

We rejoice to worship together again

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Pentecost + 5A – Gen 22 1-14 –

The Aqedah and the Pandemic

Abraham bound his son Isaac ... Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son (22:9-10).

Christians call this story “the sacrifice of Isaac” and Jews call it “the Aqedah” (the “binding” of Isaac). It’s always scandalised us. Is it a story of an abusive God? Of a deluded Abraham? Of religious violence at its worst? Or is it about God helping Abraham to discover grace? Many scholars say it’s essentially a tale of the shift from human sacrifice to animal sacrifice. That’s because of the mention of Mount Moriah, named elsewhere only in 2 Chr 3.1 as the mountain where Solomon built the Temple. So the sacrifice of the ram instead of Isaac at Moriah is for Jews the prototype of all the animal sacrifices to happen on the Temple Mount – Mt Moriah.

For very early Christians, Abraham’s obedience – being ready to sacrifice his son – was one of the greatest examples of his faith: (Heb 11:17, 19) By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac ... He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead. In Romans 4, Paul sees Abraham’s obedience as a model of faith against all odds, (Rom 4.32). And of course there’s the sense for Christians that this story foreshadows God’s self-giving in Jesus Christ.

God promises Abraham that he’ll be the father of a great nation. Yet he and Sarah endure long years of waiting. So they contrive the just-in-case birth of Ishmael with the servant woman Hagar. But at long last, the impossible happens; Sarah and Abraham rejoice in the birth of a boy they call Isaac

[laughter]. But today, we see God demand a most horrible thing: “Take your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I will show you” (22:2). We know the end of the story, thank heaven – we’ve just heard it. But what do we do with this story? I believe it can help us explore and address the difficulties confronting the people of the world at the moment. Let me explain.

For better or worse, not so long ago, we Australians lived in a world which seemed safe and predictable. Then came the fires and life’s certainties were rocked. With no time to recover, just as we were gathering resources to help, floods came. The word unprecedented was run up every masthead again. But in the background, like a growing storm-cloud, news was gathering about a new virus. In far distant places, we saw lockdowns, hospitals on life-support as staff went under, fear-crazed panic buying, normal freedoms axed, gatherings limited, then suddenly prohibited.

When that storm finally broke over us, our nation shut down; even churches had to close. Our predictable world – our old certainties, our plans, our security – none of them were safe. This catastrophe is mirrored for us in today’s shocking story of the binding of Isaac. Abraham’s hopes for a future – for a life with any meaning – were abruptly replaced by a vision of bitter emptiness. We felt these fears and confusion when we had to shut ourselves off from friends and family; from this parish family. Would we ever see each other again? Would we ever hold our loved ones again?

And yet here we are today, praise God, gathered again. At first I was shocked that this story was the one set for us to read on this day of joyful reunion. But on reflection, given the end of the story, it’s the right one for today. Our comfortable rhythm, for so many years, of predictability, of peaceful enjoyment of each other’s love and support has been shaken; threatened. We’ve learnt that it can’t be taken for

granted – that it's a fragile treasure which God has sustained and continued to bless for the 4,000 years since the gift of laughter was given back to Abraham and Sarah.

We rejoice today that we have also been given back that gift. I thank God that we are back here safe. We know what a treasure it is we've been given back, and I ask that our prayers and thanksgiving might bear practical fruit which can help poorer communities survive unimaginable threats in the coming days. '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.' Mt 10.42 Amen