

9.30 Holy Communion Cuxton	Genesis 22 vv 1-18 p22 Acts 8 vv 26-40 p1101
11.00 Holy Communion Halling	I John 4 vv 7-21 (not read) John 15 vv 1-8 p1083

O ALMIGHTY God, who alone canst order the unruly wills and affections of sinful men; Grant unto thy people, that they may love the thing which thou commandest, and desire that which thou dost promise; that so, among the sundry and manifold changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed, where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. (I John 4¹⁰).

Do you tell your children the story of how close Abraham came to killing his son Isaac as a sacrifice to God? Genesis 22 is a difficult story, one of those horrifying stories which we might be inclined to avoid sharing with youngsters or with inquirers after the faith generally. On the other hand, it is a seminal story of huge importance both to Jews and to Christians. We concluded today's OT lesson with God's words to Abraham: *And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice.* If children grow up not knowing this story, they will be deprived of an essential aspect of the story of Jesus. Take the difficult bits out of the Bible story – the suffering and sin, the puzzles – and it doesn't have much to say to us as we confront life's difficulties in the real world. The great Rector of All Souls Langham Place, who packed his central London church Sunday after Sunday with vibrant congregations of people of all ages (including me for a couple of years) and who was a well known and much respected figure in national and global Christian circles, John Stott, believed that people reject Christianity not because they think it is false, but because they consider it irrelevant. And it was irrelevant because it didn't listen. "The contemporary world is positively reverberating with cries of anger, frustration and pain. Too often, however, we turn a deaf ear to these anguished voices . . . The better way is to listen before we speak." So how do we respond to the anger, frustration & pain of the world? We listen to what people are saying about their lives. We respond with the resources which God has entrusted to us – heavenly treasure in frail earthen vessels. Prominent among those resources is the Bible, the Word of God. Others include prayer & Sacrament.

So what can we say about the story of the Binding of Isaac when we're trying to explain it to ourselves and to other people? One thing we can say is that God is teaching us that human sacrifice is wrong. In the history of the world, there have been plenty of religions which have practised human sacrifice, particularly the sacrifice of children. God very powerfully shows Abraham that this is wrong. Abraham would have been prepared to sacrifice his son to God, but, although God had apparently commanded Abraham to kill Isaac, when it came to it, God would not allow him to go through with the offering up of the life of the child.

Human life is sacred and we might allow our minds to digress for a moment and wonder about our preparedness to sacrifice young lives in battle or to put people's lives at risk for reasons of commercial gain – unsafe labour practices, skimmed health and safety precautions, for example– or in sheer recklessness such as careless driving or ruthless competition.

A more dominant theme of the story is the testing of Abraham's faith. How much does Abraham love God? How far does he trust the LORD? After all, Isaac is the child of the promise. God had promised Abraham that his seed would inherit the land of Canaan and dwell there for all generations. Abraham and Sarah his wife were too old to have children and yet Isaac, the miracle baby, the promised child, in due course was conceived and born. All Abraham's hopes are in Isaac, as the hopes of many parents are vested in their children. Can Abraham give up Isaac even for God? Well, he can. He is prepared to offer the life of his son to God, but what an appalling position to be in. God must have known that Abraham wouldn't fail the test, but what a test for anyone to have to face!

When I was a child, it was suggested to me that, when Jesus taught us to pray, *Lead us not into temptation*, He meant that we should pray not to be tested as Abraham was tested. Looking back, I now realise that the person who taught me that had, not long before I was born, lived through the Second World War, worrying for the life of her son who served in the army for the duration, including being evacuated from Dunkirk and

taking part in the Normandy landings. Parents do give up their children to fight for their country and also for other reasons which are more peaceful, but no less demanding, such as serving as a doctor or a missionary in some dangerous part of the world or perhaps simply devoting themselves so entirely to public service that they have little time for their families.

If we truly follow God, there is nothing which we would withhold from Him.

For Christians, the focus of Genesis 22 is the fact that it is God Who provides Himself a sacrifice. Isaac is set free. He escapes the pain of the knife and the descent into the darkness of death. But the Son of God doesn't escape the pain. Neither does He avoid death. God *spared not his own Son*. That takes some thinking about. *Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins*. God withholds nothing from us. God is love and love is self-sacrifice. Reading Genesis 22, I feel some relief that there is a happy ending. It gets to the point where Isaac is bound and lifted up onto the altar awaiting the stroke of his father's knife, the wood on which he is lying already prepared for the holocaust, and, just in the nick of time, the angel of the LORD calls to Abraham out of heaven, *Lay not thine hand upon the lad, nor do anything to him*. But, when Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane, *Abba, Father, all things are possible unto thee; take away this cup from me: nevertheless not what I will, but what thou wilt*, an angel appears from heaven, not to prevent the execution, but rather to strengthen Jesus to face it. Jesus is not delivered from the pain of death.

Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son secures a great blessing for the world. *And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice*. Jesus is that seed of Abraham in Whom all the families of the earth are blessed.

Philip explains this to the Ethiopian eunuch who has been reading the words of the prophet of Isaiah concerning Christ on the long chariot journey from Jerusalem back home to Ethiopia. The eunuch believed and was baptised into the death of Jesus. He was buried with Christ. He undertook to take up his cross and follow Jesus. That is what baptism or christening is. We put our faith in God. We totally repent of our sins. We are baptised into the death and resurrection of Jesus. We undertake to take up our cross daily and follow Him. If we truly follow God, there is nothing which we would withhold from Him.

The story of Isaac has a happy ending. You might be thinking of Easter. You might be thinking of our going to heaven at the end of our life here on earth. So am I. But *happy ending* seems to me to be a very weak phrase to describe what it means to dwell in Christ in all eternity. 1 Corinthians 2⁹: *But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him*. Human words are just not adequate to express the glorious truth of the resurrection in Christ, what it means to have eternal life in Him.

You might be thinking that I have forgotten to speak about the Gospel, but I haven't. To dwell in Christ – as we do if we have faith in Him – is to be as much part of Him as the branches are part of the vine. We derive our life from Him. Without Him, we can do nothing. Without Him, we wither and die. With Him, in Him, we can do anything. If we dwell in Christ and He in us, we bear much fruit to the Father's glory.

It's always hard to know how to finish a sermon. So let me conclude with these words of Jesus recorded in St John's Gospel chapter 12: ²⁴ *Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.* ²⁵ *He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal.* ²⁶ *If any man serve me, let him follow me; and where I am, there shall also my servant be: if any man serve me, him will my Father honour.*