

Proper 8, Pentecost VII June 29, 2005

As well known, and as frequently discussed and alluded to as it is, that story of Abraham and Isaac is frankly hard even to listen to, let alone take very seriously. It's just plain wrong. And even if God was only kidding the whole time, Abraham wasn't—and what kind of child-abusing, murderous jerk does that make him? And forgetting about Abraham for a minute (which is pretty easy to do right now) probably all of us would agree that if God ever said anything like that to us, we would tell God, in no uncertain terms, what God could do with that particular suggestion. How dare God even hint at such a thing. Sacrifice myself, maybe; sacrifice my son, never.

Well, if it's any consolation, we're not the first ones to hit the wall with this particular story. For centuries the church dealt with it primarily by allegorizing it to death (Abraham is God, Isaac is Jesus, the wood Isaac carries is the cross, the mountain is Calvary, and so on)—which doubtless left the ancient commentators feeling a whole lot better, but also left the *story itself* untouched. More recent reflections have often been similarly unenlightening. Still, I want to take a shot at it—because I think this story *should* bother us, but for different reasons than it usually does.

The first thing to do is get past the whole sacrifice part, which is a bit hard to do. The fact is, human sacrifice was, at one time or another, a part of virtually all the cultures around Israel, and while Israel never officially adopted the practice, and even used this story as one of the reasons such sacrifice was forbidden, it was still in the air—as something other people did a while back that they didn't think was a good idea (much as slavery is for us). Also, the stories that made it into the book of Genes were chosen from a much larger tradition and written down, not as what we would call history, but instead as ways of making important points about who Israel was and where it came from.

They are here to make a point; and the point in this story is not about human sacrifice, (which is used as a dramatic literary device drawn from surrounding cultures) but was instead about something very different.

To get at that, we need to start with Abraham and with God's promise to Abraham. As we heard a couple of weeks ago, God had promised that God would make of Abraham a great nation, and that through Abraham, all of mankind would be blessed. This was the promise that had led Abraham to leave his home in distant Haran and to begin all those years of wandering. This was the promise that controlled Abraham's life and his destiny; this was the promise that made sense out of everything that had ever happened to Abraham.

That promise lived in the person of Isaac. Isaac was the miraculous child, the son of Abraham and Sarah's old age. There would be no more where that one came from. If God's covenant was to be fulfilled, it simply had to be through Isaac. So Isaac was more than the beloved child. Isaac was God's promise. Without Isaac, not only was the covenant gone, but, with it, Abraham's whole reason for living.

So, the central issue in this story is God's demand to Abraham that Abraham surrender to God that which was most precious, both personally and, if you will, religiously. Personally, Isaac was the son that Abraham loved, as opposed, I supposed, to Ishmael, who Abraham had quite recently rejected; and religiously, which in the context of the story is the more important, to surrender even the last hope of the covenant itself. So, God's test of Abraham was a test of radical obedience, of whether God would be obeyed even if such obedience didn't make any sense.

Now with all this, as is so often the case when we dig deeply into scripture, there is good news and there is bad news, and they are the same news. That news, the good news and the bad news, is that God still treats us pretty much the same way he treated Abraham; the news is that God tailor-makes his demands for faithfulness around what we see as most precious, most loved, and most necessary.

That's because, more often than not, there is something (more than one something, to be sure, but often at least one big something) in each one of us that has to die before God can enter us in His fullness. We probably have a pretty good idea of what that something is. It may be something bad, it may not; it may even be something good. But it is not the best, and it is in the way. It keeps us from hearing clearly and responding fully to God's call to us—to his call for love and service. To say 'yes' to God always means to deny ourselves, to say 'no' to ourselves.

There is no way that I or anyone else can tell you what this is, (which, by the way, is one reason we are not big on lists of what everyone must do or must not do as we struggle to grow into the fullness of Christ...the lists are just too easy.) But each of us can probably figure it out pretty easily.

So our challenge is the same as Abraham's: it is to get clear about what is being asked of us, and to make the long, silent, walk up that mountain of sacrifice, taking with us whatever we need to take—whatever is most precious, but that also stands between us and God. It might be our anger, or our drug of choice, or our best and most unappreciated idea, or our vanity, or our hopes and dreams for our children, or our career, or our carbon footprint, or our favorite resentment, or our plans for the future, or the vice we're most ashamed of or the virtue we're the most proud of (these get close together) or some of our stuff...there's no telling. But it will probably seem just as outrageous to us as were God's words to Abraham about his son.

Whatever it is, it goes up that mountain with us, and we are asked to use it as a way of saying to God, yes, this is important, but you are more important.

That is Abraham's triumph, that's why every follower of every religion of the Book, insists that they are, in spirit if not in flesh, a child of Abraham. He made the right choice, not in the story as we hear it from our perspective, but the right choice as the story was offered to Israel as a way of defining who Israel was called to be.

Now, on the one hand, it doesn't always end for us exactly the way it did for Abraham. We don't always get back what we offer—although that can happen. But on the other hand, it always ends that way. On that mountain something new is discovered—and then everything is different, and hope is rekindled and renewed, and the future becomes possible. For, on the mountain of the Lord, on the mount of sacrifice, it will be provided.