

Wednesday Home Study, 24th June 2020

Pray: that the Holy Spirit will enlighten your mind and give you understanding as you study God's word. Pray that the Holy Spirit will help you to discern and hear any special message that God has for you this day.

Read Genesis 22:1-14

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." 2 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." 3 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. 4 On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. 5 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." 6 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. 7 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?" 8 Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together.

9 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. 10 Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. 11 But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." 12 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." 13 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. 14 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." NRSV



Our passage for study this week is a rather difficult passage for many people as it indicates child sacrifice. Nevertheless, we trust that it is an event intended by God to teach us something. So, what can we learn from this passage?

(Acknowledgement: I have developed much of the following reflection and questions for this study from an article written 28th June 2017 by Bishop Ian Palmer, then Bishop of Bathurst.)

The NIV Study Bible notes suggest that:

‘God tests us in order to confirm our faith (Ex 20:20) or prove our commitment (Dt 8:2).’

1. Read the references used to support this assertion and then reflect on whether you agree with the NIV study note.

Ex 20:20, *‘Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin." NRSV*

Deut 8:2, *‘Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. NRSV*

These passages seem to me to be about tests of ‘obedience’.

2. Do you see any difference between ‘faith’ and obedience’?
Is obedience arising out of fear the same as faith?

Deuteronomy 8:2 also states that God was testing the Israelites ‘... to know what was in your heart. ...’ (regarding their inclination to obey or not).

But 1 Samuel 16:7 says this: *‘... the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I*

have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."
(NRSV)

So, this verse states that God knows the human heart.

3. If God knows what is in our hearts, why then did God need to “test” Abraham?

A similar conventional reading of Genesis 22:1-14 (to that given in the NIV Study Bible) is that God was testing Abraham to ensure that Abraham placed nothing above loving God. By this argument, Abraham would show his supreme love for God by being willing to sacrifice the son for whom he had spent a lifetime waiting. Certainly, Abraham must have loved this son dearly. But again, we must ask, “If God knows what is in our hearts, why does he need to test our love?”

This has led to a suggestion that God did not need Abraham to prove his love for God, but rather the test was meant to show the extent to which we should love God and what we should be ready to give up in our love for God.

Bishop Ian writes that,

‘This has further led to some people arguing that love for God is actually more important than morality and ethics. It is above them! We are confronted with a similar demand for total allegiance in Luke 14:26, or put slightly less confrontationally in Matthew 10:37f. What do we do with Jesus’ teaching to “hate” father and mother in comparison to devotion to him and

his Kingdom? If we follow this argument to a logical conclusion, we allow love of God to overrule the universal principles that bind people and families and communities to one another. It is the gateway for justifying acts of great devotion and sacrifice as well as terrible acts of murder and terrorism.'

So, we need to test our own understanding. Perhaps the conventional reading that we have accepted for decades is not quite correct!

I always encourage you to examine the original context in which the passage/letter/teaching was written.

We know that in the ancient world when Genesis 22 was written, child sacrifice was not uncommon. Archaeologists have unearthed the bones of thousands of young children, showing that child sacrifice was widespread In the Middle East. It was a pagan practice.

But child sacrifice was regarded with horror in the Jewish tradition. It was consistently condemned, as were those who practised it.

Read 2 Kings 21:2-6 and Micah 6:7-8.

4. Do you think that Abraham could serve as a role model if what he was prepared to do (until stopped by God) is what his descendants were commanded not to do?

And yet, Abraham is possibly the greatest role model for the Jewish faith - and also Christians.

Bishop Ian (*drawing heavily upon an article on The Binding of Isaac by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks*) writes:

To understand the binding of Isaac we have to realise that much of the Torah, Genesis in particular, is a polemic against worldviews the Torah considers pagan, inhuman and wrong. One institution to which Genesis is opposed is the ancient family. The ancient, fundamental, social and religious unit was the family. In it there was an intrinsic connection between three things: the domestic religion, the family and the right of property. The authority of the head of the family, the *paterfamilias*, was absolute. He had power of life and death over his wife and children. Authority invariably passed, on the death of the father, to his firstborn son. Meanwhile, as long as the father lived, children had the status of property rather than persons in their own right.

The Torah is opposed to every element of this worldview. For instance, the Torah has no sacrifices to dead ancestors and seeking the spirits of the dead is explicitly forbidden (Leviticus 19:31 or Isaiah 8:19). Also in many narratives in Genesis and later in the OT, succession does not pass to the firstborn: not to Ishmael but Isaac, not to Esau but Jacob, not to the tribe of Reuben but to Levi (priesthood) and Judah (kingship), not to Aaron but to Moses.

The entire story of Isaac, from birth to binding, is opposed to the principle that a child is the property of the father. Isaac's birth is miraculous. Sarah is already post-menopausal when she conceives.

Therefore, what God was doing when he asked Abraham to offer up his son was not requesting a child sacrifice but something quite different. *He wanted Abraham to renounce ownership of his son.*

5. What is your view on this alternative understanding of Genesis 22:1-14?

Whether we accept Rabbi Sacks' reading of this passage or not, the principle that children are not the property of their parents is important to Christian morality and ethics.

6. If children are not the property of the parent, what is the relationship between the parent and the child?

To whom do children belong?

7. Do you agree with the statement: "Because children – all children – belong to God, parenthood is not ownership but guardianship." How, in practical terms, do you understand this statement?

As soon as they reach the age of maturity children become independent moral agents with their own dignity and freedom. Children are an absolute trust given to parents to bring them up in the way of God. Parents are not possessors of children but rather guardians or stewards of the life entrusted to their care.

8. Reflect on your own relationship with children. Did you have difficulty letting your children (if you have any) take their independence from you when they became adults?

Bishop Ian concluded:

‘Why then did God say to Abraham about Isaac: “Offer him up as a burnt offering”? So as to make clear to all future generations that the reason Jews condemn child sacrifice is because God is the God of life, not death. Life is sacred, not death. Every child belongs to God, and is not the property of the father, family or society. Rights are not owned (like “it’s my body I can do what I like”) the body belongs to God. We affirm this in the covenant initiations of circumcision and baptism, “You are a child of God”. ‘



Finish by *praying* for all of the children that are in your life.