



## SERMON - Easter 5 - Abraham and God & Isaac

This story we heard today about Abraham and Isaac and God is old - very old. And over the many centuries since it was first told it has been analysed and interpreted time and again by student, teacher, preacher and theologian, and also by artists, who have all attempted to bring out the depth of meaning of the story and convey what they have found in it to others.

It is at once both a terrible, disturbing story, and an image of tenderness underpinned by implacable faith that attracts us and draws us in, but at the same time repels us and would almost force us to turn away. In trying to delve into the depths of its meanings the would be interpreters of the story have often overplayed and over cooked the imagery and painted in their own additions, adding content and emphasis that are not there in what is a simple narrative, even if it is dealing with far from simple ideas.

I found two works by the artist Rembrandt that I think do speak into this story, but at the same time illustrate the way many attempts to re-tell it so often get it wrong.

The first, in full colour, is very much a traditional treatment of the climax of the story. Isaac is stretched across the kindling of the altar with his father holding him down with his throat exposed ready to slay his only son, whilst the venerable old man's hand that had held the knife being pulled away by the hand of an angel, thus forcing Abraham to drop the knife in the nick of time. Whilst the scenery around appears to be dark and stormy, there is a golden light across the scene from 'off stage' as it were, suggesting that behind the angel is God's very presence itself, spotlighting the old man's face, but centering on the boy in the foreground of the picture.

Now to us, whilst Rembrandt conveys wonderfully that split second between the Old Man finally committing himself to obey God's command and God's intervention to save Isaac, it also highlights some ideas much more difficult for us to contend with, especially in today's world...

The boy's face is completely hidden under the old man's hand and the boy's hands, although not seen, are obviously bound tightly behind his back. His pose is uncomfortable and his vulnerability extremely disturbing, especially to modern eyes. The boy is reduced to an object in the story - a sacrifice - and his vulnerability strikes with the grinding dissonance of echoes of the all too many examples of child abuse (or simply the abuse of all vulnerable people) that seem to be brought to light on a daily basis.

The other picture is an etching by Rembrandt. Where the painting would have taken a long time to complete, Rembrandt loved working in this much more

immediate, but also more ephemeral medium. He worked directly onto the metal plates that would be used for the printing process, (not easy - think about it - you are working all the time on a mirror image!) with fine engraving tools, scratching lines just into the surface of the metal. His work was entirely freehand and so delicate that the subsequent print runs were very short before the lines wore away and the plate was either discarded, or in some cases the artist would go on to re-work the image in the light of the results of the first few impressions. He loved working like this because the prints conveyed his emotional state as he worked the plates so well. These were the Instagrams of the day - displaying and betraying the sender's state of mind as he worked.

And so we have a very different picture. A kindly, if somewhat care-worn old man gazes straight at the viewer (or, as he worked on it, the Artist), as 'happy young child plays at his Father's feet, holding an apple that doubtless was a gift from Dad! The scene is bathed in light almost to the point of overexposure, as on one of those brilliant summer days when the shade from the old man's hat would have been much appreciated I am sure. Both Father and Son are very well dressed, as depicted by the fancy borders and tassels on the fringes of their obviously opulent clouting and cushions, and this furthers that overall air of familial bliss. The only presage of any impending crisis might just be seen in the old man's gaze, which seems to carry much sorrow and concern for what was and might have been, and for what he knows is to come, and yet also a steadfastness that almost says 'Yes, I know, life is not always like this picture, but it will be well, - not easy; just 'Well'.

And so we have these two images. The first, traditional and seemingly closer to the story, yet full of ideas and narrative that just are not in the text, is the most exciting and probably what comes to mind as we hear the story. Here is a flying angel intervening at the last moment with dramatic lighting and upraised hand, partly perhaps to underline the order to stop, and partly perhaps to box the ears of the old man of perchance he should not respond with sufficient alacrity! As a moment in time, the hinge-pin second on which the whole story hinges, as depicted by that knife frozen in the moment and suspended for ever in space, it is a wonderful evocation of the wrong story!

The latter picture is, for me, the truest to the heart of this story even though it does not tell the story directly, in the way the painting does. The old man sits there, knowing that you know the whole story. And we do well to remember the whole story when we dwell on either image! Here is Abraham, the 'Friend of God', with his son, Isaac, the 'Child of Promise' But there is another character who is not pictured, but who is present! For Isaac is NOT Abraham's 'Only Son'! He has had and lost another, Ishmael, forced due to family strife out of the family and out of Abraham's life, but never out of his heart or memory!

