

Close encounters with God - Gen 22:1-18 and Gen 28:10-17

This week we heard about The death of a doctor widely regarded as a hero in China for blowing the whistle on the threat posed by the Wuhan coronavirus. Li Wenliang was among a number of supposed "rumourmongers" arrested in December for spreading news about the virus. Nothing Li said was incorrect and he made a sacrificial choice to spread awareness about the virus despite the risks he faced, especially to his reputation and to his own health. He continued to care for patients up until he was infected himself. We now know that Li was a very strong christian, and you can read his poem on the other side of the hymn sheet. He has left behind a young family and a wife who is 8 months pregnant and also infected. We will pray for them later.

Our Bible readings today might be familiar to you. The common thread is God's blessing but first I want to look at another topic which threads through the whole Bible. Sacrifice. Let's remind ourselves where we are in the story. A fortnight ago Anne spoke about the times when Abraham trusted God and the times when he did not. Though he failed some of his ten tests, God's plan was big enough for him to bless Abraham regardless.

He set up a covenant with Abraham. A covenant comprises three main elements:

- 1). A seal of the agreement made between two people which binds them to it. Just think...God binding himself to a human. From now on he wanted to be known as the God of Abraham.
- 2) A sacrifice of some sort; and
- 3) A sign - for Abraham's family it was circumcision.

Abraham and his wife Sarah, despite her old age, did eventually have a promised son - Isaac. He was very precious to them both but we don't hear much about his childhood apart from when, as Anne talked about, Sarah asked Abraham to banish Hagar and Ishmael (her son by Abraham) because of their sibling rivalry and jealousy.

But then came this very strange episode that has kept commentators busy- both Jewish and Christian alike. The Jewish term for it is Akedah which means 'binding' but the Christians concentrate more on the sacrificial aspect. Sacrifice means the death of one thing so that another can have new life. In Abraham's time it was still early days - no law had been given yet. The first sacrifice and thus the first ever death in the Hebrew Bible was when God killed a lamb so that Adam and Eve could wear clothes to hide their shame. We then hear about Cain, and his brother Abel, who was the first human ever to offer an animal sacrifice. If you come to that story without any background you will wonder why he did it, because the reason for animal sacrifice is given later. Here we are simply told, "*Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord looked with favour on Abel and his offering*" whereas he did not appreciate Cain's grain offering. Why? It was the offering of the first born animal as a special sacrifice.

Noah too offered an animal sacrifice after the flood, as did Abraham, in his first test, when asked by God to migrate to Canaan. And so we come to his last test when once again he is asked to offer a sacrifice. But this time it is to be this precious son, from whom God had promised there would be many descendants. I don't know about you, but at this stage I would be screaming

“What God? Are you out of your mind? You told Noah that a human’s life was precious as we were made in your image.”

However we also need to remember that this wasn’t Abraham’s first experience with God. God had already revealed himself to him many times through his successes and failures, his faith and fear, in promises and forgiveness. Abraham knew the character of God so he obeyed God’s unexpected command because he trusted God’s promise and knew him to be good and faithful. He did not think that Isaac would die, as when they reached the mountain, Abraham told his servant, “*Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there, we will worship and then come back to you*”. The text is careful to include both Abraham and Isaac in the return journey. But consider both the fact that Abraham got Isaac to carry the wood and also Isaac’s question about where the lamb for the sacrifice would come from to which Abraham responds, “*God himself will provide the lamb*” I wonder if that makes you think of a very important future event. It seems Abraham prepared himself to do what God asked, but he expected something else to happen. The author of the book of Hebrews gives us insight into Abraham’s thoughts. It says, “*He considered that God was able even to raise from the dead*”. Instead of a resurrection, Abraham was spared the sacrifice. But most importantly, this story gives us pointers to God’s ultimate plan to save humankind through Abraham’s offspring.

The story of Abraham and Isaac takes on a larger significance when you place it in the context of prophetic drama. Throughout the Bible, God caused prophets to dramatise in miniature things that he would one day do on a larger scale. Then you start asking different questions. When we read this passage we may think, "How could God have required this?" But when we view the story through the lens of prophetic drama, we can ask, "What did God intend us to learn through this?" Just as the prophet Hosea was called to act the part of God in marrying a prostitute; and Ezekiel had to lie on his side for over a year to symbolise the siege of Jerusalem, so God asked Abraham to act the part of God in the sacrifice of his own son.

Two more links to consider before moving to the second reading... Firstly that this took place on Mount Moriah - which is in what became Jerusalem where Solomon built the temple and where Jesus was later crucified - so we will be definitely be hearing more about that mountain as we move through 2020 vision. Secondly, you might have noticed that the story started with God speaking and then moved to the Angel of the Lord. This happens in quite a few Old Testament stories - you could do some detective work yourself. I will be explaining that more fully another time. I am hoping and praying that as we move through 2020 vision, it will encourage you to see the Bible more as a whole and want to delve into its pages.

Which leads me onto the second half of this talk....Jacob’s ladder. We are now travelling with Abraham’s grandson who is fleeing his elder brother as he had deceitfully stolen both his birthright and the blessing that comes from being the older son. He had, though, finally received a proper blessing from his father Isaac which you can read about in your notes. He fell asleep and had a dream in which he saw a ladder between heaven and earth with angels ascending and descending it. The respected German theologian, Jurgen Moltmann, says that in Jewish theology, Heaven and Earth are not separate. “*Heaven is the place where God’s intention for creation exist, and from there, they can inform and shape the realm of the earth. This is called*

God's Kingdom breaking in. One day, when his will is done on earth as it is in heaven, then his kingdom will have fully come."

This is what Jacob saw - a free interchange between this world and the world where God's will rules perfectly. In his dream he was at the bottom and might have wanted to go up but was unable to. The ladder signifies the divine connection between God and the earthly realm, specifically Jacob's family. His descendant Jesus came down to earth and through his sacrifice, we do now have access to heaven. For in Christ, heaven and earth are united, and through him they will be finally and completely united and indeed Jesus alludes to it when calling Nathaniel as one of his disciples. *He then added, "Very truly I tell you, you will see 'heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on' the Son of Man."*

And so to the theme that occurs in both readings: God's blessing. You might remember Adrian talking about this on Advent Sunday and it is all in your notes. God re-iterates this time and time again - especially after Abraham had showed his faithfulness through offering Isaac as a sacrifice and then being a bit more explicit, in Jacob's dream. *"Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth", he says. "All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I will watch over you wherever you go and I will bring you back to this land..."* Jacob had no doubt heard about the great God who appeared to Abraham and to Isaac, but now this same God has a personal encounter with Jacob himself. This was a life-changing experience for Jacob and he set up a pillar to remember it.

We have thought about sacrifice and we have thought about blessings. Let us stay quiet for a moment and ask God if he wants us to be sacrificial in any new way so that we can be a blessing to those around us. Be expectant that he will speak to you.