

Readings for the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

2nd July 2023

First Reading: Genesis 22:1-14

God tested Abraham. He said to him, 'Abraham!' And Abraham said, 'Here I am.' God 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 Abraham said, 'Here I am, my son.' Isaac 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.' The angel 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.'

Second Reading: Romans 6:12-23

Do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness for sanctification.

When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. So what advantage did you then get from the

things of which you now are ashamed? The end of those things is death. But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Gospel: St Matthew 10:40-42

Jesus said to the twelve: '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.'

A Reflection for the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Is our church a place of welcome? I am sure we all hope and believe so. Indeed, I have never come across a church that doesn't believe it is welcoming, although sadly I have come across a few that seemed to struggle with it in practice. Thinking about how we actually demonstrate being welcoming to people is an important place to start, but to truly know whether we are indeed as welcoming as we hope, we need to ask people, visitors and newcomers, how they find us. And even that depends on them being honest with us, which is not always easy, especially if they find in the negative!

'Welcome' is the key word in today's Gospel passage. This is the third week in which our Gospel reading has come from chapter 10 of Matthew. In this chapter, Jesus is giving instructions to his disciples as he sends them out to continue his work, and he prepares them to face opposition. At the beginning of his words to them, Jesus spoke of the 'worthiness' of those they would go to. Worthiness was equated with hospitality, so they were to stay with those who were worthy or hospitable and let their peace come upon them, but if they were not welcomed, they were to shake the dust off their feet and go elsewhere.

At the end of what he has to say, in today's passage, Jesus returns to that theme of welcome: 'Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me'. Initially, the emphasis is on the reward others will receive if they welcome the disciples, but then there is a subtle shift that widens out the idea of welcome for all who might come to read this Gospel later: 'whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones...none of these will lose their reward'.

Welcoming people in the name of Jesus is a foundational practice of discipleship for all of us. The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'welcome' as; the act or instance of greeting or receiving (a person, idea etc.) gladly'. That word 'gladly' is important, I believe; welcoming is an attitude that is primarily conveyed by our actions rather than words. Welcome is about building relationships with people as Jesus did, overcoming traditional boundaries and offering acts of mercy, even as small as a cup of cold water, to all.

Throughout Jesus' words in chapter 10 that we have heard over these last three weeks, it is made clear that God's work, one of welcome, is accomplished not just through Jesus but also through his followers. Sometimes, perhaps

often, continuing that work entails suffering, humiliation, rejection, or opposition, or maybe even death as it did for Jesus, and as Jesus warned would be so for his followers. As Fr David reminded us last week, there are times when Jesus' words are so challenging, it is tempting to ignore them or pass over them quickly. But, if we are to take our Christian calling seriously, we need to address them.

The same is true when we read quite a lot of the Old Testament and come across passages such as today's reading from Genesis. God's command to Abraham to sacrifice his son is horrific and quite different from the God of love we more often and prefer to hear about, so how are we to understand it?

As with so much of the Bible, considering the context can be helpful. It is worth bearing in mind that, in the ancient world, fathers had the right of life and death over a child. Child sacrifice was practised by many groups to appease the gods; it was part of the worship of the Canaanite deity Molech, mentioned at various points in the Old Testament, although later it was specifically forbidden for the Israelites. Whilst that might have made the suggestion slightly less extraordinary at the time, I don't think it makes it any less horrific.

However, this command from God is introduced as a 'test' and Jewish tradition maintains that Abraham knew prophetically that he would not have to sacrifice his son. If we think about Abraham and Sarah's back story, some of which we have heard in recent weeks, we know it is very human. There have been misunderstandings, faithlessness, dysfunction and betrayal at times as they have tried to take matters into their own hands despite God's promises. Yet, at other times, they have shown great faith, and many commentators understand today's passage as one such time. The Old Testament theologian, Gerhard von Rad, described this story as 'a soul-shattering test from God with the purpose of determining faithfulness but with no intention of it being fulfilled'. Abraham was required to demonstrate his faith in God's promise of descendants, land and blessing despite the apparently contradictory command.

Knowing the outcome in advance would also have been the situation for everyone, through the oral tradition, before this story was ever written down. So it is a tale designed to shock the reader into wakefulness, not something to emulate or a suggestion of what God literally requires. As with many of the ancient stories, it is the principle behind the story that is important, rather than dwelling on the detail of what may or may not have taken place. In this story, Abraham shows a radical commitment to God and, in the verses that follow today's passage, God's promises are renewed.

Commitment and faithfulness are also at the heart of today's passage from Paul's letter to the Romans. Rome, the centre of the Roman Empire, was also the centre of debate on all manner of topics, including theological ones as Christianity spread. In this letter, with its many complex arguments, Paul is concerned that the Christians should not be led astray by false teachers and prophets.

Prior to this, his argument has been around justification by faith. Earlier in this letter to the Romans, as I mentioned a few weeks ago, Paul says that it is by faith that we are made righteous before God. In today's passage, he focusses on living out that faith by the choices we make in our lives. Using the analogy of slavery, which is ironic as slaves have little or no choice, do we choose the way of sin, giving in to all our own selfish desires without considering their impact, or do we choose God's ways? Once we have made our choice, the habits we form are like slavery – one thing

leads to another. If we choose God's ways, the advantage we get, he tells us, is sanctification. Daniel Migliore defines 'sanctification' as the process of growth in Christian love'. These are the habits we should endeavour to cultivate.

So how do we draw the threads of these readings together? Perhaps to say that we are called to a faith and trust in God that is serious, that requires commitment, that believes in God's promises. In that faith, we are called to continue the work of Jesus in the world, that brings us back to the idea of welcome. We are called to cultivate the habits and ways of being that enable us to build welcoming, loving and inclusive relationships with all people. We know we will not get it right all of the time but, as Migliore reminds us, sanctification is a process in which we grow.

This task, which we do together, is well described in the hymn *Let us build a house where love can dwell*.

Let us build a house where love can dwell and all can safely live,
a place where saints and children tell how hearts learn to forgive.
Built of hopes and dreams and visions, rock of faith and vault of grace;
here the love of Christ shall end divisions:
All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

Let us build a house where prophets speak, and words are strong and true,
where all God's children dare to seek to dream God's reign anew.
Here the cross shall stand as witness and as symbol of God's grace;
here as one we claim the faith of Jesus:
All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

Let us build a house where love is found in water, wine, and wheat:
a banquet hall on holy ground where peace and justice meet.
Here the love of God, through Jesus, is revealed in time and space;
as we share in Christ the feast that free us:
All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

Let us build a house where hands will reach beyond the wood and stone
to heal and strengthen, serve and teach, and live the Word they've known.
Here the outcast and the stranger bear the image of God's face;
let us bring an end to fear and danger:
All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

Let us build a house where all are named, their songs and visions heard
and loved and treasured, taught and claimed as words within the Word.
Built of tears and cries and laughter, prayers of faith and songs of grace,
let this house proclaim from floor to rafter:
All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

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