And so - back to our reading...

Abraham's second son, Isaac, through whom God has already promised, Abraham will become the father of a great nation, is walking beside his father with the servants and a donkey, which is carrying what is needed for a burnt offering to be made at a place that God has directed Abraham to go and find. After three days Isaac's father turns to the servants and tells them to wait where they are. **'We will go and worship and then WE will come back to you'**

Have you ever noticed that before? 'We will go,... and WE will come back...' Unless Abraham is being deliberately misleading, he has no intention or understanding that they will do anything other than both of them return...

This is not a 'Pass / Fail' test of Abraham's faith! Not really. It is a test of Abraham's faith, but one where the outcome is really never in doubt! Would Abraham sacrifice his son? Yes! Of course he would! The very existence of Isaac in the first place is a miracle of God's divine mercy, and Abraham, his Friend, trusts God implicitly, but not blindly. He knows God is faithful! And so he knows that God's promises are faithful. He doesn't know how, and can't see a way through, but Abraham will see those promises fulfilled - he knows they will be! But he cannot know the outcome yet, or otherwise his faith will not be 'tried' It needs the white hot heat of crisis to test Abraham's faith, not in order to see whether or not Abraham is up to it, but rather, to refine Abraham's faith through the testing and trying of God's faithfulness.

And so, even though Abraham would sacrifice his son, 'His only Son', (for he already knows the pain of the loss of one son! - and in that it might be said that this Friend of God is one step ahead of God!, unless of course you consider Adam, the lost son of God), God knows, that Isaac will not die on Mount Moria, and we are let in on the secret.

It is **God's Testing, God's Knowledge and God's vulnerability** that are at the heart of this story, and for the reader, Abraham stands in the place of God, and God becomes an Abraham! God is, indeed already has, put so much on the line with Abraham that He has made himself the vulnerable one. Friendship is like that, isn't it! The Befriender is always the most vulnerable when compared to the Befriended. As someone much better than I at putting things like this into words has said... *'God took the risk that Abraham would respond. Abraham took the risk that God would provide'* (E. Roop).

Which brings us actually to the end of the story, and the beginning of our story...

As we know, at the end of the story Abraham takes the knife (note, he does not more that pick the knife up - that is enough to signify intent!) and far from acting to physically restrain Abraham, God calls him, 'Abraham, Abraham!'

And Abraham, even at this critical moment (Especially at this moment?), is so in tune with God, his Friend, that he responds instantly 'Here I am'

It is almost as if Abraham had been listening intently all along for God's voice. And God's reply is, I think, very revealing...

'Now that I know that you fear God...' It is as if Abraham's belief in the faithfulness of God were never the point, but that it is God that has learned something about Abraham's faith. Abraham had already sent away, to be lost to him, one 'Only Son' and that were proof enough of Abraham's faith. Now God knows that whatever and wherever he leads Abraham his friend will follow. Because Abraham has done this, God can go on and bring to fruition the whole of his plan for Salvation, through his chosen people, that great Nation of which Abraham is the Father.

Abraham does learn too... He learns that one of God's names is Jehovah Jirah - God who provides. The ram caught in the thicket **was always going to be there, right from the start!** Abraham stopped before ever he saw God's provision. It was only afterwards that he saw the Ram, and Abraham being Abraham, his response was to set up there a point of contact between himself and his God, by making a sacrifice and so blessing the place of meeting. But God had already made provision for Abraham to be able to do so.

Abraham's faith was such that on that day when he could not see where or how God was present, he trusted in God's provision,... and whilst Abraham would now see his son, Isaac, grow and become a Father himself, Abraham never saw, in his lifetime, that Great Nation nor would he own any of that land to which God sent him, yet 'his Faith was counted to him for Righteousness', and Jesus himself would bear witness to that great faith centuries later, to a faithless generation who claimed Abraham as their father, but who didn't know him, not really!

And us, where do we come in?...

Well, as we gather around this table we too recall a sacrifice made at a place of meeting between friends who once were estranged - a 'trusting place where heaven's love and heaven's justice meet'. Here we meet 'The Lamb of God, slain before the foundation of the Earth!' - He was **always here, always going to be here, and always will be here.** The only question is 'Where are we?'

**AMEN**

