

Lent II 2006

God himself will provide a lamb

Genesis 22, Romans 8:31-34, Mark 9:2-10

Sermons can be frustrating things, not least for those who have to endure hearing them. My frustrations with this particular offering are concerned mainly with the scripture readings we heard: not the texts as such, but the selective editing which our lectionary gives us and rather than endure these frustrations I gave in to them and made sure that you heard much more of Genesis 22 that is listed on your pew sheet.

The reason is I hope obvious. The story of Abraham and the abortive sacrifice of Isaac is one of the most vivid narratives in the Old Testament. The attention to detail is striking – the preparations for the journey, the separation of the two protagonists from the fellow travelling servants, the narrowing of the focus towards the father and son and the sacrifice itself. Perhaps most striking about these storytelling techniques is their effect in building the dramatic irony whereby the Lord, who demands the sacrifice, has no intention of following it through to the end, but leaves the tested one, Abraham, with no inkling of this happy outcome, merely the most dreadful of all the demands that could be

made on faith and obedience: offer up that which will cost you the most, the Son whom you love.

Abraham and Isaac are also major characters in Paul's Letter to the Romans, though their presence is often not explicit. Paul's example of the life of faith is Abraham himself. Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. What was it, Paul asks, that Abraham believed, what was the substance of his faith, his trust? It was the conviction that the Lord, Yahweh, the God of Israel, is the God of life, the God who brings life where there is none, who makes the barren – in this case, Abraham and his wife Sarah – into something and someone who bears fruit. Not just a single life, but the very life of the world, because through after Abraham and Isaac is born Jacob, the one called Israel. Through Abraham is born the people through whom God will work to unite humankind to his own life in the person who creates the new Israel, Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

The demand for human sacrifice is terrible enough. To ask a father to kill his own son is unbearable. As if this were not enough, the death of Isaac will be the death of the people whom God has promised to create and found. Having brought a single life and a nation's life out of nothing, God now seems to demand that life, the life of Isaac, the boy who personifies creation and life-giving itself. Small wonder that this bizarre and terrifying story has captivated centuries of interpreters,

including Paul himself, not just in theological writing but in philosophy, in art, literature and music up to our own time.

Had we read only those verses specified in the Lectionary, we would have missed what is, for Christian interpreters, the key verse in the narrative. Isaac's question is as natural as can be: here are the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering? The answer summarises Abraham's triumph of faith: God himself will provide the lamb". To Paul and other Jewish Christians, that simple phrase carries enormous weight. God did not require the death of Isaac, of Abraham's son. What he required was Abraham's faith and trust, the assurance that Abraham did not prize that which he loved most on earth above the promises of God himself. In other words, that Abraham's love for God made a demand higher than his love for his own son. It is no accident that faith, hope, and love are the necessary characteristics of Abraham's extraordinary obedience. What we call the virtues are described by medieval theologians as having as their form nothing other than love itself. What this means is that love makes the virtues what they are, makes them possible. Love makes possible both the extraordinary trust which Abraham displays, but also the seemingly ridiculous hope which trust in God's promises guarantees. Having trusted in God's ability to bring life from nothing, in the birth of his son, now Abraham trusts in God's ability to bring life even from death, the death of that same son and heir.

There is no demand of love greater than that which God makes upon himself. His love, overflowing in creation bringing life where there was none, is in Christ poured out again beyond his own self, so that life can be re-created, and a new life can be brought in place of the death of sin. Thus Paul's wonderful rhetorical question: If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his only son, a phrase which does not simply remind us of Abraham and Isaac, it belongs entirely in the context of that earlier story. By referring to God not sparing his own Son Paul is making clear that the appalling demand which God seemed to make on Abraham he made fully and completely on himself, and thus the crucial words in the original narrative must be "God himself will provide a lamb".

This story gives us an excellent example of the organic nature of the church's use of scripture. Our understanding of one scriptural passage – the story in Genesis – is inevitably coloured by the interpretation which is given by the early Christian apostle, and was preserved in what we call the New Testament itself. As we learn more about the Abraham story, so we understand better Paul's Christian exegesis. What for Paul is the key to interpreting the story – God providing his own sacrifice in order to bring life from death – then allows us to understand other stories with that interpretive key. Our gospel reading gave us the Transfiguration, in which Jesus' identity is shown to the privileged few

as he talks with Moses and Elijah, the representatives of the law and the prophets, of the religion of Israel itself. The Isaac theme is present: this is my beloved son – every time that phrase is used in the gospels, the sacrifice of Isaac lies behind it. But something else is present too – the life which comes from death. At the end of the story as we heard it, Jesus charges the disciples to tell no-one about it until after the Son of Man rises from the dead. Normally the injunction to silence is unconditional – tell no-one. Here it is ‘tell no-one until the resurrection’, and the narrator adds that they adhered to this injunction, whilst speculating about what rising could mean. Why? The transfiguration sees Jesus revealed as the son of God, the representative of Israel, old and new. The characteristic of the God of Israel is the bringing of life from death. So the key to understanding what the transfiguration is intended to point to, is the resurrection itself. The transfiguration alone is not a knock-down proof of who Jesus is – the disciples are terrified, and when they do speak they do so stupidly. The transfiguration is a clue, a pointer, a signpost towards something which will not be understood until Jerusalem and Golgotha are reached and overcome, until life is brought from death, and until the new Isaac, the one who brings the new Israel to birth is, sacrificed and reborn.