



Lent 2

THE NEW SHOFAR

God can be trusted no matter what our minds say

Obedience is not blind – it is built on our experiences of God

What kind of God would demand infanticide of Abraham?

To understand the meaning of this difficult narrative, we need to explore it within its wider context. Abraham had already fathered a son Ishmael with the slave girl Hagar. With the birth of Isaac, Sarah wanted both Hagar and Ishmael thrown out of the family home. This was to ensure Isaac received the full inheritance. But without the protection of Abraham, it would have been a death sentence for both of them and knowing this terrible fate, Abraham was reluctant. However, God reassured him that Ishmael would be fine. Importantly, Hagar is informed by an angel that they will both be saved through the love of God (check out Genesis 21).

Then the very next chapter begins with God planning to *put Abraham to the test*. In doing this He uses the guarantee, the reassuring promise given to Hagar as His starting point. As a hint, God refers to Isaac as Abraham's *only* son. Remembering what has just happened, this language opens up some significant challenges to Abraham's faith: *Is God the God of life? Is He true to His word? Did He spare Ishmael as He promised? Will He spare Isaac? Does God love me?*

Abraham has faith in God and so proceeds with the sacrifice

The **Letter to the Hebrews** offers us a way forward in our reflections. Abraham and Sarah were already too old to have children, let alone as many as the stars in the sky... *So it was that there came forth from one man, himself as good as dead (i.e. infertile), descendants...* Abraham could only proceed because he had been given the promise from God about having descendants through Isaac. Hebrews again, Abraham's faith led him to believe that *God was able to raise even from the dead!*

Our ancestor Abraham had undergone many tests to his faith and had proved to himself that God is a God of love and a God who was always true to His word. Everything in our lives, everything that comes our way – including our own lives - can be entrusted to God's care. While he could not understand what God was doing, he was absolutely confident that *God was able to raise even from the dead*. If God could bring forth life from that which was "dead" unable to have children, He believed God had no intention of allowing Isaac to die, just as He did not allow the illegitimate Ishmael to die. The authors of the story are providing the Hebrew people with a reassurance – God can be trusted...always.

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It is a part of the Lenten faith challenge

The narrative opens us up to the Gospel story from Mark. It is so very easy to speak in terms of faith and hope and it works well...until our world falls apart. The great strength Abraham has is the able to live his life knowing God was working away in him and through him. If God was with him, then all would be well. That does not mean a trouble free life. What it means is that in even the darkest of times; in the face of the most horrible and frightening events, Abraham could trust that God was alongside of him, working things out. He could find Light in darkness.

A question: why couldn't the disciples see Jesus like that down in the valley?

Whatever it was that happened up there on the Mount of the Transfiguration, it was at least a revelation from God to the world - *This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him.* Like Abraham, they too had been present when Jesus performed signs of this reality – miracles, healings, exorcisms, teachings and so on. It should have been obvious to them that this Jesus of Nazareth was in fact, from God.

“Down in the valley” they were content with the Jesus they thought they knew. But because He did not fit into their model of a Messiah, God’s anointed Son, they had no real reason to transform the way they were living. Yes, they followed Jesus. Yes, they left lots of things behind in following Him – but they still did not believe. They were still entrapped in their own views, expectations and hubris.

Here is Mark’s message – the disciples could see Jesus but not truly *see* Him as He was. They could listen to His teachings but *not hear* the message they were being given. They serve as classic examples of a faithless life of faith. They were attracted to Jesus as a concept, maybe even as a hope but there were limits to how far they were going to go in believing in Him as the Son of God, the Messiah.

Listening to Christ means allowing the Word of God to change us

In the Bible, to hear God means to take in the message and then to live the demands and consequences of that message in what we do each and every moment. This is what Abraham understood. When God made the promise to him, he truly did believe God would remain faithful to His Word. That is why he could take Isaac to the altar of sacrifice. He understood what God was doing, that Isaac was safe.

For the disciples to see the true identity and nature of Jesus, they had to allow Jesus to interrupt their normal lives, take them away and reveal Himself to them. What they saw on the mountain top was also there down in the valley, it is just that “down there” they were blinded by a nominal faith, a mediocre hope. They were busy doing disciple things without being connected to the real source of hope and peace.

Lent is partially about getting back to basics: giving thanks and questioning our faith in God, our willingness to accept Jesus as God’s Messiah. We need to work on finding that mountain-top experience in the “valleys” of our every day existence.

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