

Abraham and Isaac – Parable of Faith

In the 19th century,
the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard
became fascinated – obsessed even - by the story of Abraham and Isaac.
His book 'Fear and Trembling' is a lengthy reflection
on this perplexing and troubling story.
but as well these qualities,
And partly *because* of these qualities,
It is also one of the most important stories in all of scripture.

Kierkegaard wanted to understand the experience of Abraham
and what that experience meant.
He came to regard this story as the ultimate paradigm of faith,
which is an immersion into the mystery of God who is beyond all understanding.

We will never know how much – if any – of the story is historical.
But it *functions* mainly as a parable.
A parable of faith.
Abraham trusts God even when he doesn't understand what's going on,
And even in the worst possible situation,
When he is asked to give up the thing that he loves most in all the world,
Without which he is as good as dead,
His son.
His only son.
Whom he loves.
So it is a story of trust,
but also of **hope**.
Even when the knife is drawn,
even as it glitters in the sunlight,
ready to fall,
when there appears to be no way out –
It is at THAT moment
the angel of the Lord calls out:
'Abraham! Abraham!'
And stops the sacrifice,
at the last possible moment.
What does this tell us?
Even when we cannot see any way out,
when the worst appears to be about to happen,
It's never too late for hope.

This was a message that Kierkegaard needed to hear himself.
He often suffered from depression .
He once said:
'Life is lived forward, but understood backward'.
Something I've always found to be true.
In the midst of life,
it's hard to see God at work alongside us.

But, later on, when we look back,
we can perhaps discern his presence.
When the artist Brueghel the Elder depicted this story,
He focused not on the sacrifice on the mountain,
but on the journey to it.



Indeed, his painting is chiefly an excuse for a landscape,
With Abraham, Isaac and their assistants,
as only tiny figures in the foreground.
In this way, he sought to express one of the realities of life,
That when we're in the landscape,
We can only see the little bit where we are.
Only later, when we have travelled across it,
when we look back to the place we have come from,
can we see the lie of the land.

As we begin to emerge out of lockdown,
And many aspects of life begin to return to something a little more like normal,
That's what many of us will be doing too.
In the coming weeks and years,
we'll look back on the last few months,
and try to understand it,
what we have learnt,
and what it means,

But what makes this story so troubling for many people,
is the very fact that God asks Abraham to sacrifice Isaac in the first place.
What are we to make of that?
Even as a parable,
this story is rooted in the historical reality of child-sacrifice,
a feature common to nearly all ancient societies and primitive religions,
and founded on the crude idea that life is saved by giving life.
So by sacrifice the anger of the gods is appeased,
and a blessing is bought with blood.

The more precious the offering,
The greater the blessing,
And what could be more precious than your only son?

But the key thing to remember is that Isaac is **NOT** sacrificed,
and this makes it a pivotal moment in the history of religion,
even in the history of the world.

This story is essential a question:

'What does God want?'

Abraham sets off to appease what he thinks is a cruel, jealous and angry God,
but comes to discover that God is more about
generosity than jealousy,
kindness than cruelty,
love than anger.

This is a radical new understanding,
a great leap forward in understanding the divine.

It is dramatically presented to us in the moment when the angel holds back Abraham's arm.
It's a revelation.

This sacrifice is not what God wants.

God is not like Abraham things he is.

A lesson was learnt then,

But the ancient question remains forever:

'What does God want?'

It's a question worth asking at all the critical moments in life,
And even every day,
As we seek to live faithful Christian lives.

But there is an afterlife to this ancient Jewish story,
That gives it another twist.

Very early on,
Christians have seen in this story,
As a foretelling of Christ.

The ram that appears
And is laid on the wood,
in place of Isaac,
is Christ on the Cross;
suffering, dying,
instead of us,
even in our place.

The Jewish artist Chagall makes this connection explicit,
in one of his paintings of this scene,
with the crucifixion hovering in the background.



Speaking of the Cross,
St Paul says that the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom.
but we see the outlines of this idea first revealed by Abraham in this story,
Kierkegaard described it as the 'suspension of the ethical',
because sometimes the thing that seems most wrong, most crazy, most absurd
in the eyes of the world,
Is – in reality – the right thing to do.

In that same spirit of obedience to the absurd,
Abraham says *'Here I am'*
And the boy Samuel in the Temple says *'speak Lord for your servant is listening'*
And Mary says to the angel: *'Be it unto me according to thy word'*.
Abraham is part of a long tradition of people who respond to God in faith,
No matter how ridiculous or absurd,
No matter how confused or frightened they are,
Because they trust in his love.
If Abraham had never left home.
If Samuel had gone back to sleep,
If Mary had said 'no'.
We would not remember them.
But by their faith they entered into the mystery of God,
Who is more other than we imagine,
Greater than we can understand,
More loving than we dare to believe.