**Third Sunday after Trinity – 2 July**

**Genesis 22. 1-14 (Matthew 10)**

Curiosity didn’t only kill the cat. The ram also paid a price for its inquisitiveness. He was a bit of an alpha male, the head of the herd, and it was his job, not just to strut around impressing the girls, but also to be the front man if danger threatened. So when he heard the rustling in the clearing just beyond the shrubs he thought he ought to go and take a look. Manoeuvering through the undergrowth he saw through the thickets a strange sight. Two men, one older than the other, with the younger tethered to some sort of pallet, with the older man in an obvious kind of distress. The younger one’s eyes were open in some kind of terror, but he said nothing, even though he was breathing heavily. He was held fast by his bindings, but didn’t seem to struggle. The older man was swaying, and was clearly struggling with himself, looking up to the skies as if pleading with some invisible object far above. He then drew a knife from his belt and approached the younger person who held him in his gaze. The ram was transfixed. He had never seen behaviour like this before, even from humans, and was startled when the man with the knife lifted it high pointing it towards the other’s chest. He couldn’t, could he? And as he was about to plunge the knife downwards, a loud noise echoed through the clearing. Now the ram was properly scared. He turned to go back the way he came, but he found that his horns had caught in the thicket, and he couldn’t extricate himself from it. The more he struggled the more he became entangled. And more importantly, he was heard by the old man, who immediately rushed over, and tethered the ram’s legs so he could not move at all. The man hacked away at the branches, and dragged the ram by the neck over to the pallet where the young man was still tethered. The last thoughts the ram had before that same knife slashed across his throat was to wonder why he had given in to his curiosity.

The story of Abraham and Isaac is one of the great blockages of the Old Testament. How on earth could a father think of doing this to his son, and what kind of God would ask him to do this? Over the centuries the story has been explained away or amplified in all sorts of ways to dull its brute force. This shows that Abraham was obedient to God to the nth degree. God’s commands override everything. This was a period when human sacrifice was still practised, so we shouldn’t be surprised by this story appearing. It has been explained by some as presaging the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. It has even been given artistic depth to some extent in Benjamin Britten’s mesmerising canticle of 1952, so beautifully sung by Toshi and Peb in this very establishment ten days ago, where the voices of Abraham and Isaac interweave as they come to terms with the significance of the occasion, before both voices blend into the voice of God.

Yet no amount of explanation will ever cancel out the notion that this is a brutal, brutal story, and the questions surrounding it remain as a constant challenge to anyone who claims to believe in a loving God. What sort of God would ask this of anyone? I know of no parent who would not defend their children to the hilt, but to have the hilt of the knife plunge into the son by the hand of the father, well that is unimaginable. Even when my wife told this story to her children at school, and said that Isaac wasn’t killed in the end, more than one voice sparked up, saying, it was all very well for Isaac not to be murdered by Abraham, but what about the ram? It didn’t end well for him, did it?

No, this story cannot be defended. And nor should it, for if we try and explain it away – well, people were different then – then we will end up missing the point entirely, a point that not only affects this story but the whole notion of how God is portrayed in the scriptures.

For the point I am making is that scripture does not, cannot, portray God as he is, but as he is presented by those who believed in him. Scripture is not a record of the absolute nature of God – what God is like – but about how we, as the human race, try and make sense of him. Time and time again we hear theologians and preachers say that God cannot be described; he is an eternal mystery. We are in the Trinity season, and if you want a slap bang, in your face Christian mystery then look no further than the Trinity. God is unexplainable. So why should we suddenly think that in the Bible we have the clearest exposition of what God is like?

So does this mean I have a typically liberal attitude to scripture? Well, in some senses I do, for here comes a statement of faith. I do not believe for one second that any word of the Bible was dictated to suppliant recorders by God himself. Instead I do believe that people over the span of many centuries wrestled with their understanding of God and put down on parchment a record of that wrestling. It delivers some unbelievably beautiful poetry, especially in the psalms. It also delivers some pretty monstrous actions, like the wiping out of indigenous peoples in Canaan by the people of Israel after they left Egypt. Both perspectives can’t be right, but they don’t need to be because different people wrote with different perspectives over hundreds of years.

Don’t get me wrong. Yesterday, at one of the most moving services you will ever attend, the ordinations, candidates are asked whether they believe that Holy Scriptures reveal all things necessary for eternal salvation through Jesus Christ, and they dutifully reply yes. And so would I. But that doesn’t mean for one iota that scriptures explain God or define him. It says, in effect, scriptures reveal Jesus, which they do; do you therefore believe in Jesus? Yes, we shout. But do I think there is no more to say about God? No I don’t. If it were so, why should God have stopped dictating to the faithful sometime around the year 100AD? Does that mean that everything since then is simply God some distance removed, a second-hand God sold by some dodgy salesman doubling up as a fourth century bishop? Of course not.

Does it mean that the worship *we* have today, and the fellowship *we* generate, and the music *we* share, especially in that moment of the beautiful weaving of Toshi and Peb’s voices last week during the singing of the Britten canticle, are in any way detached from divine reality because they are not presaged in scripture?

No. Of course scripture is foundational. It is the record of Jesus, after all. But all its contributors, all of them, even that stentorian voice of the first generation of the Church, Paul, were stumbling to understand who this God is. It was Paul who said that we see [now] through a glass darkly, but then [after our deaths] we will see God face to face. He knew that this side of paradise there would be great gaps in our understanding. None of the writers of scripture, including Paul, didn’t have all the answers, by a long chalk. They got things wrong. So when Paul goes off on one about women or homosexuality we do not have to believe that, because Paul said all this in his letters, and these have been incorporated into the canon of scripture, that somehow they have the divine imprimatur. We don’t have to agree with Paul in everything. We can think differently!

It doesn’t mean scripture is relative to its times, and that we can just dismiss it willy-nilly. But how God reveals himself to us, in the here and now, is just as valid, and how our faith is informed by the experience and reality of scripture is fundamental to our pilgrimage of faith.

So where does this leave the Abraham and Isaac story? Well I would forget some of the explanations, some of which are palpable rubbish, that try and explain it away in a proto-Christian context. One explanation I read in preparing for this actually tried to convey the impression that this was a beautiful vision of God because of what the sacrifice on the cross led to. God deliver us from such nonsense. It is just a story shrouded in the midst of time, where an ancient writer attempted to make sense of one man’s struggle and another’s subservience. All we can do is see it through the prism of our twenty-first century sensibilities, and that means we will always confront its innate brutality with distaste. All we can say is that responsibility to family and the honouring of God interweave in this brutal, violent tale, which, you could say, has been part of the human exploration of God ever since, where brutality and violence have always brushed up against transformative beauty. And in our own day and age, let us not forget that this story is being repeated endlessly, with fathers killing their sons in the name of God. Our shock and our sadness expressed as we read this account doesn’t mean that we don’t have a lot of work to do to curb our murderous instincts. But don’t tell me that *God* occupies the brutal and the violent to make a point. He doesn’t. And don’t forget the ram.