

43. Images of Prayer in the Older Testament (Catechism n. 2568-2597)


The Primeval Narrative

The inspired stories of the primeval narratives explore the fundamental questions that intrigue the human mind, including: Who are we? Where do we come from? Why do we choose what is not good for us? Why do humans treat each other badly? They are also interested in the mysterious communion that we humans have with God.

In one scene we see God walking in the garden of Eden at the time of the evening breeze (Genesis 3:8). Man and Woman who would normally be there walking with God have just disobeyed God and so try to hide from him. Both Enoch and Noah are described as ‘walking with God’(Genesis 5:24 and 6:9).

Catechism n. 2569 reminds us: ‘This kind of prayer is lived by many righteous people in all religions’

1



Abraham and Isaac

Child sacrifice was not unknown in Israel (see 2Kings 16:3; Jeremiah 7:23), as in the surrounding cultures (see 2Kings 3:27). It is important to remember that the writers and the readers of this story knew that child sacrifice was absolutely forbidden by God (see Leviticus 18:21). They knew therefore that God could not command such a thing. Abraham lived before the Mosaic Law and so could be portrayed as thinking that God was asking such an obedience of him.

3



Abraham

In Lecture One we spoke of Rublev’s icon which depicts the three divine guests who were offered hospitality by Abraham and Sarah at the tent at Mamre (see Genesis 18; Catechism n. 2571).

The Catechism refers also to the scene in which Abraham thinks that God is asking him to sacrifice Isaac and shows his readiness to do God’s will whatever the cost (Genesis 22, see Catechism n. 2571). This story is a reflection on the nature of God and on what it means to believe.

2

The opening sentence lets us know that this is a test (22:1). Abraham’s obedience is immediate and unquestioning. Verse 12 assures us that Abraham passed the test, showing that he ‘feared God’(22:12). The only other text in the Torah that speaks of testing and fear together is Exodus 20:20: ‘God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin’. ‘Fear of God’ in this context (and generally in the Torah) means obedience that is based on profound respect and awe.

It is the perfect test, for Abraham is being asked to offer back to God the very one who is the only one through whom God’s promise to him can be realised: ‘your only son, whom you love, Isaac’(22:2). As the story goes, the sacrifice is to take place in ‘the land of Moriah’, that is to say on the site where the temple in Jerusalem will one day stand (see 2Chronicles 3:1). This is YHWH’s mountain (Psalm 24:3; Isaiah 2:3; Zechariah 8:3), the place where cult is to be performed (Deuteronomy 12:5).

Interestingly, the Samaritan Pentateuch locates this scene on Mount Gerizim (the site of the Samaritan temple).

4

Abraham sees the place of sacrifice 'on the third day'(22:4), that is to say on the day when the judgment of God will be revealed (see especially Exodus 19:11, 15, 16). Abraham commands the others to stay behind. He is going to worship God by offering to God the sacrifice God has commanded him to make, and he must go on alone with his son. Isaac carries the wood for the fire and Abraham carries the fire and the knife. He is in God's hands. If help is to come it can come only from God.

Abraham's faith is being tested, his faith in God's faithfulness. Verse 8 is the high point of Abraham's faith. With nothing to support him except his faith, he declares: 'God himself will provide'. The English 'provide' and 'providence' come from the Latin 'providere'(to see ahead). YHWH means 'I will be (for you)'.

Abraham trusts this.

5

God does provide – not a 'lamb' but a 'ram'. The sacrifice was that of a father, not a son. The author and the readers have known from the beginning that this must happen for they knew God's will from the Law. Abraham had only faith to guide him. He is offered here as a model of faith. Abraham names the place as a memorial of how God, whom he recognises as YHWH, because of his compassion looked on him in his distress and reached down to save him.

Gifts from God must be held with open hands. The whole Abraham saga has made it abundantly clear that Isaac is the child of promise through whom Abraham will be the father of Israel and of many nations. No matter how clear we think we are as to God's will for us, we can never contain God within our limited view. God must be free, and we will be free only when we are ready to let go even God's gifts when we are called by God to do so. We who have known Jesus should be all the more ready to do so when we remember with Paul: 'He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?(Romans 8:32).

7

It makes no sense to Abraham that God would ask him to give up Isaac, the very means that God has miraculously provided to carry out God's promises, but Abraham knows that: 'My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says YHWH. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts'(Isaiah 55:8-9).

