

Commentary on the Gospel for Thu, Jul 2nd 2015

Today's first reading is one of the most puzzling, and to some, disturbing, passages in the Old Testament. Yet, its importance is attested by the fact that the Church has given it to us twice this year – once at the Easter Vigil, where it follows the creation story, and then again today. How are we to understand it?

God had given Isaac to Abraham, a son born when neither Abraham nor Sarah were in the childbearing years. Isaac is Abraham's only hope for the line of descendants – numerous as the sands – that God had promised him. God asks Abraham to give him back, a request that Abraham interprets, in the culture of his time and place, to mean sacrifice. Sacrifices usually destroyed what was given – a libation poured out upon the ground, a precious calf or sheep killed and burned – which meant the giver could no longer use or benefit from them. The story makes the point that Abraham was willing to do whatever God asked of him, and for many of us, the story might stop there.

But the story tells us something even more important about God, something that resonates with God's gift of Jesus to humanity, and with Jesus' own sacrifice. What the sparing of Isaac tells us, in the words of theologian Sandra Schneiders, is that "there is no violence in God". God gives; God does not destroy. In the case of Isaac, God gave him back to Abraham, who had been willing to slay him. And in the case of Jesus, God gives Him back to us, in the Resurrection, back to those who rejected God's gift and thought we had destroyed it. This depth of God's love is utterly incomprehensible. God so loved the world that he not only gave us His son (John 3:16), but even more, He gave him back to us after we had rejected and killed the gift.

Theologians have puzzled for centuries over why Jesus had to die. But the sparing of Isaac tells us that Jesus' death was not something God wanted (let alone demanded!). That's why this story is a part of the Easter Vigil readings. In 1 John (4:7) we read that God is love, but the Greek word "love" in the Johannine writings is best translated as "self-giving". God is relentless self-giving, utterly forgiving self-giving.

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