



Second Sunday of Lent March 4, 2012 B

A demand from God that enrages us?

In this Sunday's first reading, God says to Abraham: *"Take your son Isaac, your only one, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah. There you shall offer him up as a holocaust on a height that I will point out to you"* (Gen.22).

The Colledgeville Bible Commentary states: *"This story is one of the great masterpieces of narrative writing in the Bible. We are drawn from the very beginning of the story and held in suspense until an angel intervenes. We are left to imagine Abraham's inner thoughts as he makes the fifty-mile trip to Mount Moriah. We feel the silence as father and son walk together, coming closer with each step to that moment of ultimate decision"* (p.60).

The story is a clever one in that it sets out with a message that is completely opposite what it hopes to leave the listener to conclude. It starts by leading us to believe that God sanctions human sacrifice, but in actual fact one key message of the story is that human sacrifice is *abhorrent* to God.

When God asked Abraham to take his only son, Isaac, and sacrifice him, it makes us cry out: *Stop! This is wrong.* But Abraham lived amongst people who believed in offering human sacrifice to their gods. So what God asked of Abraham was not that unusual in those times. When the angel appeared and told Abraham not to kill Isaac, it was God saying to Abraham: *The people around you may believe that their gods demand human sacrifice, but I don't. In fact, I don't condone it and I don't want you nor your descendants to engage in such a horrific act.*

Killing in the name of God

Going up the mountain, Abraham was convinced that he was going to kill another human being in God's name. Coming down the mountain, he understood that it was wrong kill in the name of God. Going up the mountain, he belonged to God.

Most, if not all, parents may think their children belong to them, and they do in a sense but in point of fact, they belong to God.

Sadly, killing in the name of God has been widely practiced down the ages. Even in our own day, there are people who kill for religious reasons, in the belief that they are honoring God. Yigal Amir, who shot Yitzhak Rabin in October 1995, was a Jewish religious fundamentalist. The Palestinian suicide bombers, who from time to time have struck at Israel, killing innocent men, women and children, were Muslim fundamentalists. Suicide bombers believe that they are killing in God's name. Paul Hill, who killed a doctor and a bodyguard outside a Florida abortion clinic in 1994, was a former Presbyterian minister. These are but a few examples.

A message about trust in God

The second message that today's first reading seeks to convey is one of Abraham's absolute faith and trust. When God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son, he obeyed ungrudgingly. Being a man of faith, Abraham believed God knew what he was doing. He never questioned: *Why, God, are you asking this of me?* Rather, his response was predicated on faith and trust. Of course, it is only human that we ask why, but in the end what saves the day for us is not answers but faith in a God who knows what he is doing even though it makes no sense to us.

It is apparent that our first reading has two layers of meaning. The first seeks to condemn human sacrifice while the second aims to hold up for us a model of faith—one who is willing to give back to God his most cherished gift.

In his book of meditations on the Lenten readings, Fr. Emeric Lawrence, O.S.B., tells this story of a sister at the shrine of St. Anne de Beaupre in Quebec.

[The sister saw] a distraught mother carrying a tiny child, and she went to meet her. The woman had come a great distance with the child, the only one she would ever have, she thought, and now he had an affliction which the doctors said was incurable. The only hope was a miracle, and she had brought the child to St. Anne's shrine to pray for that. The sister accompanied the mother to the shrine.

"As we prayed," the sister said, "I witnessed the struggle and rebellion of this woman refusing to give up her child. Her sorrow was terrible to see. Yet the miracle came. But it came to the mother, not the child. When she left I knew that she had offered the child back to God and had surrendered him as a gift. A few weeks later I received word that the child had died. But the following Christmas there came a card with the picture of a beautiful baby boy whom the mother had called Michael, the same name she had given to the first son. And the mother wrote: 'Now I have a son Michael in heaven and a son Michael to give me joy on earth.'"

The story well illustrates today's readings. Being a Christian means being willing to offer back to God what is nearest and dearest to us—as Abraham did, as God the Father did, as the woman in the story did. No one, least of all Jesus himself, ever said that being a disciple is easy. What is dearest to us may be a human person, a relative, a friend—or it may just be an old way of life, a profession, or just our opinions and prejudices, our own will. Whatever it is that we give back to God makes us victims like Isaac, like Christ, like little Michael. But it also makes us priests like Abraham, like the Father, and like the mother in the story (p.48).

Parallel between Isaac and Jesus

Just as the waters of the Flood prefigured the waters of Baptism, Isaac prefigures Christ. Fr. Lawrence writes:

The parallel between Isaac and Jesus is perfect. Both are the well-beloved and only-sons of their fathers. Both carry the wood on which they are to be slain. Both are innocent. Both are willing to die freely, out of love. What we can only try to imagine is the anguish that rends the hearts of the fathers at the prospect of seeing their sons sacrificed. Parents who lose a child through death, sickness, or drugs have some idea of the feeling of Abraham and the Father almighty.

Reflection questions

- What was the toughest thing God ever asked you to let go of?
- To what extent do we tend to believe that all that we have is ours versus the "stewardship principle" that all belongs to God. We own nothing. Everything, including our children, are only on loan to us.
- Who or what are the "Isaacs" that we tightly hold on to as if they belonged to us? What would it cost us, or what would it take for us to say: *Ok, God, this is yours, I surrender him/her/it to you.*

Prayers for the Journey

Recently, I put together a book of miscellaneous prayers written by known and unknown people. The following are two of the prayers:

To be Filled with God

O Divine One,
to thee I raise my whole being,
a vessel emptied of self.

O Accept, gracious God,
this my emptiness, and so fill me
with thyself, thy light, thy love, thy life.

That these thy precious gifts may radiate
through me and overflow the chalice of
my heart into the hearts of all those with
whom I come in contact this day,
revealing unto them the beauty of thy joy
and wholeness and the serenity of thy
peace, which nothing can destroy.

Amen.

Prayer for a Giving Heart

I do not know how long I'll live,
but while I live, Lord, let me give
some comfort to someone in need
by smile or nod, kind word or deed.

And let me do whatever I can
to ease things for my fellow man.

I want nothing but to do my part
to lift a tired or weary heart,
to change folks from frowns to smiles
again—then I will not have lived in vain.

And I'll not care how long I'll live,
if I can give—and give—and give.

Have a blessed week,

Le Sarah