WHY WOULD GOD ASK ABRAHAM TO SACRIFICE HIS SON TO HIM?

Reflection for the Second Sunday of Lent, Cycle B

In a way, today's first reading is a shocking and disturbing story because in it we read about God demanding that Abraham sacrifice his *only* son, the son on which future legacy rested in. The story could leave us with a very disturbing image of God. The story is a clever one in that it sets out in the opposite direction to that in which it hopes to leave the listener. It starts out by leading us to believe that God believes in human sacrifice, but in actual fact one key message of the story is that human sacrifice is *abhorrent* to God.

When God asks Abraham to take his only son, Isaac, and sacrifice him, we want to 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 for the times he lived in. When the angel appeared and told Abraham not to kill Isaac, it was God saying to Abraham "The people around you may think their gods demand human sacrifice, but I don't. In fact, I hate the idea and I do not want you nor your descendents to do this."

Killing in the name of God

Going up the mountain, Abraham believed that he was going to kill another human being in God's name. Coming down the mountain, he knew that it was wrong to "kill another in God's name".

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 beliefs and who think that in doing so 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. Paul Hill, who killed a doctor and 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 was willing to obey. Being a man of faith, Abraham believed God knew what he was doing. His response was not one of : *Why God are you asking this of me?* Rather, his response was one of faith. Of course, it is human for us to ask the why questions, 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.

So our first reading is one with two layers of meaning: One seeks to condemn human sacrifice. The second one seeks to hold up for us a model of faith, one who was 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 woman at the shrine of St. Anne de Beaupre in Quebec who 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.

Reflection Questions

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

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