

The Sacrifice of Isaac

Readings: Genesis chapter 22, verses 1-13; Luke chapter 5 verses 1-11

Times change! I can remember this story being taught when I was in Sunday School and I have heard many a sermon preached about it. But I can never remember any suggestion that there was anything dubious about God requiring Abraham to sacrifice his own son. Instead the point was made that this is what God Himself did.

But hang on a moment. Imagine this scenario. Social workers have uncovered a case of the ritual abuse of children, including an instance of one child being sacrificially killed. The case now comes to the High Court.

Judge: "How do you plead?" / Defendant "Not guilty my Lord"

Judge: "On what grounds?" / Defendant "God told me to do it"

No one today would accept that as a defence. Murder is murder, even if God commands it. We would not tolerate that kind of special pleading today so why accept it in the Abraham story?

And, if you go on to argue that Abraham didn't sacrifice his son and the boy got a last minute reprieve the objections still remain.

What kind of a God is he who would engage in that kind of brinkmanship? Abraham was in an appalling position and it becomes worse if we say that God was only pretending. If this was an elaborate bluff to test Abraham's faith then it is in very bad taste.

Moreover, what about the effect on Isaac? He would have been traumatised forever. Imagine yourself in his position. Imagine being bound and strapped to a makeshift altar and facing an uplifted knife. "What are you doing Dad?" And getting the answer; "Don't worry son; its what God wants". Is there any way of justifying that kind of psychological and emotional trauma on a boy? Could Isaac ever trust his father again?

If you take this story at face value then both God and Abraham come out of it very badly. It is immoral. So why is it in Holy Scripture?

And what does it mean for us today?

One reason is because that's the way it happened. It shows how people thought about God 1700 years before Christ. In those days child sacrifice was common-place.. Imagine Abraham coming to live amongst a people who practised child sacrifice. He claimed to believe in a different God and they wanted to know just how much he believed. They were prepared to sacrifice their most valued possession; their eldest son. Such was their devotion to their God. Was Abraham prepared to match their devotion? Abraham was a man of his times and it is not surprising that he felt compelled to make a similar sacrifice. Nor is it surprising that he believed God would require any less.

Times have moved on. Our understanding of what God requires is governed by what God has revealed in Christ for it is our belief that God was in Christ. In the light of Jesus we cannot believe that God would have required or ordered such a sacrifice. If we say that Abraham was wrong it is because his understanding of what God required was wrong. In the light of Jesus we have no excuse for that faulty understanding.

There is another reason for this story being in the Bible. Years afterwards the Hebrews were asked why they did not practise child sacrifice. Their answer was to recall the story of Abraham. God had revealed in this story that He did not require child sacrifice.

More importantly we ask what we can learn from this story today.

The answer is that we can learn a lot about what it means to have faith. For Jesus called on people to have faith in God and this story of Abraham is an illustration of what constitutes faith.

Faith consists in Trust and Obedience. The story of Abraham exemplifies this. The difference is that we are called to Trust and Obey the God who revealed Himself in Jesus. In Jesus God has revealed His will and purpose and shown us what He requires. Abraham exemplified the quality of faith which God requires even if we have to admit that his understanding of what God requires is wrong. To have faith is to trust and obey, and so we look at this double component.

Trust

Trusting is a lot more than mere believing. To trust is to put your life on the line for something you believe. There is always an element of uncertainty attached to trusting.

I like the story of the tightrope walker who strung a wire across Niagara Falls and pushed a wheelbarrow across. People were amazed. He did it again to prove it was no fluke. And then he asked for volunteers to be pushed across in the wheelbarrow. There were no takers! Nobody doubted that he could do it. But nobody was prepared to trust him enough to be pushed across. Believing is one thing. Trusting is another. And faith does not only mean believing in God. It means trusting God and that's a very different thing.

Obedience

The other component of Faith is obedience. The failure to obey indicates a lack of trust. That's why we read the story of the disciples having fished all night and caught nothing. In the morning Jesus meets them on the beach and tells them to "put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch". They protested. "We know these waters. We have fished all night. There are no fish there!" Reluctantly and against their better judgement they pushed out into deep water and let down their nets. They were utterly amazed at the haul which resulted.

That's faith. Such was the faith of Abraham. He was wrong only in believing what God required of him. And we, who have known Jesus know what God requires of us. The quality of our faith must be nothing less than that of Abraham who trusted God sufficiently to sacrifice his all.