We are not asked to have faith when God's will is seen by us to be reasonable. God is free. It is not for us to set the boundaries within which God must act. We are reminded of Jesus' unrelenting words: 'Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it'(Mark 8:35). To have faith is to 'Commit your way to YHWH; trust in him, and he will act'(Psalm 37:5). It is for Abraham to listen and obey, and to believe that 'God himself will provide'.

Abraham continues to obey till, at the last moment, YHWH calls him by name. Once again he is listening and ready to obey: 'Here I am'(22:11, see 22:1) – an attitude that carries over to his relationship with his son (see 22:7).

6

The promises repeated to Abraham in this scene have been repeated throughout the Abraham story from the opening verses (12:1-3, see 13:16; 15:5; 18:18). Here, as in Genesis chapter 17, the focus is on obedience. Blessing comes from God, but it requires human obedience.

We have a role to play. Blessings will happen 'because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son'(22:16), 'because you have obeyed my voice'(22:18). In the light of the destruction of Jerusalem and the experience of the exile, the authors are stressing to their contemporaries the need for them to keep their side of the 'covenant'.

Significantly the promise this time includes victory over Israel's enemies: 'your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies'(22:17).

8

This powerful scene is, as the opening verse makes clear, a test of Abraham's faith. At a deeper level it is a statement about God. Can we trust God to provide? It is interesting to listen to Jesus telling us how to pray. We are to pray confidently: 'Give us today the bread we really need'(Matthew 6:11). For God will provide (see Matthew 6:25-33; 7:11; 14:13-21; Ephesians 3:20-21). We are also to pray: 'Do not put us to the test'(Matthew 6:13).

Paul reminds us: 'God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it'(1Corinthians 10:13).

But we must never be complacent about our faith. It is likely that if it were tested we would be found wanting. Did not Jesus ask: 'when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?(Luke 18:8)? It is no simple thing to really believe.

9

The new wound, linked in verse 32 with a food law not found elsewhere in the Bible, concerns the 'thigh'. It is possible that the intended reference is to the genitals. The life that Jacob will hand on will always bear the marks of the struggle that he had this night on the borders of the Promised Land. We might recall Paul's words: 'YHWH said to me: My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness' (2Corinthians 12:9).

The new name is 'Israel'(32:28), linked here with the verb 'to struggle', and the word 'God'. His life and the life of the 'Israelites'(32:32) is one of constant struggle 'with God and with humans'. God will be with Israel, and so Israel will prevail. In the words of the prophet Hosea: 'Jacob strove with the messenger and prevailed'(Hosea 12:5).

This story speaks of prayer, which can often feel like a struggle with the mysterious God who is beyond our ken and beyond our control.

11

#### Jacob (Catechism n. 2573)

The Catechism refers to the strange story in which Jacob is alone at night, struggling with his 'demons' as he prepares to cross the Jabbok Gorge to enter the Promised Land (see Genesis 32:22-32). He never discovers the name of this being with whom he struggles all night long, and we never discover it either. This is how things are in the night. Jacob emerges from the struggle with a new wound (32:25), but also a new name (32:28), and a new 'blessing'(32:29), which can only mean a sharing in the strange 'divine' power of the one with whom he is struggling. The three belong together.

10

#### Moses (Catechism n. 2574-2577)

There are many stories about Moses that offer insights into prayer. On Mount Sinai, Moses sees a fire in a bush, but the bush is not consumed by it. He goes to investigate, and encounters God who tells him to remove his sandals, for he is on holy ground (Exodus 3:5). God introduces himself as the one who has observed the misery of his people in Egypt, has heard their cry and is determined to redeem them. He has chosen to do this through Moses. Moses wants to know God's name, but we cannot 'name' God. He must be content to know that God is with him – something he will discover only by stepping out in faith. The name YHWH is translated 'I am' or 'I will be'.

Moses resists God's call. He offers excuses. He questions the wisdom of his being asked, but finally he surrenders. The mission will succeed because it is God's mission, but Moses (like Abraham) will have to walk in faith. It will only be when he returns to the sacred mountain that he will see that God is, indeed, with him.

12

Another story (Exodus 17:8-12) highlights the efficacy of intercession. The Bedouin Amalekites attack the camp of the Israelites. Joshua is leading the defense.

Moses is on the mountain with one arm raised to God in prayer and the other holding the staff over the battlefield. Aaron and Hur are supporting him and Joshua prevails.

