

Sunday 31 March, 2019

A sermon preached by the Dean, The Very Revd Dr Andreas Loewe, at the installation of the inaugural Canon Missioner of St Paul's Cathedral, the Revd Canon Robert Vun, on the fourth Sunday of Lent, 2019.

Readings: Genesis 22.1-14, Luke 23.1-25

At the heart of our ministry here at St Paul's Cathedral stands a vision of people's lives transformed through their encounter with God. Tonight we give thanks that Canon Robert Vun has answered the call to share with my colleagues and me in showing forth the life-changing love of God in this place. Tonight's readings each point to that transformational love God has for us: they invite us to place our trust in God's sovereignty and his provision. They remind us that we may stand firm not because of anything that we ourselves accomplish, but because God stands with us. They assure us that it is because of God's sacrifice of his own firstborn son that we are given new life, and they charge us to make visible that life among others in response to God's goodness.

Our first lesson, from the Book Genesis, describes a pivotal moment in the life of God's people: God calls his servant Abraham to give up his Son Isaac in sacrifice in order to test Abraham's faithfulness and steadfastness. In the preceding chapter of Genesis we read how Abraham had already sent away his firstborn son by his servant Hagar, Ishmael, into the desert fully expecting Ishmael and his mother to die there of thirst. We read how an angel of the Lord guided Hagar to a desert spring, how she and the boy sustained life in the paucity of the desert, how the boy grew up in the wilderness and himself became a 'great nation,' just as God had promised. We are not told whether Abraham knew that his firstborn son survived, even thrived, because of God's intervention. We do not know whether Abraham knew that Ishmael would become the forebear of a great nation. What we *do* know is that God tested Abraham by commanding him to send away his second son, Isaac, as well. The child he had with Sarah, who against the odds had borne a son in her old age. The son whom she named *Yishaq*, 'he will laugh', because 'God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me'.

God seems to be prepared to turn that laughter into mourning to test Abraham's steadfastness. He calls him 'go forth and take your son, your only remaining son Isaac, whom you love and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt-offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you'. God calls Abraham in the same words in which he had called him once to leave behind his possessions, his homeland and parents' home, in Ur in Chaldea, and go to an unknown land that God

would show him. A land in which he would become a great nation. And now, in the same words God calls him to give up as a burnt-offering the only remaining child he has, give up the only hope he has to fulfil the vision God gave him when he first called him. Sacrificing Isaac means an end to God's plan, which was for Abraham to be the forefather of God's people. Sacrificing Isaac means an end to God's own vision. And yet God commands that Abraham give up his only child: the hope of attaining the future of offspring as multitudinous as the sand on the seashore.

When Abraham sent away Hagar and her son Ishmael, he did so at the behest of his wife Sarah, in her full knowledge. When God commands Abraham to take away Isaac, Sarah's delight, he does so behind her back. He himself undertakes the duties otherwise accomplished by servants – saddling the donkey, cutting the firewood for the sacrifice, and setting out on the journey – rises early in the morning leaving his wife entirely in the dark. When they reach the mountains that God had shown him, they leave behind the two trusted manservants as well. Isaac himself becomes the beast of burden, carrying the wood for his own sacrifice. As they approach the place of sacrifice, Isaac asks, 'Where is the lamb for the burnt-offering'. And Abraham evades the truthful answer – which would have been: 'you are' – and instead tells his son, 'God himself will provide a lamb for a burnt-offering, my son'. Or, more pointedly, in Hebrew: 'my son God will provide himself for a burnt offering'. God had given him Isaac, and God would now take him away again, as an offering in obedience. And Abraham proceeds to bind his son, and raises the knife to kill him, when God stays his hand.

God does indeed provide his own sacrifice. A ram caught in a thicket is sacrificed in worship of the God who demands obedience to his commands, obedience that is tested again and again throughout life. And Abraham is told that the binding of his son had been a test of his faithfulness to follow where God called, and is told that God now knows him to stand in fear and faith of him. In the verses immediately following our reading God reaffirms his vision for Abraham to become a great nation through Isaac and his other children, and Abraham names the place of revelation that God demands of us obedience, not blood sacrifices *Adonai Yireh* – 'the Lord will provide'. God will provide his own sacrifice. And because Hebrew is a language that, like English, loves wordplay, the same consonants can also spell out 'The Lord appears / will be seen'. God makes himself known on the mountaintop as a God who tests the faithfulness of those who profess to follow his command, and then freely grants them what he demands of them. God grants life and a renewed vision to Abraham, and his faithfulness is reckoned as blessing: 'all the nations of the earth shall gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice', God swears to Abraham. And does not test him again. God desires obedient service, the sacrifice of self, not our own blood sacrifice or the sacrifice of our children, our lesson affirms.

