

The test of Abraham

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 2nd July 2023 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Genesis 22:1-19 (Proper 8)

The ultimate test

What is the most difficult decision you have ever had to make? What made it so difficult? And, looking back, did you get it right?

In today's episode of the story of Abraham, our hero comes to his most difficult test: God asks him to offer his son Isaac as a burnt offering – a human sacrifice.

The very thought of killing your child as a human sacrifice is horrific and offensive to us. And it is made worse by the fact that in the story it is not Abraham's idea, but God's. Doesn't this just prove all that the New Atheists are saying about the barbarity of religion? If this is the sort of God we Christians believe in, then the sooner we ditch the whole thing, the better!

So, having acknowledged our feelings about the basis for the plot, let's look at it in context. Nowhere in the Bible is human sacrifice accepted or condoned. One time it happens is in the book of Judges, where Jephthah makes a rash promise to God, that if he will grant him success against the enemy Ammonites, he will sacrifice the first thing that comes to meet him when he gets home. And, tragically, when Jephthah returns after his military success, his daughter runs out to greet him. The folly of his vow is

evident, and the death of Jephthah's daughter gives rise to an annual ceremony of lament.¹

Child sacrifice seems to have been practised by some Canaanite religions, especially in the worship of the Ammonite god Molech², and is especially forbidden in Leviticus³. A strong condemnation of child sacrifice is also given by the prophet Jeremiah⁴.

But in the context of Abraham's time, perhaps the question is this: if other people are willing to sacrifice their children to their gods, wouldn't Abraham be willing to show his devotion to *his* God by doing the same?

Of course, we know from the beginning of the chapter that God has no intention of letting Abraham sacrifice his son. And God's angel quickly intervenes as soon as Abraham picks up the knife⁵.

The meaning of the story

Like many other stories in the Old Testament we have to lay aside our objections to God testing Abraham in this way in order to explore what the story means. And it's a story that has been commented on over the centuries by a huge range of people from Jewish rabbis, Christian commentators, the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard up to the Canadian psychologist and speaker Jordan Peterson. It also features in

¹ Judges 11:29-40

² 2 Kings 16:3, 17:17,31, 21:6, 23:10

³ Leviticus 18:21, 20:2-5

⁴ Jeremiah 19:4-5, 32:35

⁵ Genesis 22:11-12

the Koran, and is celebrated in the festival of Eid al-Adha⁶, which has just taken place this last week – although in the Muslim version of the story, it is Ishmael, Abraham’s son by Hagar, who is nearly sacrificed⁷. And it has been illustrated by many artists, such as the painters Caravaggio and Rembrandt⁸.

The narrator introduces the story by explaining that this was a test that God gave to Abraham⁹. It’s not as though Abraham’s faith hasn’t been tested enough since he was first called to leave Haran in chapter 12. But this is the ultimate test, and I’m grateful to a book by the Baptist preacher and writer F.B Meyer for my three headings.¹⁰

And the first is this: **a test of love.**

“Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt-offering.”¹¹

In the last chapter, Abraham had been forced to send away his first-born, Ishmael. Now he is left with Isaac, the son God had promised to give him through his wife Sarah, the child Abraham and Sarah had waited 25 years for. God acknowledges that this is the son “whom you love”. And God

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eid_al-Adha

⁷ Koran 37:99-111

⁸ https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sacrifice_of_Isaac-Caravaggio_%28Uffizi%29.jpg;
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sacrifice_of_Isaac_%28Caravaggio%29#/media/File:Sacrifice_of_Isaac-Caravaggio_\(c._1603\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sacrifice_of_Isaac_%28Caravaggio%29#/media/File:Sacrifice_of_Isaac-Caravaggio_(c._1603).jpg) ;
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Sacrifice_of_Isaac_%28Rembrandt%29#/media/File:Rembrandt_The_Sacrifice_of_Abraham.jpg

⁹ Genesis 22:1

¹⁰ F.B. Meyer *Abraham: the Obedience of Faith* (1890), chapter 21

¹¹ Genesis 22:2 NRSV

is asking Abraham to give him up. This is not a test of Abraham's love for Isaac – that is not in doubt. It is a test of *Abraham's love for God* – this God who has called him, guided him, protected him and prospered him. This is the God who has confided his plans to Abraham one-to-one, the God who elsewhere in the Bible calls Abraham his friend, the God who had promised him a great legacy. How much does Abraham love God?

How much do *we* love God? Do we know him as a loving Father, who made us and saw us growing in our mother's womb¹², knows us intimately, cares about the small details of our lives as well as our eternal destiny? More than that, this is the God who "so loved the world that he gave his only Son"¹³. Indeed, Paul refers to this story in his letter to the Romans, where he says that God "did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us"¹⁴ – words that echo Abraham's willingness not to withhold his only son, Isaac¹⁵.

Our response to God's love for us is to love him "with all our heart, soul, mind and strength". And one test of our love is what we're willing to give up – or sacrifice – for him. God would never ask us to make the sacrifice he demands from Abraham in this story. But following Jesus does involve making sacrifices.

