

Commentary on the Gospel for Thu, Jul 6th 2017

The story of Abraham offering his son Isaac is one of the best-known stories from the Book of Genesis. Many have commented on the meaning of the story, especially the comparison between Abraham offering Isaac and the Father offering the Son upon the cross. I want to make only a couple of comments on this story. First, I once had a student who said that God would not ask a person to sacrifice their child and that Abraham, on hearing the request to do so, should have just said, “You are obviously not God so leave me alone.” He pointed out to me that God destroyed many of the nations in that part of the world exactly because they practiced child sacrifice. Would God then ask Abraham to do what was an abomination to him? I reflected on the words that “God put Abraham to the test.” Abraham appears to have no doubt of who is speaking to him. He obviously trusts the one who made this bizarre request. Even though he knows that it goes against God’s love for his children and against his teaching not to immolate one’s children in sacrifice, he goes along. Can you get to a level of trust where you are willing to follow a person’s guidance even when you believe that the person is steering you toward doing something that even they do not believe in? Or did Abraham think it was a test all along? This we do not know but it is something to consider.

My second reflection from this story comes from the blessing of Abraham. The promise is that Abraham’s descendants shall be numerous and through them “all the nations of the earth shall find blessing.” This promise is repeated numerous times in the Abraham story and is one of the best ways to understand the Book of Genesis, especially chapters 12-50. Everywhere that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph go ends up blessed. They are not perfect men. They are sinners. Abraham lied and Jacob was a first-class rascal. Joseph should have probably kept his dreams to himself; his brothers were not amused. However, God worked powerfully through them. He blessed them and, through them, many others. It is one of the Apostle Paul’s themes. Followers of Jesus are children of Abraham and are called to be channels of blessing, instruments of peace, sacraments of grace. Like them, we are not perfect. Even with all our faults, God can bless us and the people around us, if we will trust and follow him.

The psalmist reminds us of the temptation not to trust God. It can be hard to trust God when the “pagans” seem to be prospering and taunt us with “where is your God?” We want God to glorify his name by doing something. O, it’s not that we want glory; we just want God’s kindness and truth to be recognized by others. Or, we just want the “pagans” to shut up. When God does not do this, a related temptation is to make a god who will do what we want. The psalmist reminds us that these gods cannot speak, see, hear, or smell and that, trusting in them, we become as lifeless as they are. So, trust in the Lord, we are told. He is our help and our shield. “God is in heaven; whatever he wills, he does.” Trusting God includes recognizing that I am not God and that God is not determined to do everything I want. Can we trust him? Sure. Will he bless us and everyone around us through us? Most certainly. However, let us not confuse this with a carefree life with God at our beck and call.