



*Chaplaincy of All Saints' Marseille  
with Aix-en-Provence  
and the Luberon*

*28<sup>th</sup> June 2020  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Trinity*

**Reflection**

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I find it strange that if a gifted artist paints something horrific, it's still accepted as great art. Think of Michelangelo's Last Judgement, or the Blinding of Samson by Rembrandt, both of which are enough to give anyone nightmares. The picture above this reflection is actually embroidered and hangs on our wall downstairs. It shows an old man wielding an enormous knife over a teenage boy who is tied up. If that picture were to be on the news, we'd all be horrified. To make matters worse, it's of a scene in the Bible, from Genesis, the first book in the Bible. It forms part of the history of our faith and the basis of the Old Testament. In it we see Abraham who will be the father of the Israelite nation, about to kill his son Isaac.

All sorts of questions spring to mind about this. Who could kill their own child? Why would anyone do such a thing? Were children of such little value in Abraham's time? What sort of God would ask a father to kill their own son? Who puts pleasing their God before the life of their child? Didn't Abraham love his son?

As it turns out, God didn't want Abraham to kill his son and sends an angel to tell him not to. He has passed the test of faith. Which gives rise to another question – this time about a God who would test someone's faith in this way? Who amongst us would unquestioningly take our child and prepare to kill him if we thought God wanted us to?

There's a lot going on here for us to think about and unravel.

In Abraham's time it wasn't unheard of to sacrifice children to various deities. The Israelites weren't exempt from this. Children were not usually valued too much until they got to adulthood, and many never reached maturity at all. In a number of cultures, a child would be sacrificed for all manner of reasons – winning battles, getting a good harvest, making the rain stop – or start. But this was a very special child to Abraham – his only son from his beloved wife Sarah, born long after both were far too old to have children. A winter child is very special. And this one was even more special because God had told Abraham that through Isaac, Abraham would become the father of a great nation. Abraham loved Isaac with all his heart.

So being told by God to take Isaac and sacrifice him didn't make sense of His previous promises. Astonishingly, however, Abraham sets out to do what God has told him to do. What was he thinking? At all other times when he had obeyed God, it had turned out well. Abraham's faith that this time would also be OK is astounding to me. He passes the test with flying colours. I still struggle, however, with the thought that God put Abraham through this test. God of course knew that He didn't want Isaac to be killed, but Abraham didn't know that – he obeyed in blind faith. He shut his eyes to what he had been told to do and complied. Enormous faith. As it turns out, God doesn't want any human sacrifice at all and makes it clear in various other books of the Old Testament that He doesn't want it. Abraham's unshakeable faith here, though, gives us a vivid example of how we can all trust God no matter what He seems to be asking of us. It may seem too much, but we need to trust God that all will be well in the end.

There are also hints in this story of what is to come for God's own Son, Jesus Christ, who was sacrificed for us. He too, like Isaac, carried the wood that he was to die upon. It took Isaac and his father three days to get to the place of death, on a mountain.

This story also to me highlights what is of value to me, to all of us. Is the life of one of our family of more value to me than my God? What do I give to God that costs me dear – or what am I prepared to give to God that would cost me dear? Do I give enough? Do I trust God so much that whatever He asks of me is fine by me and I'll do my best to do it or to give it? Big questions for all of us. But if we really believe that everything comes to us from God, then we must realise that it is still actually God's possession and if He asks us to give it back, then we should obediently do just that. We need to trust that God will always provide for all our needs – and, like Abraham, we too will discover from experience that God always does so.

God didn't want to break Abraham's heart and had never intended to do so. What He really wanted was for Abraham not to sacrifice his son, but his self-will, to obey God and have absolute trust in Him. He wanted to be sure that Abraham would hold nothing back from Him.

I recently saw a film where a young schoolteacher over 100 years ago had a class of children in a mining town on the Canadian border. These children didn't have much, but they had more than a party of orphans passing through on their way to an orphanage. It was Christmas, and the orphans would have no presents. So the children of the town thought it would be a nice idea to each give one of the toys they didn't play with any more to one of the orphans. Their teacher, however, challenged them to think about what toy they would most love to receive from all the toys they had – and to give that special toy to the orphans. And, it being TV, they did!

Those children were learning to give – not reluctantly, but with love and generosity. How much more did God love us when He gave his only Son for us.

After that, it seems only right that we should give back to God as generously as He gives to us. And we must never forget that God wants our trust and our belief. These days many of us go our own way, driven by our own self-will and self-reliance, and only turn to God when things go badly. As Abraham went on to discover, obeying God without protest and trusting Him implicitly was the best thing he had ever done. We might try it ourselves...