



Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon by Revd Matthew Wright



Sunday 2 July 2023

READINGS

Genesis 22:1-14; Psalm 13; Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42

*Abraham said,
"God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering" (Gen.22:8a)*

Greetings. May I speak in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

At face value, the message of our Gospel reading is that we ought to seek to recognise Christ in our brothers and sisters, and especially in those who are doing the work of the Lord. And, in treating them accordingly, we will be rewarded. I'm not sure how much more we will get out of our Gospel reading so I have instead opted to focus on the Old Testament reading for this Sunday, which is Genesis 22:1-14, the very well-known story of the sacrifice of Isaac.

For some people, this story may sit uncomfortably and this for at least two reasons. The first and most obvious is that it strikes some as unreasonable, cruel and perhaps even sadistic, of God to ask Abraham to sacrifice his son. It is even more strange that previously Abraham and Sarah had been barren, and that Isaac was the product of a miraculous promise of God which materialised. God told Abraham that Isaac would be "the father of many nations," that through Isaac, Abraham's offspring would become as numerous as the stars in the sky and the grains of sand on the sea shore. So it seems not only cruel but non-sensical of God to now ask Abraham to sacrifice his one and only son for which he had waited so long.

The second reason as to why the story does not sit well with some, is that seemingly the phenomenon of child sacrifice (which to us is utterly barbaric hence why this story does not sit well) was a feature of the larger Canaanite society in which ancient Judaism was situated. There is apparently debate among scholars as to the nature and extent of this sacrifice and whether or not it was a feature of nascent Hebrew culture. It was long held that child sacrifice was associated with a Canaanite god called Moloch, or Molech. More recently it has emerged that the root word for this name itself means 'sacrifice' and that it therefore referred not to a deity but to the practice of sacrifice itself. With this backdrop then, the story of the sacrifice of Isaac is said to reflect a throwback to or a hangup about such practices.

But the story can be read and interpreted in various ways. It can be read as a parable or fable or moralising story. The signature line in response to Isaac's seemingly tragic question, "where is the lamb for the burnt offering?", namely that "God himself will provide the lamb" (Genesis 22:8a) is seen as one among many prophetic references to Christ contained within the Old Testament. And while this may appear to be a neat-fitting and satisfying explanation, I believe it also points to an observation regarding

the system of gradated sacrifice which was largely man-made and the larger context of Torah in which this appeared.

Paul uncovers this in his writings and in particular in his letter to the Romans:

“Apart from the law sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died, and the very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.”

(Romans 7:8b-11)

The central mystery regarding the Law, that is Jewish Torah, is that on the one hand we cannot dispute the fact that Torah, or its essence, was given by God. And this is represented in the story of the tablets which Moses receives on Mount Sinai. We can't dispute the fact that, at its core, the Law represents certain immutable and universal principles and values which provide God's creation and, in particular the human race, with a sense of order and rectitude.

On the other hand, there lies within the Law a trap, and the trap is twofold. Firstly, and most immediately, it tempts us toward self-righteousness and the inflation of our egos, because if we believe that we are law-abiding, that we can keep the law, we fall into the trap of thinking we are righteous people. Secondly, and perhaps more profoundly, and this is what is represented in the connection between the almost-sacrifice of Isaac and the atoning death of Christ – and I think is also the point Paul makes in Romans – the ultimate end of the Law, regardless of which way we look at it or of how we approach it, is death.

And this is where I think the human factor comes in in terms of the construction of the system of the Law and of gradated sacrifice. The system which we created, which we can think abstractly of, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, as “the Law”, is a voracious system whose appetite can never be sated and whose thirst can never be slaked. No matter how many animals, no matter how many bulls, sheep and goats were sacrificed, the Law always reverted to the same conclusion regarding human nature – one of condemnation in state of unrighteousness. And so, what is the human response? To exact tighter laws, demand the sacrifice of more animals, offer more blood to appease this insatiable system which had somehow become predicated on a futile pursuit for righteousness and affirmation in human eyes.

And this is precisely why, within first-century Judaism, the Gospel, and Paul's message in particular, was so radical, scandalous even. What he proposed was revolutionary – a system predicated not on human righteousness, but on the grace of God. I close with a verse from the Romans reading set for this Sunday: “Sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.” (Romans 6:14)

Amen.