

Genesis 22:1-18, 'Isaac – Trust'

By Ian Olliver

Letter I brings us to Isaac, the miracle baby born to Abraham and Sarah in their old age. Although I say that Isaac was a miracle baby, that does not mean he wasn't promised or expected. On numerous occasions God had told Abraham that, because of his faith, he would become the father of a great nation. As time had gone by Abraham had become less and less certain of the reality of this promise and eventually took matters into his own hands by choosing to father a child via Sarah's maidservant Hagar. And in a rather similar way to the story of Hannah we heard last week- the two wives scenario did not lead to happy families. Rather than resolving the issue it had instead driven a wedge between Sarah and Abraham. Abraham tried to take steps to make a bad situation better, but inevitably it only made it worse. Eventually Hagar and her young child Ishmael were forced to move out... and arguably the animosity and pain caused by that rift in the family is still a major root of conflict within the middle East today.

Isaac would have grown up realizing that he was indeed a miracle baby. And he would of course have heard accounts from his father about how God had promised him a son, and that ultimately a great nation would be created from his descendants. And yet there is nothing that gives me the sense that as a consequence Isaac became precautious or big-headed about the situation... It seems that he lived in quiet wonder that he could possibly be important in the story of God.

For those of you who have studied the stories of Abraham and Isaac in any detail, there is plenty of bizarre stuff going on. Indeed with our 21st century eyes large chunks of the story are theologically challenging and morally awkward. It certainly does not make a comfortable and easy sell to modern society to say that its ok to pass your wife off as your sister if a local powerful despotic ruler takes a fancy to her.

But even that pales into insignificance when presented with this account of Abraham travelling up the road towards mount Moriah with the intention to ritually murder he only precious son because he believed he had heard the voice of God telling him to do it. I think we can safely assume that such a defense would not stand up too well in a British court. The Tabloid press would be all over it, and to say that there was a bit of a safeguarding issue here...would be more than an understatement.

I'm sure that down through the centuries powerful people across the world have used the "It must be ok it's in the Bible" defense to justify all kinds of horror and barbaric behaviour.

As Christians, certainly it is good to know what is in the Bible... and indeed the Bible is the Word of God. Every week we preach from the scriptures believing that through them God still speaks today. With a difficult passage like this we cannot suddenly throw out all we know about God – his love- his kindness-his faithfulness. Because we know that that is the character of God. So what we do need to do is look for clues as to how on earth we can explain that this episode reveals something about the true nature of God.

Now of course the first thing to notice is that this story is old... Very old. It comes at the beginning of the Bible, and Abraham does not have the luxury of reading through the scriptures to understand about God. Abraham's faith is built on personal encounter with God alone.

When God gives Moses the Law around 450 years later there are explicit instructions which say that sacrificing children is not permitted under any circumstances...and further more turning a blind eye when you suspect that such a thing is going on – then that is also punishable by death or deportation – Leviticus 20 if you are interested.

Isaac

So if God is so against this, then what is going on in the passage in hand?

God is not sanctioning child sacrifice...what he is doing is confirming whether or not Abraham still has faith in him.

Right from the outset, God singled out Abraham as a man who had the ability to take the time to encounter God. Everyone was busy, distracted, pre-occupied with life... and yet Abraham albeit he was into his 70's not only made it a priority to spend time searching for God, but he left his home, and country to travel 700 miles to a remote place upstream where God revealed to him his plan for a new nation.

Several times Abraham has encounters with God..and each time there is a little more detail about how he was going to use his descendants to become a nation set apart as the people of God. They would be distinctive. They would not behave as other nations. They would reflect the Love of God in demonstrating justice and mercy for all who would inhabit the new land which God was going to give them.

In all kinds of ways the new nation was to be distinctive. And God keeps testing Abraham's level of faith- Even persuading him to embrace the rite of circumcision as a mark of belonging to the people of God.

Sometimes it seemed that it was going to be impossible. But every time Abraham tried to circumvent God's plan, God would sit him down and remind him of his promise.

By the time Isaac arrives, Abraham is in his late 90's and Sarah isn't far behind. No wonder they call their son Isaac meaning 'he laughs' because the whole situation seems hilarious and farcical.

But God was not done in checking out whether this new plan for a new nation was going to work... there was another hoop to jump through.

