

Commentary to the Second Sunday of Lent (B)



The Covenant of Faith

Today's readings present us with several figures from the Jewish tradition. In the first reading we come upon Abraham, the Father of Faith and his son Isaac. In the Gospel we encounter Moses, the law-giver, and Elijah, the greatest of the prophets. On the Mountain of the Transfiguration, Moses and Elijah discuss God's plan for his people with Jesus. This plan was to be a new and greater covenant, a new and greater relationship, greater even than the original relationship established with Abraham. This week we are presented with the covenant of Abraham, the covenant of faith. The covenant is that if we trust in God, have faith, he will reward us for this faith. The first reading for this Sunday is the sacrifice of Isaac.

This is a hard test for us to understand. The Jewish people never practiced human sacrifice. Why is Abraham was called to kill Isaac? It appears only as a demonstration of how deep his faith in God needed to be. Well, as we know, he did have faith. He had faith in God's promise that he would build him into a nation even though the only way that would happen would be through his son Isaac, the very son he was asked to sacrifice. As you know, God did not allow him to kill his son, and his faith was rewarded by a covenant with him saying that his descendants would be as countless as the stars of the sky and the sands of the seashore, they will conquer their enemies and all nations will bless Abraham.

Indeed, Abraham is the father of faith not just for those of the Jews and Christians, but even for those who follow Islam. Many years ago, my family and I had the joy of attending the Passion Play in Oberammergau, Germany. Believe me when I say that it surpassed even our deepest hopes. The music

was original and wonderful, the cast was huge, and everything was extremely reverential. It was four to five hours long, but an experience of a life time.

During the production Old Testament themes were woven into the sacrifice of Christ. There would be a tableau on an Old Testament theme that would be reflected in what they were acting out in the presentation of the Passion of the Lord. The particular one that made the deepest impression on me was the sacrifice of Isaac. The picture was of Isaac and Abraham climbing up the mountain for the sacrifice. Abraham carried the knife.

Isaac, as it says in verse six of the story carried the wood for the sacrifice on his back. The singers at Oberammergau noted that just as God provided the lamb for the sacrifice back in the day of Abraham and Isaac, so he would provide the lamb for the sacrifice when Jesus climbed the mountain with the wood of the sacrifice on his back. What we can add to this is that just as Abraham's faith was rewarded with the establishment of a new covenant, a new relationship with God, Jesus' faith would be rewarded with the establishment of a new covenant, a new relationship with God. The point for us today is that God is aware of our faith. He knows the struggles we have to believe.

Abraham did not want to sacrifice his son, but trusted in God. Jesus cried during the agony in the garden for his father to free him from the terrible suffering he was going to endure, but he still trusted in God. How about us? God sees us here, praying to him, wanting to grow closer to him. At the same time he sees how our faith is continually tested by the turmoil of our lives. It is easy for us to believe and be so called people of faith when all is going well and we are happy. It is easy to believe, be people of faith, when we are enjoying our family, our children, our lives. It's easy to believe, be people of faith, when we leave Church feeling warm and deeply moved. But faith is difficult when we are in turmoil.

When relationships meant to be growing and nurturing, such as marriage, become bitter and end up destructive, when children push people to the edge, when jobs that we don't even like are in jeopardy, then faith is difficult. It is difficult to believe in God when a loved one is sick, or if a loved one has passed away. God knows how often we are just plain angry, angry with him for the difficulties of our lives. He knows that sometimes we become so angry that we even doubt his existence. He knows that sometimes we wonder if he really cares. God knows how often we feel weak in our faith, but he also knows that we do want to have faith. "I do believe, said the man whose son had leprosy and whom the disciples could not cure. "I do believe, the man said, "but help my unbelief. God sees us here as people of faith, who are begging him to help them grow in faith. When times of turmoil take over our lives, we have to focus in on the covenant with Abraham, the covenant of faith.

Abraham trusted that God would find a way to reward him for his faith. And God did reward him. And he does reward us for our faith. When the disciples, Peter, James, and John saw Jesus transfigured on the Mountain and Elijah and Moses with him they wanted to erect booths. Maybe they wanted to sell religious articles. Some nice plastic statues of Moses that people could plant upside down in their yards when they wanted to sell their property would be go over big.

Or maybe there was some other superstition that they could make money on in the name of faith. Maybe, the disciples wanted to organize pilgrimages to the mountain, and then invest in a Hilton nearby. People these days are continually looking for the spectacular as a basis for their faith. But Jesus told the disciples and us that glory comes only after they and we understand what to rise from the dead means.

We cannot celebrate the Glory of the Lord until we share in his passion, his death, his sacrifice. Our faith is tested like Abraham's faith and like Jesus faith. We are called to give our best to the Lord and trust him to transform the sacrifice into a new covenant far greater than we could ever imagine. "If God is for us St. Paul tells the Romans and us, "who can be against us. He who did not spare his own son for us, will prevent the forces of evil from attacking us. This includes those forces within us tearing at our psyche, leading us away from the Lord. Today, we pray for the faith of Abraham, trusting in God to reward our determination to be his.

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