

*Terror and trust*

‘God said to Abraham, “kill me a son.”  
 Abe says, “man, you must be puttin’ me on”;  
 God say, “No.” Abe say, “What?”  
 God say, “you can do what you want, Abe, but  
 The next time you see me coming, you’d better run!”  
 Well, Abe says, “where do you want this killing done?”  
 God says, “out on Highway 61”.’

That was Bob Dylan’s take on our Old Testament passage this morning, in a 1960s song that ended with a fairly typical 1960s anti-war message. Similarly the poet and singer Leonard Cohen, writing at the time of the Vietnam war, saw this story of a father being tempted to slay his son as an image of what America was then doing to its young, and he composed the haunting song ‘Story of Isaac’: ‘you who build these altars now, to sacrifice these children, you must not do it any more...’, sang Cohen. But there have been many responses to this story, artistic and otherwise, and of course closer to home this story inspired Rembrandt to at least two masterpieces. And it’s not surprising that it has been such an inspiration for not only is it so powerful but it is also very disturbing, what is sometimes called ‘a text of terror’. Richard Dawkins, our atheist crusader friend, has singled out this story as a prime demonstration that the God of the Old Testament is, quote, ‘the most unpleasant character in all fiction’. And certainly it is a dark and mysterious story, one we might wish were not in the Bible at all.

Think about it. Abraham and his wife Sarah were very old when they had Isaac. They had abandoned all hope of having children, resigned to their childlessness when, out of the blue, comes this impossible gift. What joy! And now, with no rationale or explanation – what explanation could there be? – Abraham is commanded to sacrifice Isaac. God will take Isaac back. And, strangely, Abraham obeys without protest or argument. Nor in the text is there any consultation with Sarah who is only Isaac’s mother, after all. Abraham saddles his donkey and takes his servants and Isaac and off he sets on the three day journey to the mountain where he will do this terrible thing. Then just at the last moment, as Abraham has bound Isaac and laid him on the wood on the

altar and he is reaching for the knife, the command comes to stop – and a ram is offered instead. So what on earth is going on here? What kind of God plays these games?

Well, in approaching this text we tread carefully for we tread on holy ground, but the first thing that must be said is that this story is very specific to Abraham and relates particularly to him and his circumstances, and I'll explain what I mean. You see, you could say that Abraham, along with Jesus, occupies a unique and central role in the whole history of the world and in God's plan of salvation. If you read the first chapters of the Book of Genesis at the beginning of the Bible you read the story of a world created good, but which has fallen into violence and corruption. And in chapter 11 of Genesis we come to a decisive moment when we are introduced to a man called Abram and his wife Sarai. Through them salvation will come to this spoiled creation. Abram is told that he will be the father of a nation, a nation through whom the world will be blessed and salvation will come. The problem is that Abram and Sarai are old and childless, so how can they be parents to this nation that will be such a blessing? Well, Abram is told, nothing is impossible for God and in due course Sara conceives and a child, Isaac, is born and the plan for salvation is under way. Through Abram and his descendants the world will be saved. So, no pressure Abram! The fate of the whole world rests upon your shoulders!

The problem is that Abram is a mixed bag. Capable of great trust in God he is also capable of great self-regard and of being exceedingly faithless. For instance, there are two occasions when rather than trust God Abram tries to pass Sarai off as his sister in order to save his own skin but endangering hers. The man is capable of being a first rate cad! And if Abram is to play his part in this great plan, this grand scheme, God must come absolutely first in his life, before everything else. He must learn to trust God completely and to surrender himself and all that he is and all that he has to God. There's a sense in which Abram must be put firmly in his place. And part of putting Abram in his place involves reminding him of why he was given his son Isaac at all. You see, God did not cause Sarai to conceive Isaac just because God felt sorry a childless old couple. Isaac is not given just to complete a deficient family unit. Isaac is given because he is crucial to God's plan of salvation for the world. He is really God's child more than Abraham and Sarah's, part of God's family, not theirs. And Abraham needs to be reminded of all this. So of course it seems mad to kill Isaac – how is God going to ever create this great family that will be such a

blessing to the world if he kills the very one from whom the family will descend? Is God not shooting himself in the foot, destroying his own strategy? Well, that's God's problem, not Abraham's. Abraham must learn to put God first and to trust. And while that is true of us all it is especially true for those who are called to special service, special responsibility. It's like the disciples in our reading from Matthew's Gospel this morning. They are being sent out with the Gospel of God's love at a crucial moment, at another strategic juncture in God's plan for salvation. So they must go out utterly dependent on God, with no family ties, with no extra clothes or comforts and they must become dependent upon others for even a cup of cold water. As many missionaries and others called to special service have discovered, family ties may have to come second to God's call.

