



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Genesis 22: 1-14
Second Reading Romans 6: 12-23
Gospel Matthew 10: 40-42

Today we read a story that can chill one's soul, especially a parent's-the story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac. This is a story that cannot be dismissed or ignored. We cannot just say that this is a primitive understanding of the nature of God or a brutal Old Testament story that is irrelevant in the light of the New Testament message. However, if we focus only on the topic of parent and child, and the emotional and precious quality of that relationship, we lose the profound heart of what the story of Abraham and Isaac is really about.

The Book of Genesis contains the Abraham cycle, a group of stories between chapters 12-22 about Abraham's call, journey, and relationship with God. The entire cycle is worth reading at one sitting. It takes us into a life that seems hopeless, is filled with promise, results in a journey that is full of dangers and Abraham's foolishness – at one point he betrays Sarah rather than admit to Pharaoh that she is his wife – and concludes with this monumental account of a genuine test, one in which even God does not know the outcome. We see in the life of Abraham not very promising material on which God

wants to build a great nation-his chosen people. I cannot help but remember the accounts in the gospels of Jesus calling his disciples-a group of men flawed as all human beings is weak, argumentative, unseeing yet ultimately capable of momentous acts. Not unlike us gathered here today the present day disciples of Jesus and the people God wishes to use to build his Kingdom: His great nation here on Earth. When God chose Abraham he took a risk and when Jesus called his disciples he took a risk. The call could go either way a positive YES or a negative NO. In our calling today God is also taking a risk. It is this risk that we get to a real meaning of the story of Abrahams willingness to sacrifice Isaac.

The entire cycle of Abraham stories is about a covenant. Early on, God chose Abraham. The question is, will Abraham choose God? And that is the profound but at the same time simple question facing each of us. God chose us, long ago. Yet, like the psalmist in today's psalm, we often ask, "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?"

Abraham despite his weaknesses does choose God and God never deserts him. The Covenant is everlasting.

God still challenges us as God challenged Abraham. Everyday we are beset with perplexing questions: Why do natural disasters kill so many people? We only need to look at the aftermath of last weekend's weather. Why are hatred and terrorism such dire threats in our world? Why are economic forces beyond our control forcing us to cut back, go without, or cause others to lose jobs and be hungry? Consider the effects of the so called credit crunch and the rising price of oil and rice. These may not be as personalized as Abraham's test with Isaac, but they are tests nevertheless. And God does want to know where we stand. God has chosen us. Will we choose God?

Today in the church calendar is the feast of Saints Peter and Paul, but it is transferred to tomorrow, since the Sunday lectionary takes precedence. These two apostles are examples to us of people who chose God, despite adversity in their lives. Peter, having denied Jesus three times, now becomes the articulate preacher proclaiming the Good News of Jesus. Paul, who had persecuted Christians with great vigor, now confesses Jesus as Lord and goes to the ends of the known world to proclaim the Good News. God chose these people; and in the end they chose him. A covenant bond existed between them, a bond so strong that nothing – not persecution, prison, and shipwreck – could break it. Both of these great men were flawed. Peter the rock on which Jesus was to build his church denied Jesus yet he was lifted up by God from the depths of failure. Paul writing in his letters frequently mentions a thorn in his side. Something that was a constant weakness yet with God's help he was able to overcome this and become the great missionary who carried the Gospel to many people.

The story of Abraham and Isaac Peter and Paul is the conclusion of a great story about ordinary people invited by God to do extraordinary things in God's plan. It seems the invitation always comes with a test: will those invited say yes?

Now, a word about today's Gospel from Matthew. Anyone, it seems, can be welcoming. But righteous people who welcome are the ones in whom God is interested. Righteous people are the ones who give cold water, not out of duty, or because it's fairly easy, but because they truly love God who gives us all things. Jesus has been teaching us this all through the readings from Matthew this month. Righteous people are not "holier than thou." They are people in a covenant relationship with God. They are tested, and they have said yes, often many times. I firmly believe that God is testing us as a church now.

This testing has also the effect of refining. In our lives as individuals and as a community we are refined in the fire by a God who does not want to break us but who loves us and wants to bring the very best out of us. If we say yes to God and enter into a covenant relationship with him God will refine us. Just as rock from a gold mine is refined in fire until the small amount of gold is revealed so God will refine us until that which is good holy precious and great is finally revealed.

In Jerusalem there is a memorial park to remember non-Jews who protected and helped Jews to escape the Holocaust. Each person is remembered with a tree and plaque. They are sometimes called the Righteous Ones. That is because, chosen by God, they said yes, even when they knew they might lose their lives by doing so. They knew, as Abraham did, that God always keeps promises.

How is God testing us? God has already chosen you. Now God wants to know, will you choose God?