

Homily for 2nd Lenten Sunday (B)

February 26, 2018

Intro:

There are many horrifying tales in the Bible, none of them more horrifying than this tale of Abraham sacrificing his son. What horrifies us is that early biblical stories often were set in a tribal society that was more brutal than our own. On at least two occasions the Bible records sacrificing one's own child to God. We have to remember that human sacrifice was common in ancient times, but that does not entirely mollify us when we read today's story.

Genesis 22 has to be understood against the whole background of Abraham's relations with God. At age 75 he was called to leave his land and kin, on God's promise that he would get what he lacked and needed---land, prosperity, and, especially, a son. So he packed up and went. For 25 years he got wealth and land, but he lacked a son to whom he could leave his goods and who would be the only immortality he could hope for. Finally, when he is 100 years old, Isaac is born and becomes the focal point of all God's promises to him.

Now God asks him to sacrifice his son, not only the one he loves as a father, but the reason for the whole past 40 years of his life. Isaac is his own identity. Yet Abraham does not doubt: the next morning he packs up the materials necessary for the sacrifice and takes his unsuspecting son. When they come in sight of the place of sacrifice, Isaac asks, "Here are the wood and the fire; where is the sheep for the sacrifice?" Abraham answers, "God will provide the sheep." When they arrive at the place, Abraham puts wood on the altar, ties up his son, puts him on top of the wood, and takes out his knife to kill him before he lights the fire. At the fatal moment, a voice from heaven shouts to him, "Abraham, do not do the least harm to the boy. I know now how committed you are to God, since you were willing to sacrifice your own beloved son." Then Abraham spies a ram caught in a thicket, and so he sacrifices the ram to God. God has provided the sheep for sacrifice.

The Meaning for us is two-fold:

Some biblical interpreters find the meaning in God's prohibition of all human sacrifice, a prohibition which recurs six times in later biblical writings. But that misses the main point of the tale---that humans must be willing to give everything they have to the God who has given everything to them. Abraham does not doubt God because God has been faithful to him in every way since he was called from the land of Ur.

God has been faithful to each one of us, in all that we have---our possessions, our life, our children, our faith---everything. If God asks to sacrifice our son, we must first discern whether or not this is a delusion. In view of the biblical teaching, we must presume that it is a delusion. There are some in this church who have sacrificed their son or daughter, by sending them into the military where they lost their lives to some wayside bomb. We honor them. There are others who thought a particular war wrong and have dissuaded their son from going. We also honor them. But in each case, God asks of us not only discernment but dedication to God's own causes. Abraham is our model, but we are often like the child who wrote to God, "If you give me a genie lamp like Alladin's, I'll give you everything, except my money and my chess set." We all need to ask ourselves, "When have I not done what God was summoning me to do for God's kingdom on earth?" We need to teach our children that God's call is everything to us, because we, like Abraham, have found that answering God's call has delivered life to us.

The second meaning is even more important: Today's New Testament readings underline the greatest reality of all. Almighty God, the loving Father of his beloved Son, has sent him into our world to die at the hands of

those who refused to believe in his message. And God the Father was fully aware that he was *not* going to interfere to save the life of his beloved son, as he did with Isaac.

Why did he not interfere? Because we have to know that God's love for each of us is so great that he dies for his people. He has died for me, he has died for each of you, he has died for Adolph Hitler, for Donald Trump and for Nancy Pelosi. Because he has loved them with an infinite and divine love.

This Lent think beyond all the goods you have received---your possessions, your life, your children, your faith. This Lent concentrate on God's love which led him to die for you. In this way, your motive for doing what God asks is greater than Abraham's: As St. Paul says, "If God is for us who can be against us?" A God who gives his son for us, is absolutely trustworthy, and so his call is our life. You have a greater motive for obeying than did Abraham.

In his *Spiritual Exercises* St. Ignatius has the retreatant kneel before Christ crucified and ask, "What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What will I do for Christ?" When you have given God all that he asks of you, you will have life, and have it more abundantly.

Good news.