devil or Satan tempts Jesus in the New Testament. The writers are trying to distance God Himself from the doing of evil. But we return to the core

² Robert P Carroll *Wolf in the Sheepfold* p48

questions: what makes Abraham so great? Why is he the father of faith?

What did he achieve?

There is no single answer to these questions. Different thinkers have offered different perspectives on what the story of Abraham and Isaac means.

Kierkegaard said that our emotions and our intellect, our powers of reason, have their bearing on faith but that there comes a point beyond which emotion and reason cannot go. Faith moves onto its own ground. Faith is the cast iron belief that God will not ever let us down. Kierkegaard draws attention to the fact that, when they reach the mountain of Moriah, Abraham tells his men that he and Isaac will go on alone and that *they* will return: ‘The lad and I will go yonder and worship, and we will come back to you.’ Kierkegaard says that this is not a deception, a cover-up. Abraham has heard God’s command; he understands God’s command; and he believes that in this seemingly impossible situation God will give Isaac back to him. Isaac asks his father, ‘Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?’ His father replies, ‘God will provide for Himself the lamb.’ Again, says Kierkegaard, this is not a lie. Abraham believes that out of this impossible situation God will give Isaac back to him. Even as he raised his hand with the knife, Abraham did not look up for a way out. He was prepared to give up everything in this life that held any value and meaning for him. Jesus said, ‘Whoever loses his life shall preserve it.’ When the knife was at its highest point, when his arm was fully raised, at the very moment of

murdering his son, it is he, Abraham, who dies. He has let go of everything he cherished, of life itself, this world, his future in it and the son he loved. It is in his moment of death that God spoke: ‘Abraham! Abraham!’ He replies, ‘Here I am.’ God restores his life. Out of the seemingly impossible, God brings possibility.

The binding of Isaac is only about child sacrifice if we read it in a very superficial manner. This is a story – historical, I doubt it – which is a deep theological reflection on the nature of God and faith. It is about life, out attachment to this world, to the things and people we love, who have made us what we are and whom we would never choose to let go. It is about death and learning to die and learning to let go and trusting that, in the face of death and decaying flesh and the possibility of life beyond looking absurd, God brings possibility. Emotion and reason can never fully take us onto the ground of faith, but Abraham teaches us that the ground is a rock. D H Lawrence said, ‘It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the Living God. But it is a far more fearful thing to fall out of them.’

Let me close with a story told by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks about the moment he very nearly died. Sacks was on holiday in Italy with his wife. He said:

As we sat on the beach and looked across the water...I realised that the shore must be sloping very gently. People were far out into the sea.

It looked safe just to walk out, and so it was. I walked out to where I had seen people standing just a few minutes before....Then I started walking back to the shore. Within a minute I found myself out of my depth.

How it happened, I am not sure. There must have been a dip in the sand. I had missed it on my way out. I tried to swim. I failed. As I went under for the fifth time, I remember thinking two thoughts: 'What a way to begin a honeymoon!' and 'What's the Italian for "help"?'

It is difficult to recapture the panic I felt. Clearly someone rescued me, or I would not be writing now. At the time, however, it did seem like the end. As far as I can reconstruct that moment in my memory, I had already reconciled myself to drowning when someone, seeing me thrashing about, swam over, took hold of me and brought me to the shore. He deposited me, almost unconscious, at the feet of my wife. I was too shocked to do or say anything. I never found out his name. Somewhere there is someone to whom I owe my life.

It changed my life. For years afterwards, I would wake in the morning conscious of the fact that but for a miracle, I would not be here. Somehow that made everything easier to bear. Our life has had difficult times. It has had moments of crisis. Public life is full of stress and not everyone who lives it has a thick skin. People often ask me, 'How do you bear it?' The answer is simple. That day, on an Italian beach, I learned that life, which I so nearly lost, had been given back to me.....

This is why, every morning, I say with real feeling the traditional Jewish prayer on waking up: 'I thank you, living and everlasting King, for restoring my soul in compassion, great is Your faithfulness.'

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It was then that I realised something I should have understood long before. Faith is not a complex set of theological propositions. It is simpler and deeper than that. It is about not taking things for granted. It is a sustained discipline of meditation on the miracle of being. 'Not how the world is, but that it is, is the mystical,' said Wittgenstein. Not how we are, but *that* we are, is cause for wonder, and faith is the symphony on that theme.

The story of Abraham and Isaac is the story of life and death, of all we value and love, learning to cherish every minute as a precious gift and learning to die, to let go and trusting that God will provide. He will bring possibility out of the impossible. Faith is a rock on which to stand. In the end letting go in faith means falling into the hand of God.

Amen.