Sermon preached by Revd Professor David Thompson on 2nd July 2023

Readings: Genesis 22: 1-14; Matthew 10: 40-42; Romans 6: 10-23

'Where is the lamb for a burnt-offering? (Genesis 22:7)'

This is the question that Isaac is recorded as having asked Abraham at the climax of today's Old Testament reading. Sometimes people find themselves asked what their favourite passage from the Bible is; and usually most can think of something suitable. But a more difficult question is what people find the most difficult text or story in the Bible is, and this gets us thinking. If you are a subscriber to the URC's *Daily Devotions* online, then you will recall that in the last two weeks of June we had twelve of the most horrifying passages in the Bible to reflect on day after day; and it was a sharp reminder of the passages we never usually read, or even hear read.

The set Old Testament lesson for today, Genesis 22:1-14, even though it is very well known, probably comes into this category. I guess it would have to be included in any list of biblical texts that have probably caused more people to lose their faith than any other. This morning I want to reflect briefly on what we make of this. Does it matter? After all, we can never control what other people make of texts and stories they read, however much we might want to. Genesis 22:1-14 only occurs in the Lectionary on this Sunday once every three years; but if we observed the Easter Vigil (which currently we don't) we could read it every year at the climax of the Christian celebration of Easter, and then it would be really significant.

Now I should say before I go any further (for those of you who do not know) that I am not a Hebrew or Old Testament scholar. All I am trying to do this morning is to offer some thoughts on a story, the meaning of which is not straightforward, of the kind that any Christian, in my view, ought to be prepared to say in response if asked what on earth the point of this story is. It is worth noting at the outset that the chapter (as we now have it) seems to have been something of a floating story, in that it is not directly linked either to what precedes it or what follows it.

To an age, which finds it self-evident that human sacrifice (at least when considered as a moral question of right and wrong) is barbaric, it is probably impossible to imagine why anyone should ever have thought there were circumstances that justified it; but we could ask why war has not disappeared, even though that is just as self-evidently wrong. One standard interpretation of the reason for this story is that it was intended to register very early on in the story of the Patriarchs that the Jews did not believe in or practise human sacrifice, which early anthropologists had seen as a fundamental part of religious practice.

Yet Isaac is presented as a boy who understood more of what was going on than adults might have hoped or supposed. 'Where is the lamb for the burnt-offering?' Any parent will recognise how true to life that aspect of the story is. Asking the awkward question is absolutely typical of a child: we might almost be able to guess how old he was (though scholars dispute this)! Abraham's prevaricating answer that the Lord would provide was almost certainly not the first time that a pious platitude had been helplessly launched in response to a question which demanded a more honest admission from Abraham than he gave.

It may be that Isaac's question forced Abraham to reflect on the answer to the problem he must have been mulling over during their journey thus far. Why did God, who called Abraham to leave his home in Ur and follow to a land that God would show him, first promise that he would reward Abraham for his faithful response by making him the father of many nations apparently seem to be putting that at risk by getting Abraham to kill the son that Sarah had borne him? No wonder the narrator describes this as putting Abraham to the test. But what kind of God is this, who apparently plays tricks on those who follow him? That is why this story caused so many to lose faith in the nineteenth century.

There follows the somewhat implausible 'happy ending', with the ram caught in the bush, that just happened to turn up in time to be offered instead. For the sceptic this seems to add insult to injury.

Isn't it just too good to be true? provoking the response we are now encouraged to make to offers on the internet, 'If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.' What would you have said to Isaac, if you had been Abraham?

The kind of scepticism to which I am referring comes very much from a time when people very easily believed that their age was very much more enlightened than previous ages. It was all too easy to dismiss the ideas and customs of earlier times as 'primitive', a word that still has implications about lack of progress. We may not be quite so arrogant as that today, though I am not convinced. It was Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* written for the consecration of the new Coventry Cathedral in 1962 which brought this story from Genesis back to the forefront of the consciousness for people of my generation.

