

The Lord be with you:

and also with you.

Lord, speak to us: **that we may hear your word.**

Move among us: **that we may behold your glory.**

Receive our prayers: **that we may learn to trust you. Amen.**

As we celebrate the grace and good of God, we remember our sins and weaknesses.

Father God, we confess that we often take the gifts of your creation for granted, and use them chiefly to further our own interests:

Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

Saviour Christ, we confess that we often give in to the selfish desires of our hearts, and the uncaring ways of the world.

Christ, have mercy.

Christ, have mercy.

Holy Spirit, we confess that we often close our minds to your influence, and fail to bear good fruits in our lives.

Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

Absolution Almighty God, who forgives all who truly repent, have mercy on you, pardon and deliver you from all your sins, confirm and strengthen you in all goodness, and keep you in eternal life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Genesis 22:1-14 [The Command to Sacrifice Isaac]

God tested Abraham. He said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' He said, '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 on one of the mountains that I shall show you.' So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt-offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. Then Abraham said to his young men, 'Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you.' Abraham took the wood of the burnt-offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. Isaac said to his father Abraham, 'Father!' And he said, 'Here I am, my son.' He said, 'The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt-offering?' Abraham said, 'God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son.' So the two of them walked on together.

When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, 'Abraham, Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' He said, 'Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.' And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt-offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place 'The LORD will provide'; as it is said to this day, 'On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.'

This is the word of the Lord;

Thanks be to God.

Matthew 10:40-42 [Rewards]

'Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.'

This is the gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Sermon

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

I invariably preach on the Gospel reading of the day. But then I read today's Old Testament reading. What a shocking, awful, infamous passage! I couldn't ignore it or airbrush it out. It's too well-known. I had to try to address it.

Every Jew knows it from childhood. It's one of the best and most deliberately crafted pieces of Hebrew literature. It's referred to by the New Testament writers. We can't, as Christians, ignore it. It's part of our DNA, our history.

To 21st century ears, it smacks of unacceptable behaviour, and not something which we want to endorse. It approaches child abuse, not to say pre-meditation to murder. It leaves a whiff of the whole unthinkable issue of child sacrifice, from ancient agrarian religions, including early Israelite religious origins. Sacrifice of the first-born son to ensure a good harvest.

To some, it is unbearably, deeply poignant, with its focus on the trust between father and son. But we should remember that it wasn't written for us!

I prefer to think of it as a part of the origin myths of the Israelite nation of about 3-4 millenia ago – more than 1500 years before Christ's birth. Why, and in what kind of setting, was this story told?

I want to suggest that we don't treat the incident as a real, historical occurrence, but rather to consider examining it as legend.

Let us look at this legendary figure, Abraham, for a moment. He is the primary patriarch of the Jews. He was the figure who personified the covenant between YHWH – God – and the Israelites. A whole ten chapters of the book Genesis are dedicated to his legendary exploits. I read them as that – they are, to our ears, too far-fetched to be credible unless we take them as legend.

Tradition tells us that in total faith he heeded the call of YHWH to leave his ancestral home in Mesopotamia – between the Tigris and Euphrates valleys – today's Iraq - and to journey to the land of Canaan. No walk in the park, even today.

God promises to him and his family all the land of Canaan. Yet he has no family. His wife, Sarai, is old, and barren. In Mesopotamian tradition, she offers her servant Hagar to bear a child with Abram. She duly provides him with Ishmael.

It just has to be myth and legend! By chapter 17, YHWH the Lord appears to him and says: "Walk before me and be blameless, and I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous."

And here is the central part of the whole narrative – "I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations – an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your offspring". As a sign of this covenant, God promises to give Abraham a son by his wife Sarah ... "and you shall call his name Isaac". Now remember: Abram was reputedly 99 years old, and Sarai was unable to have children.

Along the way there are other mythical and super-natural occurrences, and Abraham is tested by God in some bizarre situations. I won't waste your time on them now; read chapter 20 of Genesis if you want the details. Basically, they are tests of obedience. And he's human. He fails several of these tests.

Then Isaac is born. And we come to today's story. It is, I think, best seen as part of this legendary origin story of Abraham. I know we have just heard it, but don't read it in isolation, by itself, without the surrounding context.

After all, you wouldn't take a chapter out of a novel by Maeve Binchy and expect it to stand by itself.

The story of today's passage is about God's testing of Abraham. The child Isaac which came, as it were, from God was to be used as the ultimate test of Abraham's loyalty towards God. His faith; and ultimately, his trust.

It reminds me of a passage from the book of Job which is quoted in our funeral service: "The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." Trust, again.

If we try now to move away from Israelite mythology, the story comes down to us as a question of faith - of belief. Would we ever conceive of performing such a test of faith? If God gives, as an act of grace, is it really right for him to take away just as easily? No. That's not the point of the story.

Here's the point. In the reading, we're told that "Abraham took the knife to kill his son. And the Lord said, 'Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for NOW I KNOW that you fear God'".

"Now I know. Now I know that you fear God."

Abraham is a representative of the human race. And we all share, with Abraham, our promises, and our failures to keep them. The covenant with God is with us too. Have you ever been pushed to the edge? I think we all have, at one time or another. The story for me is about the uncertainty of the journey of life, and how we respond to it.

The word for this whole topic is "faith". Abraham's entire life, mythical or not, had been marked by his journey to a place that he did not know, into a future that he did not always understand, while trusting that God would show him the destination and how to get there.

Faith is risking what is, for what is yet to be.
Faith is holding on, when you want to let go.
Faith is letting go, when you want to hold on.
Faith is the presence of light in darkness.
The presence of God.

It is up to us whether we trust God's way of seeing ... or whether we try to see on our own. The story invites us to participate in that journey with Abraham, to reach his conclusion, to affirm God, and then to live life under God because it is true.

But the decision is ours. Abraham could have ignored the call. He could have walked away. I think that's what makes this story such a memorable test. An ultimate test. Can any of us be sure how we would react in a comparable situation? All we can pray for is that we trust in God. That he will never test us beyond our capability. That he will be able to say of each one of us: "Now I know that you fear God." Pray that we are never put to the test.

And now to God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit be ascribed, as is most justly due, all might, majesty, dominion, power and glory. Amen.

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died and was buried;
he descended to the dead.

On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church,
the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

Amen.

Intercessions, beginning with the Collect of the Third Sunday after Trinity

Almighty God,
you have broken the tyranny of sin
and have sent the Spirit of your Son into our hearts
whereby we call you Father:
Give us grace to dedicate our freedom to your service,
that we and all creation may be brought
to the glorious liberty of the children of God;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Give to the Church the gifts that inspired the prophets of old, to warn and to encourage at this time and always. Make your people worthy to be prophets of your word and counted as righteous through your grace.

Be with those who in the world speak the words of truth and the message of salvation. Open the hearts of the powerful and the humble alike to receive those who come in your name.

Grant us grace to discern the presence of Christ in those we know, and in the stranger. May we be hospitable and welcoming in our homes. May the doors in this community be open to the Lord who comes in many ways.

We pray for those who are sick, whether from COVID-19 or from any disease or illness. Be a constant, sustaining presence to them. We pray for their nurses; doctors; for all their carers and family members.

May the faithful departed receive their reward and share in the fountain of living water in heaven. Grant that we may be constant in this world and enter at last into the world to come.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory,
for ever and ever, Amen.

Dismissal:

God the Holy Trinity
make you strong in faith and love,
defend you on every side,
and guide you in truth and peace;
and the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be with you and remain with you always, **Amen.**