

Sermon Notes

St Mark's Anglican Church
South Hurstville

Pentecost 11
12 August 2007

Preacher
The Reverend Chris Albany
Rector

Readings: Isaiah 1.1,10-20; Psalm 50.1-8, 23-24; Hebrews 11.1-3,8-16; Luke 12.32-40

Faith – Sacred or Diabolical?

It's perhaps just a well the Hebrews passage finished at verse 16 for if we continued we would have read: *By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, of whom he had been told, 'It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named after you.'* v 17, 18

Which brings in to question, just what do we mean by faith? – does faith mean accepting things including the stories of scripture at face value? Do we agree with the writer of Hebrews that Abraham was being faithful when he seemed prepared to sacrifice Isaac? Faithful to whom or what? What does that say about our understanding of God? Is faith no more than blind obedience?

One modern poet has reflected on that striking story from Genesis 22.1-14 in this way.

The Sacrifice of Isaac:

*god's command
a tortured father
an eternal journey
a loyal son
an expectant altar
a readied pyre
a flashing knife
a sudden angel
a last minute reprieve
a father's relief
an unlucky sheep.*

Adam Taylor

Is it as simple as that really? I wonder! No more than wonder – too much is lost, much much too much by such a simple acceptance of this story at face value. The implications in terms of our understanding of God, and the sacralizing of violence and what that might mean in terms of our approach to life and our relationships with each other are really quite profound and to my mind absolutely destructive. Destructive of trust and legitimizing of rivalry and jealousy and violence.

We only need look at one of Job's comforter's Bildad to gain a sense of what begins to happen when one accepts this understanding of this incident. As one commentator puts it:

*"Bildad's words were reassuring: Abraham, man of faith, obedient to the end; sacrifice, total commitment, friend of God, God's will, divine purpose fulfilled, radical obedience, the Word..."*¹ - That's all that matters obedience to God and the Word – sound familiar? The same commentator continues:

So in God's name people have justified all sorts of unspeakable things leading to the cries of children, with newsreels of little girls screaming with the pain of napalm, bodies blown apart by bombs, black men picked off by gun fire, blood and more blood, violence and more violence, holy wars across the holy land, and beaten battered children, women, gays, and the slow silent torture of those who have less, those who have not received their share, the undramatic poverty of the unreported or the mere statistics.

But not to worry *there is more reassurance, it's all part of God's plan, God's wisdom, God's foreknowledge, God's election, God's rule, God's will. Little wonder that eventually there was*

*shouting, a crowd with staves, and a soldier, marching, marching, atop a hill of execution, more flesh on wood, more blood poured out, more sacrifice, and with a lance the striking of the heart of God.*¹

How far this is from the message lived and communicated by the one so pierced. The one who in the passage we have just heard as our Gospel reading speaks of service and a radical turning upside down of all the hierarchical norms of society – the importance not of blind obedience but of compassion and meeting the needs of the other.

So what is going on in this ancient story? Surely the only way to understand it is to see it as the ancient Hebrews' way of including in their stories about the formation of their culture the history of the sacrificial system which was part of their religious traditions, perhaps as a way of explaining why theirs was one of animal sacrifice rather than human as in some other cultures. It adds weight to the story to have God as the director of it all – but by thus implicating God in the violence the ancient Hebrews do not see the terrible consequences, consequences that Jesus seeks to redress. Jesus is the one who says “those who live by the sword will die by the sword, how a simple acceptance of the Abraham – Isaac story leads to violence and murder. How Bildad would have pained Jesus, for Jesus there was no blind obedience to the word, just as Bildad pained Job (we need to see the hints of what Jesus reveals most fully, there within the Hebrew scriptures – there were those whose experience of the living God helped them articulate a different understanding to that of their contemporaries). Chief amongst these were the prophets such as Isaiah whose evocative cry we have just heard, as he rails against the futility of their religious practises and says “*cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.*”

Jesus is the one who shows us that the heavens weep at the suffering of God's people, his vision of God was not that of Abraham or Bildad. Jesus shows us that God called not for blind obedience, but compassion. That the prophet Micah got it right when he declared “I desire mercy not sacrifice” says the Lord. Essentially the message of Isaiah in today's reading.

Charles Kimball in his illuminating Book “When Religion becomes Evil” suggests that “Blind Obedience” is one of the 5 warning signs of corruption in religion. In essence that if faith has to do with unquestioning obedience then it is diabolical faith not sacred faith. He suggests that the antidote to it is the encouragement of freedom of thought. He concludes his chapter on Blind Obedience in this way:

“Blind obedience is a sure sign of trouble. The likelihood of religion becoming evil is greatly diminished when there is freedom for individual thinking and when honest enquiry is encouraged. As the Buddha lay on his deathbed, he emphasized human responsibility and used the metaphor of light. He offered these poignant final words to his disciples:

Do not accept what you hear by report, do not accept tradition, do not accept a statement because it is found in our books, nor because it is in accord with your belief, nor because it is a saying of your teacher.... Be ye lamps unto yourselves.” p. 99

In other words, test and try things for yourself and against your experience of life and perception of reality.

Does not that experience tell us that violence only begets violence, that jealousy (the kind that might demand being put first above all else) only begets rivalry, resentment and that leads to yet more violence? That even the smallest of acts of compassion, a smile, a shared meal, or even a cup if not of water of tea or coffee – a listening non judgmental ear can make the profoundest of differences. Openness, welcome - compassion is perhaps the word that best sums up Jesus message to us. Our God is the compassionate one. May we you and I individually and as a community be above all else compassionate people.

¹ Adapted from “Isaac” part of William Loader's web-based commentary on the Lectionary Readings – see <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/Isaac.html> (words not in italics added).