13

Moses' prayer is portrayed as being attentive: waiting on God to reveal his will:

'The cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of YHWH filled the tabernacle ... Whenever the cloud was taken up from the tabernacle, the Israelites would set out on each stage of their journey; but if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out until the day that it was taken up. For the cloud of YHWH was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, before the eyes of all the house of Israel at each stage of their journey.' (Exodus 40:34-38).

15

The intimacy of Moses' communion with God is expressed in the following text: 'Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of YHWH settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of YHWH was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights'(Exodus 24:15-18).

Nowhere is this intimate contemplation better expressed than in the following statements: 'YHWH used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend'(Exodus 33:11). 'Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth : YHWH said: "Hear my words: When there are prophets among you, I, YHWH, make myself known to them in visions; I speak to them in dreams. Not so with my servant Moses; he is entrusted with all my house. With him I speak face to face – clearly, not in riddles; and he beholds the form of YHWH"'(Numbers 12:3-7).

14

Samuel (Catechism n. 2578)

As a young boy attending the high priest Eli in the sanctuary, Samuel hears God calling him, but does not recognize that it is God. This happens a number of times, till finally, Eli says to Samuel: 'Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, YHWH, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. Now YHWH came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening.'"(1Samuel 3:9-10).

16

Elijah (Catechism n. 2583)

There is a marvellous story about the prophet Elijah. He is full of zeal, but wants to 'see' God, so he journeys through the wilderness to Mount Sinai. Hoping to encounter God there where Moses encountered him. He is expecting God to reveal himself in something powerful, but is in for a surprise:

'Elijah went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, YHWH, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. The angel of YHWH came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.

17

At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of YHWH came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He answered, "I have been very zealous for YHWH, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before YHWH, for YHWH is about to pass by."

Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before YHWH, but YHWH was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but YHWH was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but YHWH was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave'(1Kings 19:4-13).

18

The Psalms (Catechism n. 2585-2589)

• see my commentary: 'The Psalms: an introductory commentary' (Chevalier Press 2005).

Also the following quote from 'Yielding to Love' Chapter 12, pages 121-122 on the Prayer of the Church, which is structured around the Psalms:

'Knowing how helpful prepared prayers can be, the Church offers us prayers that help us as a community to celebrate the Mass and the various sacraments. We are also invited to join our Christian brothers and sisters in offering morning and evening prayer as well as prayer for other times of the day. This is sometimes called the Prayer of the Hours or the Divine Office. It is a structured form of prayer, which includes hymns, psalms, Scripture readings and prayers of petition.

19

In promulgating the new form of the Divine Office in 1970, Pope Paul VI wrote:

"Christian prayer is primarily the prayer of the entire community of humankind joined to Christ himself. Each individual has his or her part in this prayer which is common to the one Body, and it thus becomes the voice of the Beloved Spouse of Christ, putting into words the wishes and desires of the whole Christian people and making intercession for the necessities common to all humankind. It obtains its unity from the heart of Christ himself. Our Redeemer, as he himself had entered into life through his prayer and sacrifice, wished that this should not cease throughout the ages in his Mystical Body, the Church, and so the official Prayer of the Church is at the same time the very prayer which Christ himself together with his Body addresses to the Father. Thus, when the Divine Office is said, our voices re-echo in Christ and his voice in us."

20

In his commentary on the writings of Teresa, Father Marie-Eugène writes: “Liturgical prayer, like every other prayer, is to be vivified by interior prayer. If the external movement that it imposes, the art that it cultivates, the sustained attention that it requires, should hinder or even destroy the contemplation that it is meant to serve, the devotion that it should stimulate, or the interior spirit that it wants to express, it would be mere external worship that God could not accept, according to the words of Scripture: ‘These people honour me with their lips, but their heart is far from me’ (Isaiah 29:13, quoted by Jesus in Mark 7:6). The beginner must learn to pray with the Church, to enter into the majestic beauty of her ceremonies, to penetrate their symbolism and delight in her liturgical texts. We must above all seek in liturgical prayer the movements of the soul of Christ in the Church, listening to the movements of his Spirit of Love, and so learn in the school of Jesus Christ our Master his daily intimate and silent prayer”(*I want to see God* page 191).

Prayer is an essential element of many of the stories of the Older Testament. We have offered here a small sample to illustrate the centrality of prayer in the spirituality of the people into whom Jesus was born.

Let us now look at Jesus’ Prayer as we find it in the Newer Testament.