

Sermon The Revd Dr Janet Tollington

May I speak in the name of God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.

That passage is usually referred to as the ‘sacrifice of Isaac’. His name means ‘he laughs’ – but there’s not much to laugh about in this narrative. It’s a story we probably find distasteful, as the whole idea of human sacrifice is abhorrent to us – but, unless the notion of Isaac actually being sacrificed was credible, both to Abraham as a character in the story and to its original audience, it loses all meaning.

In Exodus Israel is commanded that their firstborn – always meaning a son, not a daughter, belongs to God. Another verse says the child can be redeemed by offering an animal sacrifice instead; and there’s another that develops the idea into a requirement to consecrate the boy to God, implying some kind of priestly function. Eventually it is understood that the descendants of Levi are required by God as a tribe of priests, holy, set apart for permanent service of God in the sanctuary, as replacements for everyone else’s firstborn sons. So Israel always found a way round an underlying belief that human sacrifice was required by God, although Leviticus makes clear that such sacrifice to Molech was very much part of the culture of some of her neighbours. Indeed as late as the early 7th C, Manasseh, the king of Judah, may have been accused of participating in this heinous sin (2 Kgs 21). Even today such ideas are not alien to all religious traditions, where they have failed to grasp the truth, revealed ultimately through Christ, that God is love and has overcome death and desires that all shall have life in abundance.

The story we heard is presented as a test of Abraham’s obedience towards God, a test which he passes with flying colours; and so Isaac’s life is spared by God and the story of God’s people can continue down through the generations – Isaac, Jacob, the 12 tribes, etc., all the way down to Jesus. Then all too quickly we make a move from Abraham, who wasn’t required to give his son up to death, to God’s willingness to make the ultimate sacrifice as Jesus – God’s only begotten son – does die on the cross; and we leave the story of Abraham behind. But, in so doing, I wonder whether we are guilty of imposing a Christian doctrine on an ancient text and failing to allow that text to challenge us in other ways, ways that might reveal more about our humanity, or our relationship with God; that make us think deeply about our faith and have the potential to enliven our discipleship today. I make no apologies that I am going to pose some hard questions for us to reflect upon as we explore this text.

So let’s go back to the story. Abraham’s told to take his son, his only son ... hang on a minute! Isaac isn’t Abraham’s only son. Ishmael was Abraham’s first-born son and he’s still alive – (we find him alongside Isaac as they bury their father in Gen. 25). In Genesis 21 Abraham and Sarah had banished Ishmael and his mother into the wilderness – but surely a child cannot simply be banished from someone’s life, or written out of the ongoing story. There will always be consequences, practical and emotional, as the whole history of Jewish/Arab/Moslem relations (which are rooted in this story) attests to this day. Kinship ties bind us together as one human family; and the futures of us all are intricately connected, no matter how much we might imagine a possibility of moving forward independent of others. And perhaps we need to remember that it is foolish, even dangerous, to think that we can simply forget aspects of our own stories that we bitterly regret – pretend they didn’t happen – as they might come back later to bite us. The good news is that forgiveness is available through Christ and reconciliation is possible when we take steps to achieve it.

It was Sarah who had engineered the banishment of Ishmael to secure the future of Isaac, who *was her firstborn and only son*; but where is Sarah in this story? Should we imagine that Abraham told her what he planned to do in obedience to God? That she acquiesced? – and if so, was this a matter of faith in God, or subservience to Abraham? I wonder how many women in our world today have little or no say when decisions are made about the future of their sons (or daughters) and how they might feel as a consequence. What might we do to challenge abusive patriarchal powers and to support those who need help to make their own voices heard?

Another reading of the story imagines Abraham slipping out one morning with Isaac, without telling Sarah anything – to avoid an argument, perhaps; to spare her the anguish; or to put off the problem of telling her what he'd done until later? I wonder, when is the right time to have a difficult conversation with a loved one, once a life-threatening situation has arisen. For whose sake is silence kept in such situations? And can we ever be certain about that, with respect to our own motives or those of others? In this reading Abraham carries the whole weight of God's demand on himself. Does he hope against hope that the problem will go away, or does he accept that he will have to find a way to explain his actions if he returns home alone? He's got three days to worry about it on the journey out and potentially another three days on the way back. I wonder if the number three is significant?

Sarah doesn't die until many years later, in Hebron, according to the text; but we hear nothing about any interaction between her and Abraham after Genesis 21 – just before this story - until he goes in to mourn her death. Might a scenario such as presented in this story result in them going in separate ways? Does this scripture force us to realise that sometimes a human decision, no matter one motivated by faith, as much as one reached thoughtlessly, or even determined through sin, can cause a breach in a relationship that is almost impossible to restore? If trust between the parties has been destroyed – even though love continues – things cannot carry on exactly as before.

In the final form of the narrative Abraham's problem is resolved by God's intervention of providing a ram for the sacrifice – but if you read vv.15-19 sometime after the service you will discover an ending to the story that suggests an original version in which Isaac *was* sacrificed, since he's not mentioned as one of the group with whom Abraham returns home. This reading is shared by several Rabbinic commentators; and it challenges us to recognise that all that exists belongs to God. What God gives to us, even our loved ones, God can require back from us, a theme which is explored more fully in the book of Job.

So let's focus on Isaac now. He's mature enough to go on a three day walk and to carry the wood needed for the sacrifice on the latter part of the journey. He knows that his father is going to worship and is astute enough to ask where the lamb is for the offering. Abraham's response to Isaac might actually say effectively 'It's you'. It is only the way we punctuate the sentence and inflect our voice that turns the words 'my son', into an address to Isaac; and the Hebrew verb translated 'will provide' normally means 'sees'. Isaac had seen his half-brother being banished from the family, so his own security was not assured.

However, Isaac interprets his father's reply, I'm always struck at his willingness to allow himself to be bound and laid on top of the altar; and to watch in silence as his father raises the knife. Is this an extraordinary act of obedience and submission to his father, or one of trust that God, or someone, something else will intervene to save him? What did he think was

going to happen? If we traditionally understand this story as a test of Abraham's faith, then it is equally a test of Isaac's; and perhaps, as I suggested earlier, of Sarah's too.

There is no doubt that this is a complex, troubling story – but it is story. I am convinced that God never did and does not put us to the test in this, or any other such way. But human life presents us with countless situations that need resolution; and many of these challenge us to wrestle with the demands and teachings of our faith. The story ultimately reveals a God committed to life, who redeems Isaac with a ram and fulfils the promises made to both Abraham and Sarah (and Hagar) about their descendants. God is faithful; and God's promises in Christ will come to fulfilment, in God's time. Just as God is present with the characters in this story, so God is present with us through the activity of the Spirit as we grapple with the difficult issues that confront us as disciples of Jesus. God calls us, like Abraham, Sarah and Isaac, to lives of obedience; but the test of our obedience is that we turn away from sin and commit to living lives of love, working to establish peace and justice, following in the footsteps of Christ, the incarnate Word, until God's kingdom comes - and to God be the glory, Amen.