OK Abraham. So you have trusted me to move you into the promised land of Canaan. You have trusted me by using the symbol of circumcision and... Ok... so eventually you trusted me to give you a son. What I want you to do is take your son. The special son I have given you. Go up the mountain and at the top, sacrifice him. Then I will know that you really do trust me.

If this was a test then it certainly seemed like a pretty intense and brutal one.

If you can picture the scene. Abraham... is there with the knife, the fire, and I suspect a walking frame. Isaac, young, but quite strong, carrying the wood on his back up to the place where he was going to be sacrificed. Does that picture remind you of anything? Especially poignant when in all innocence Isaac utters the incredibly prophetic words,, as he stand with the wood on his back.. Where is the lamb who is to be slain?" I mean just wow. And then the reply from his father.... God will provide for himself the lamb

My admiration for Isaac at this point is incredible. He trusts his father, who in turn trusts his heavenly father that this is what needs to happen. Of course Isaac has heard the stories of God's incredible miraculous intervention which means that he is here. I don't think deep down that either Isaac or Abraham believed that the episode would end in death and foolishness... I think they both believed that if God was involved, then something amazing would happen. That God could be trusted.

Would the knife disappear on impact. Would Isaac be killed, but then God would immediately bring him back to life. Who can imagine what was going through their minds at that moment.

Throughout the episode Isaac seems content to go with it. I can hardly imagine Isaac as a person unable to escape the clutches of a man well over 100 years old. I get the sense that Isaac would have been helping

his Dad... helping him arrange the wood and tie the knots....almost as if this trip up the mountain was a joint agreement between God and Abraham and Isaac. Could they both whole-heartedly go through this process trusting that God was to be trusted.

And God lets the whole thing go down to the wire. Abraham is there with his knife aloft and committed to doing the deed before the angel intervenes and calls a halt to the proceedings.

God has seen the level of faith and trust that Abraham and Isaac have placed in Him, and God indeed provides the sacrifice. A ram – a grown male sheep -to become the sacrifice which seals the deal. And the episode ends with God once again reiterating the promise to Abraham that this act of faith by this man of faith will lead to a situation far beyond his imagining... descendants too numerous to count – a blessing beyond his wildest dreams.

Beyond this extraordinary episode we don't know much about Isaac. There is a long account about how his wife Rebecca was chosen and brought 1000 miles from Abraham's clan rather than him choose a local girl to marry. We also learn that they also struggled to conceive a child... and then twins arrive – Esau and Jacob. Isaac was not a great King or warrior. He seems to have been a caring and patient husband at least until the twins were born... but then we start to see some of his flaws... he played favourites with his children, he doesn't always tell the truth. He becomes open to manipulation. The great patriarch is actually just an ordinary bloke....But even his faults and failings were used by God and woven into his plan.

So where does this land for us. What can we take away from the story of Isaac?

Well I think it is the pattern of his life which foreshadows our own. From his own character, his own efforts and his own imperfections does he naturally qualify to be there at the head of the roll of the family of God... well I don't see that that is the case. It seems that the ram who was slain instead of him. He was the innocent one, caught in the thorn bush, but it seems that it is the sacrifice of the ram, its blood spilled in Isaac's place, which enables Isaac to take his place as a man blessed by God and fully embedded in the story of God.

I think that this story of Isaac is a vivid reminder that we gain our salvation, our relationship with God not because of the people that we are, but because of the sacrifice which bought us our freedom to live within the family of God.

Do you feel worthy of that privileged position that you hold as a child of God and inheritor of the riches of his kingdom beyond our imagining? Me neither! But thanks be to God, that the one great sacrifice of Jesus was enough to atone for the sin of the whole world.

Our lives may feel a bit of a mess and inadequate.. Our world might look an utter shambles and there is so much brokenness and we know it is beyond our ability or capacity to fix it. But please, lift your eyes up to see Jesus. His sacrifice is sufficient. With him there is hope, there is life, there is joy. If we live and work in the light of his sacrifice, then not only is there hope, there is assurance that God can weave even our lives into the vast tapestry of his story which will one day be completed in glory and wonder and peace and justice. May we continue build each other up in the wonderful good news of his gospel so that we may see his victory as our destiny. Amen