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The same mountain on which Abraham was prepared to give up his own son in order to prove his faithful obedience to God, is the place that for the writer of our psalms symbolises God's eternal presence among his people. It is one of the 'hills about Jerusalem' that stand as firm as 'the Lord stands around his people, from this time forth for evermore'. The mountain on which the Lord has provided his own sacrifice is an everlasting monument to God's faithful fulfilment of his oath to Abraham, 'helping his servant Israel and remembering his mercy ... forever'. God will shield those who trust in him from harm: 'the sceptre of unrighteousness will not come to the lot of the just'. Those who turn from their pledge to follow God, who 'turn unto their own wickedness', our psalm writer knows, 'the Lord shall lead out with the evildoers, but peace shall be upon Israel'. As long as God's people remember the covenant God made with Abraham, the oath he reaffirmed when Abraham bound his own son, they will receive God's mercy and protection. The mountains of Jerusalem are not strong in themselves, but they are the place where the Lord appears and provides his own sacrifice. When God makes his own sacrifice, those who trust in him will live securely, 'from generation to generation'.

The way in which God fulfils his promise of mercy and protection is not by taking our lives or the lives of our children. But by giving up his own Son, Jesus Christ. Our second lesson, from the holy gospel according to St Luke takes us to the moment, when God prepares the lasting sacrifice that will be shown forth on the mountains of Jerusalem, the sacrifice that will make safe God's people in time and eternity. The very people to whom God had pledged that they would be safe from the rule of unrighteousness, had turned their hand to wickedness, as our psalm has it, and were led away with the evildoers. They had captured God's own Son, Jesus, in a garden, at night, brought him before a trial of judges who sought to maintain their own influence rather than promote God's influence, and had condemned him to die. And because they did indeed, as our psalm foretold, live under a sceptre of unrighteousness – the rule of their gentile overlords, the Romans – then judges took Jesus to have his sentence confirmed by the governor of the Roman province. Accompanied by a crowd calling for the release of the murderer Barabbas: the Hebrew patronymic name literally means 'son of the Father'. The true and righteous Son of the Father, Jesus, is condemned to be given up as a sacrifice for sin 'led away with the evildoers', while the other, the wayward, 'son of the father', the murderer Barabbas, is set free.

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God gifts us Jesus Christ as the sacrifice that confirms the promise of mercy, 'made to Abraham and his descendants forever'. He will, indeed, provide the lamb for an offering, as Abraham told his son Isaac. The lamb that God provides will take away the sins of the whole world when it is provided and raised up like an ensign on the

mountains that surround Jerusalem. And the two parallel stories that make up our readings tonight – the father who withholds from his wife that he has been commanded to sacrifice the laughter and delight of her old age as a test of his own faithfulness, and the people who clamour for the release of the murderer ‘son of the father’, Barabbas, and whose voices prevail so that the true Son of the Father, Jesus, is crucified – these two stories are shown to be stories of mercy.

Because in providing the lamb for sacrifice himself, his own Son Jesus Christ, who was raised up on a cross on the mountains of Jerusalem to be seen as the Lord over death, God has provided the means to put an end to all sin and death. This does not absolve the stories themselves: Abraham still lies to his wife and son in order to prove his faithfulness, the people who clamour for Jesus’ death still lie to Pilate and Herod when they laconically tell them ‘if this man were not an evildoer we would not have handed him over to you’. But in the midst of the lies, and the sheer enormity that the sacrifice of an innocent Son stands for, is also the place where the mercy and grace of God may be shown forth, a place from which new life stems, from which new generations of faithful people may be raised.

Abraham is told that the generations that follow his own obedience in faith will withstand their enemies, and that ‘by your offspring all the nations of the world shall gain blessing for themselves’. Just as the risen Jesus tells those who follow his obedience in faith that by his suffering and death, and raising ‘repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in God’s name to all nations’, beginning from the very place where God’s sacrifices are shown forth and his mercy is being poured out, Jerusalem. All nations may share in the blessings promised to Abraham and confirmed on the cross: wherever people turn in faith to God, they will find new life because ‘God himself provided the lamb for a sacrifice’. We ourselves may never provide the sacrifice – as Abraham attempted to do when God tested his faith – for the sacrifice is already provided for us. The only sacrifice we may return for God’s gift of his own self is the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, the sacrificial acts of service and care in his name that serve to show forth the extravagant love God has for us, his people.

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I said at the beginning that our Cathedral has a vision to bring the good news that God himself sets free those who turn to him in faith to all who have yet to hear it. I give thanks that Canon Robert Vun has today joined our Cathedral’s ministry team to share with us in making known this good news. His many gifts, among them his own experience of sacrifice on the journey of discipleship, his gift for making friends and calling others into friendship with God, the gift of his family and his partner Ruth, his gift of being able to speak to people of all walks of life, from many cultures, in many languages, will enable him to speak with conviction and grace of the story of our

salvation. I pray that God would bless you, Robert, as you minister among us. That God would give you grace to share with many the good news that God the Father seeks to gift us life, that God the Son has already himself provided the sacrifice for sin and death, and that God the Spirit invites you and I to reach out our hands and accept his extraordinary gift of mercy and grace. Thanks be to God.