

## Second Sunday of Lent

Today's First Reading is one of the most remarkable stories in the Hebrew Scriptures. The people of Israel look back to the Patriarch Abraham as their father in faith. God promised him that he would be the father of many nations. Even though he was a very old man and his wife Sarah was well beyond child-bearing age, Abraham believed that God would keep his promise. Incomprehensibly his wife did become pregnant and they had a boy, Isaac. This is the Isaac of today's narrative, Abraham's beloved and only son. It must have seemed obvious to Abraham that this son, born miraculously, was the one through whom God intended to carry out his promise.

In the ancient world, there were some who thought that, to appease the gods, it was sometimes necessary to take the life of a child. We may be familiar with the ancient Greek story of the fall of Troy, some six or seven hundred years after Abraham. When the winds were not favourable for the Greek fleet, the king Agamemnon killed his daughter Iphigenia, to win over the gods. Similar ideas existed in the world to which Abraham belonged. As our story begins, Abraham thinks that this is the kind of action that God requires of him. He thinks that God is testing him to be sure that Abraham's trust is really in God. At the close of the story we find that this is not, in fact, the case. God stays Abraham's hand to make the point that God is not like the gods of the pagans. The God of Abraham wants life, not death.

However, the key to the story lies elsewhere. Even though Abraham is mistaken, the fact is that he thinks that God is asking him to sacrifice his beloved son, and, in spite of the fact that God gave him Isaac precisely in order that Abraham would be who God wanted him to be, once Abraham judges that God wants him to offer his son in sacrifice, he is willing to do so. It is a story of faith at its extreme. Abraham is willing to give up the very means that God has given him in order to carry out his mission from God. He is willing to do so because he trusts in God and not in God's gifts.

The story is shocking and we find it impossible to put ourselves in Abraham's place. It is its extreme nature and the powerful poignancy of the father-son relationship that makes this story unforgettable – and the point being made is as valid today as it was then. Do we cling to God in faith, or do we cling to God's gifts? When we pray is it our desire to be with God, or to enjoy the feeling of being close to God? Do we want only what God wants, or do we like to feel useful and to succeed in spiritual as well as other matters? Are we ready to let go when God calls us to let go – of people, of places, of security, of past graces, of health, of life itself? How deep is our trust in God?

In a Christian set

ting the story has been used as an image of God's willingness to give up his only Son, the one closest to God's heart, in order to win us back to his love. This can be and has been terribly misused, as though God somehow demanded a sacrifice and would accept us back only if Jesus paid the proper price. This horrible image of God is not the one I am suggesting here. It is better to listen to Jesus himself as he tells a parable about an owner of a vineyard who sent his servants to collect the produce owed to him. The servants were treated shamefully and killed. We are meant to think of the treatment given to the prophets. Jesus goes on to speak of the owner's beloved son. Jesus is referring to himself in terms taken from the story of Abraham and Isaac: 'The owner finally sent his beloved son to them, saying: "Surely they will respect my

son!” (Mark 12:6).

As we know, they did not respect God’s beloved Son. Because there was no room in their hearts for God’s Word, they had him crucified. It was not God who demanded his Son’s death; it was those who refused to welcome him. The point is that God so wanted to convince us of his love that, like Abraham, he was willing to put even his only Son at risk. Abraham was willing to hand his beloved and only son over to God, trusting God. God proved worthy of his trust. God was willing to hand his beloved and only son over to us. We proved unworthy of the trust God placed in us. But, as Saint Paul says, quoting from an early Christian hymn: ‘If we are faithless, he remains faithful – for God cannot deny himself’ (2Timothy 2:13).

It was not God who abandoned Jesus it was the religious leaders and those who obeyed them. This time there was no one to stay the hand of the executioner. The Responsorial Psalm picks up the theme of how precious to God was his beloved Son who kept faith with God and with us, and who willingly gave his life even when it seemed that his mission from God would fail. He entrusted his life into the hands of his Father.

In the Second Reading, Paul recalls God’s amazing love: ‘God did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for us. Will God not also give us with him everything else?’ (Romans 8:32). We are here at the heart of the Gospel. Our own sins, our own mistakes, our own pettiness and the poverty of our love, as well as the way some other people think of us and treat us, makes it easy for any of us to wonder if we really are worth loving. Sometimes, when people say they love us, we wonder if they would still love us if they really knew us as we know ourselves. The message of Jesus is that God really does love us, more than a parent or a grandparent. In fact it is this unconditional love – if only we would really believe it – that gives us the motivation and the energy to become the kind of loving person God wants us to be. God placed his dearly beloved Son in our hands. What more could he do to demonstrate his trust and his love. Surely we must believe that God will give us all we need to counter the negative influences in our lives and to learn to love, each of us in our own individual way, as best we can.

The Gospel, too, focuses on Jesus as God’s beloved Son. It is to Jesus we must listen, for the Law represented by Moses, and the Prophets represented by Elijah, have fulfilled their role. When the disciples look up, Moses and Elijah are no longer there ‘but only Jesus’. Jesus has just told his close friends, for the first time, of the dangers that lie ahead for him. He has just told them that, if they want to be his disciples they must be ready to give their lives for what they believe. The transfiguration scene is God’s statement that Jesus is right. It is a foretaste of the resurrection. Whatever might happen to Jesus God will never abandon him. Jesus will know a deep peace in his soul and he will always experience a profound communion with the very source of his being. Yes, he, like us, will suffer and be misunderstood. He will feel abandoned. But Jesus knew in faith that God would never let him go. This enabled Jesus to cling to God in love. Jesus wants us to know that God offers each of us a similar assurance – a grace of intimate communion to strengthen us during our trials.

God has made wonderful promises to us by the very fact that we have received life. Trust this truth, and we will find the courage not to cling to anything or to anyone so tightly that we are not willing to let them go when God calls us to do so. Do not fear that God wants us to be unhappy, or that he is playing games with us. Jesus came, as he said, that we might find life and

live it to the full. Whatever accidents may happen to us in this uncertain world, one thing is certain. We are made for love and for a love that lasts eternally. Jesus trusted that this is so and the Transfiguration is God's assurance to him and to us that Jesus is right. Let us place our lives trustingly in God's loving care.

For God alone my soul waits in silence;  
from God comes my salvation.  
God alone is my rock and my salvation,  
my fortress; I shall never be shaken ...

Trust in God at all times;  
pour out your heart before him;  
God is a refuge for us.