Perhaps the biggest sacrifice of all is our independence. Instead of being the boss of our own lives, doing what *we*

¹² Psalm 139:13-16; Jeremiah 1:5

¹³ John 3:16

¹⁴ Romans 8:32

¹⁵ Genesis 22:16

want and living according to the values we choose for ourselves, Jesus calls us to align our way of thinking, our priorities in life and our lifestyle with the values of his Kingdom. Discipleship is about making choices: how we conduct our relationships, how we spend our time and our money, whether we try to live in a way that brings glory to God or just suit ourselves. In our society people tend to think that true happiness and fulfilment come from being the person you want to be, being “true to yourself”, achieving whatever you want to achieve. This is all about “me first”, others second, and God last if at all. Jesus says true happiness and fulfilment come from putting things the other way round.

What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?¹⁶

Rather, according to Jesus, we find our “very self”, our soul, our true identity by loving God and following Jesus.

I think many Christians don’t experience the joy of being a disciple of Jesus because they are holding something back. There’s some areas of life they’re not willing to fully surrender to Jesus. Think of it this way: imagine your life is a house, with different rooms representing parts of your life – your family, your work, your leisure time and hobbies, your financial planning, your inner thoughts. Is there a room that you wouldn’t want Jesus to come into? Are you afraid that he might want to change something in that room? Would you be willing to let him do that?

¹⁶ Luke 9:25 NIV

I hadn't expected to spend so long on this first point – the test of Abraham's love. But actually love is what motivates us. We will do anything for someone we love. And Abraham was willing to give up his beloved Isaac if God asked him to, because he loved God more.

A test of faith

Being asked to sacrifice his son was also a supreme test of faith – because God had said that it was through Isaac that he would fulfil his promise to give Abraham as many descendants as the stars in the sky. If Abraham and Sarah's faith in God's promise had been tested while they were still childless, how much more would Abraham's faith be tested when God asked him to kill the very son who was the key to the promise coming true? It made no sense at all.

God doesn't always lead us through familiar ground – sometimes his way is through uncharted territory. This was true for Abraham, and it is sometimes true for us. God gives us a sense of what his plans are for us, whether as individuals or as a church, but the situation we face seems to make the fulfilment of God's plans impossible. In this situation, will we trust God to lead us, to provide what we need to carry out his will? The writer of the letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament sees Abraham's successes as resulting from his willingness to trust God – even if that meant guessing that God would bring Isaac back from the dead.¹⁷

A test of obedience

¹⁷ Hebrews 11:17-19

This story is also about a test of obedience. True faith isn't just an intellectual belief that something is possible. James explains this when he writes about Abraham showing his faith by what he *did*:

Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.¹⁸

In other words, Abraham was told to sacrifice Isaac and *he obeyed*. Obeying God doesn't sound a very attractive proposition in our culture. It goes back to what I was saying earlier about our independence. We'd like to think of God as being there for *us*, our guide, our provider, our support. But God is also the ruler of the universe. We are part of his Kingdom, and Jesus tells us to seek his Kingdom and his righteousness first, and then God will provide.¹⁹

Do we *love* God enough to obey him? Do we *trust* God enough to obey him? Are we willing to give up our own way in order to live *his* way?

Sometimes it might seem as if God is demanding too big a sacrifice. That must be how it seemed to Abraham. But in the end, he didn't lose Isaac – God provided a ram for the burnt offering. Abraham didn't know how God was going to solve the problem which he seemed to have created. We also may not see how God could possibly solve the problems we face. For example, it might seem like a big risk to start putting his Kingdom first in our financial giving, by tithing our

¹⁸ James 2:21-22 NIV

¹⁹ Matthew 6:33

income and making a realistic contribution to the church and other charities. It might seem like a big ask to volunteer our time to visit people who are lonely, or to offer a lift to someone who can't get to church. Or perhaps we have a guilty pleasure that we know is bad for us and is dishonouring to God, and we find it difficult to give it up. But if we do, God will replace it with the joy of living wholeheartedly for him.

Whatever sacrifice God may be asking you to make, please be assured that you can only be happier and more fulfilled if you say "yes" to him, and obey what he is asking you to do. Whatever we give up, or take up, for the love of God, God will reward us. We will have the joy of knowing that we are in the centre of his will. We will have a new assurance of his love for us, and we will enjoy his blessings. As the angel promised to Abraham:

'I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you'.²⁰

Are you ready to show your love for God and your faith in God, by obeying God? Abraham's story could be our story. Loving God, trusting God and obeying God are the way to receiving the blessings of God. Are we willing to say "yes" to God?

²⁰ Genesis 22:16-17 NIV

Appendix: some further thoughts:

Ancient rabbinic commentators have speculated that Isaac, rather than being a boy who is old enough to carry the wood but innocently and trustingly asks his father where the lamb is, is an adult who willingly agrees to be sacrificed. In this way he becomes a type of later Jewish martyrs, e.g. those who refused to give up their faith in the time of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, as recounted in the Books of Maccabees.

Christian commentators have seen Isaac as the type of Christ. Like Isaac, Jesus carried the wood that would be used for his own sacrifice – the cross.

And as alluded to in the sermon above, Paul copies the language of the angel “Because you... have not withheld your son, your only son” when he says that God “did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us”²¹. But whereas Isaac was spared death when a ram was substituted, Jesus was not spared – he was like the ram who was offered in place of Isaac, the Lamb of God who died in our place.

²¹ Genesis 22:15, cp Romans 8:32