If you know it, you will remember that Britten sets several of Wilfred Owen's First World War poems alongside the traditional canticles from the Catholic Requiem Mass. One of them was *The Parable of the Old Man and the Young*, the second half of which reads as follows:

> Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,
> And builded parapets and trenches there,
> And stretched forth the knife to slay his son.
> When lo! an angel called him out of heaven,
> Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,
> Neither do anything to him. Behold,
> A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns;
> Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.
> But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
> And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

Apparently, though I have no idea whether Owen was aware of this or not (probably not), there is a strand of rabbinic tradition in Europe, which maintains that Abraham did complete the sacrifice. For the first time in more than fifty years I took my grandfather's copy of *The Talmud* down from my shelves, and read the version of the story there.[1] That adds a story into the account of two other relatives going to investigate what had happened, who were told that Abraham had killed the boy. A medieval rabbinic commentary states that the news of this effectively led Sarah to collapse and die. She had previously been depicted as pleading with Isaac not to accompany Abraham on this journey. The tale in the Talmud is then described as untrue, to bring it back into line with the biblical text. A modern rabbi, a dual American-Israeli citizen, who studied in Jerusalem and now works in New York, has published a book on it in recent years.[2] The technical argument (which I shall not develop) is that in the Pentateuchal text which uses the Hebrew, *Elohim*, to refer to God, Isaac is not mentioned again, and Genesis 22:19 refers to only Abraham returning with his young men, whereas Isaac was included in the journey out in Genesis 22:6. There is, of course, much more about Abraham and Jacob in Genesis than there is about Isaac. If you want to while away an afternoon some time you could reflect on what would have to be omitted from Genesis to accommodate the possibility that Isaac never reached adulthood.

There is another dimension of which I was previously unaware. As a result of *Thought for the Day* on Radio 4 last Tuesday about the background to the Muslim Festival of Eid, which began last Thursday, I was made aware of another parallel, which I was able to check in my grandfather's copy of the Koran. There is a story of Abraham being called by an angel to sacrifice his son, and his son telling him that he must do what God commanded. Muslim commentators interpret this story as being about Ishmael rather than Isaac, but that Abraham did not kill Ishmael.[3] The themes of testing obedience are the same; and I was reminded of the sometimes unexpected links between the three Abrahamic faiths.

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[1] *The Talmud*, tr. H. Polano, Frederick Warne and Co., London 5636, ch 3.
[2] Tzemah Yoren, *The Kernel*, New York 2013.
[3] *The Koran*, with Preliminary Discourse by George Sale, Frederick Warne and Co., n.d., ch 37; Arthur J Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*, World's Classics, Oxford University Press 1964, ch 37. The text refers to Isaac, but Sale comments that most Muslim interpreters refer to Ishmael, as the subject of this prophecy, Ibid, 337.

So what do we make of all this? It is appropriate that we read this on a Communion Sunday, when there are abundant references to the idea of dying to live, of the idea of sacrifice, and an offering to God. The central fact of our Christian faith is the death of Jesus, the one who described himself as the Son of God (or the Son of Man), especially when understood in the light of his being raised from the dead by God to a new life, in which we believe that we share. Note, for example, the way we describe God as giving us his only begotten son in the person of Jesus. Or think about the difference it makes to regard the death of Christ as a thank-offering rather than a sin-offering. And the climax of our faith is the death of Christ, which Jesus commanded us to remember in Holy Communion

We cannot eliminate or avoid the fact that this story comes from a time of very different religious customs and practices from our own. So it is entirely inappropriate, in my view, to operate a kind of 'cancel culture' on the story by omitting it from our worship (as I fear *Roots* tries to do by omitting it from today's Lectionary readings). Above all, we need to develop the self-confidence to be prepared to voice the difficulties we may sometimes have with Scripture and face up to those places where Scripture is telling us things about our world that we would prefer to ignore or forget. Not everything in Scripture is there to be taken as an example for us to follow; imitating behaviour is not the only way of learning from it.