

## The sacrifice of Isaac 3-1-15 (Lindsay)

The story of Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac is one of the most puzzling in the entire Bible. It is difficult because it is hard to square with both Jewish and Christian ethics. There was nothing Jews were more opposed to and adamantly against than human sacrifice, let alone sacrificing child that is your own. This story is a problem because Abraham is commanded to do something that is contrary to all Judeo-Christian worship. Some have argued that this story testifies to Abraham's detachment from any ruling passion other than love of God. Kierkegaard says in an essay that Abraham is a 'knight of faith' that has to sacrifice not only his son but his ethical ideals for God's sake. Maimonides (the great Jewish philosopher) said that it was a test case of the extreme limits of the love and fear God rightfully demands.

But Paul Johnson points out that this story makes perfect sense to a historian because Abraham came from a legal tradition that said it was mandatory to seal a covenant or a contract with an animal sacrifice. Since Abraham's covenant with God was of such importance, a mere animal sacrifice wouldn't do, Abraham had to sacrifice what he loved most in the world, his son. I think this is the correct interpretation. God stopped the sacrifice, but because Abraham was willing to obey God, even in this, then the sacrifice was binding even though it wasn't carried out. Everything a human

being has is from God and is returnable to Him, as we are reminded every time we attend a funeral.

But note something in the story you may not have noticed or thought didn't have any significance. At the beginning of the story God speaks directly to Abraham telling him to offer up Isaac as a holocaust, or burnt offering. When the command is rescinded it isn't God who speaks, but a messenger usually depicted as an angel in paintings. Even when God spoke directly to Abraham, Abraham didn't see God, he only heard God's voice. We don't know if the voice was audible or not, but God Himself wasn't visible. Another thing is that in all other encounters with God Abraham bargains or haggles with God. It is curious that in this incident he doesn't.

So, when does God become visible? Of course, when He becomes a man, Jesus. The Incarnation is the fulfillment of God's revelation for the reason that Jesus tells us that if you have seen Him you have seen the Father. There is no reason to seek further for God the Father, because we have seen the Son.

Now, of course this story came to be seen by the early Church fathers as a pre-figuring of Jesus being God's Son who was not spared, but the horrible sacrifice being carried out in all its horror. Isaac was spared, Jesus

was not. So God went further than even the man who obeyed Him even being willing to kill his own son, Abraham.

Now, what can we do to emulate Abraham? It is our highest duty in this world to try and be faithful to God's commandments in all things. Are we going to be successful all the time? Unfortunately not. All human experience teaches us that we are prone to failure, sometimes spectacular failure. We fall so far from what would should be that the ideal of what we should be isn't even visible. We despair of even trying. But the lesson of Lent is different. Even though it is a penitential time, a somber time, we are told by the Church to get up, dust ourselves off and try again. God hasn't written us off, even if we have written ourselves off. The idea of 'total depravity' as taught by some Protestant denominations is false. None of us, no matter how bad we have been is totally depraved, a lost cause. St Thomas Aquinas said that even the worst person could be worse. Why? Because that person has the option, the free will to not sin in the future. Or the option to sin some more. It is up to you.

But be optimistic. You are not doomed to failure. Through repentance, through prayer, through God's grace you can start anew with a soul made clean through the Sacraments.