Abraham then, to be of any use to God, must learn to trust God – and hence this strange test. And what is so lovely is that in this story we see Abraham learning to put God first and to trust. On the one hand Abraham understands exactly what he is being called to do. Yet he clearly seems to believe that somehow God will find a way, that God will provide. Abraham is ready to let go of Isaac and yet somehow he believes that God will intervene. So when he leaves his servants behind to ascend the mountain where the sacrifice will take place he says to his servants, 'Stay here... the boy and I will go over there; we will worship and then *we* will come back to you.' Abraham seems to anticipate that somehow they will both return. And when poor Isaac asks Abraham where the lamb is for the burnt offering, Abraham replies, 'God himself will provide...' And I don't think Abraham is bluffing here. He is at that place where, yes, he is willing to put God first, to let go of Isaac, to return him to God – and yet somehow he believes that God is in control and will provide: even as he binds Isaac to the altar, and reaches for the knife.

And this is where the story begins to address us all, where it becomes a summons to trust God, even in the darkness, even in the midst of yearning and loss. There are times, after all, when the will of God is hard to take, when we struggle with a God who seems to be either absent, or silent, or making impossible demands upon us. And it is then that we have to learn somehow to trust. Eliezer Berkovits was a great 20<sup>th</sup> century Jewish theologian who specialised in the holocaust and on how we can make sense of such evil. In his profound book, *With God in Hell*, Berkovits asks how it was that so many Jews kept their faith, even in the ghettos and the death camps. And he turns to this

story of Abraham, and he imagines Abraham saying to God during those three days of hell, as he and Isaac ascend the mountain: “In this situation I do not understand You. Your behavior violates our covenant; still, I trust You because it is You, because it is You and me, because it is us.... Almighty God! What you are asking of me is terrible.... But I have known You, my God. You have loved me and I love You. My God, My God, you are breaking Your word to me.... Yet, I trust You; I trust You.” There is faith under extreme duress, and it is what Abraham learnt and what he had to learn in order to play his part in God’s plan.

Learning to trust, even when faith is at full stretch – where do we begin? Well, this is where we need to make one last point. And this is where we need to bring something else to the story. You see, by itself this story is not enough. It leaves us with the call to trust God but by itself it gives us no grounds for doing so. What incentive do we have for trusting God when we are asked to bear burdens too heavy to be ours? What sustains us when we faith reaches breaking point, when the will of God asks too much of us? Well, this is where this ancient Jewish story must be read through Christian eyes, because when we bring a Christian perspective to bear we notice things we would otherwise miss. Put simply, this is a story of a father who is willing to give up his beloved son and for Christians that has a very special resonance. Our faith is founded on a God of whom it is said that ‘God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...’ In other words in this perplexing story we discern as in a glass darkly the mystery of a God who did not withhold his own Son, whose own experience somehow mirrors Abraham’s. And such a God has given us grounds to trust him. Indeed as we watch in our mind’s eye Isaac ascending the mountain, carrying the wood for his own sacrifice, we might catch a glimpse of another later son ascending a mountain and carrying a cross. Here this story of Isaac cries out for another story to frame it and to throw it into relief. And that’s why I have deliberately quoted Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen and Eliezer Berkovits, all Jews steeped in Jewish tradition for that tradition take us far - but not far enough.

This story addresses Abraham first of all in his unique circumstances and vocation. Then - for all of us it - becomes a call to trust God. But when faith is at the edge it needs more. When faith is stretched we need that verse from the Letter to the Romans, chapter 8, which says, ‘He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him give us everything else?’ That is a God we can trust, and to him be praise and glory forever. Amen.