

*Genesis 22.1-14*

*After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' He said, 'Take 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 that I shall show you.' So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt-offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. Then Abraham said to his young men, 'Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you.' Abraham took the wood of the burnt-offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. Isaac said to his father Abraham, 'Father!' And he said, 'Here I am, my son.' He said, 'The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt-offering?' Abraham said, 'God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son.' So the two of them walked on together. When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, 'Abraham, Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' He said, 'Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.' And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt-offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place 'The Lord will provide'; as it is said to this day, 'On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.'*

Last Sunday's reading from the Hebrew Bible told the story of Hagar and Ishmael's banishment; if you remember, Abraham and Sarah had been unable to have a child so Sarah's handmaid, Hagar, was made to have Abraham's child. When Sarah miraculously conceived and had a son, Isaac, she persuaded Abraham to throw out Hagar and Ishmael, abandoning them to the wilderness.

It is a story included in those named by theologian Phyllis Trible as 'Texts of Terror': Biblical stories of women who were horrifically treated. It is not a nice story.

Today's story from Genesis is another one fraught with difficulties. God 'tests' Abraham by asking him to slaughter his beloved son- after he has already lost his other beloved son, Ishmael. How can we make sense of that?

Traditionally this story has been used to demonstrate Abraham's faith in God; that the Patriarch, the forefather of all Jewish, Christian, and Muslim people, is the archetype of faithfulness. It has been said that God needed to find out whether Abraham had enough faith to be up to the job, so God set up the ultimate test: and Abraham passed, good for him. But what kind of god asks someone to murder their child? When God speaks to Abraham, our English translation leaves out an important word. We read that God said, "Take 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 that I shall show you."

In Hebrew, we read that God said, "PLEASE take your son....". When God gives a command, God doesn't usually say please; God expects it will be done. So why here, and why did the translators choose to omit it? I don't know the answer and can only wonder if maybe God is asking Abraham, rather than giving an outright command, because God knows what a terribly hard thing is being asked. And I can only wonder if the translators left out the 'please' because it didn't fit with God's usual way of giving commands.

It is notable that Abraham did not answer God at all. When Sarah told Abraham she wanted him to get rid of his first son, Ishmael, Abraham was very distressed; and maybe he prayed, because God seems to answer by telling him to do as Sarah asked because Ishmael would also be the ancestor of a great nation.

Before that, when God told Abraham of the impending destruction of Sodom, Abraham bargained with God for the sake of the righteous people who lived there.

If Abraham was not afraid to argue and plead with God, why didn't he beg for the life of his son? Why didn't he ask if there was some other way? He was silent. He had no words, no prayer.

This story has great significance for Jewish people, who refer to it as the Akedah- the binding of Isaac. It has resonated with Israeli Jews who have sent their sons to war many times over many years. It is also seen as the founding of animal sacrifice, rather than human sacrifice as was common in the surrounding countries; and although nobody knows where Mount Moriah is, it is identified with Jerusalem and the Temple Mount- the place where God was most present.

This story is more than an explanation of why the people of Israel used animal sacrifice in worship, or why Jerusalem is the centre of the religion. It speaks to us, who are thousands of years and thousands of miles from where the story is set- because Abraham is the archetype of faith.

That means we can look at this story as a way of trying to understand what faith in God is, and what it means for us. As we grapple with the horrible concept of a father being asked, required, commanded to kill the son he loves and then burn his body, we might begin to glimpse the reality of what faith is.

As a hospital chaplain I have watched as people suffered and died. I have sat with people who are deeply angry because their loved one is suffering and they can't do anything to help. I've been with young parents whose baby has died; and I've struggled to find words and tried to pray for and with people who have no words.

Abraham had no words because there ARE no words for such awful suffering. What he did have was such a strong, all-encompassing faith in God that he could not turn away, he could not disobey, even when every fibre of his being cried out in anguish.

How dare he believe in the face of this? And yet he did. Many people, when confronted by suffering and death, abandon belief and turn away.

Some of us don't have that choice. We HAVE to believe. In the face of tragedy when it seems ridiculous to believe in a good and loving God- we still believe.

Abraham teaches us that faith means even when everything seems hopeless, even when we cannot see an end to the suffering, even when all hope is lost- there is God.

Jesus told us to take up our cross, and that to lose one's life is to find it. He knew what crucifixion meant, he didn't want to go through all that horror- but he did, because it was necessary.

Suffering and death are the price we pay for being human, however much we rightly try to alleviate unnecessary suffering. We fool ourselves if we think we can protect ourselves and those we love from any harm or pain. When the inevitable happens, some will blame God- 'how could a loving God let this happen?'

Others will still feel all the pain and loss and grief and yet hang on to their faith and trust in God, even as they cry and scream and complain, as the psalmist did: "How long, O Lord? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long?"

And the psalm ends, "But I have trusted your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation."

The Lord be with you.