

## Parish of Central Exeter

### Morning Worship and Spiritual Communion

3rd Sunday after Trinity 28 June 2020



The Sacrifice of Isaac (Another fine mess you've gotten me into! Laurel and Hardy)

When does an ordinary life  
Become extraordinary,  
A mundane day  
Become revolutionary,  
A moment in time  
Change history?

The story of Abraham preparing to kill his son Isaac as a sacrifice is well known and no spoiler alerts are needed about what happens. It is a dark story but before we get into that we shall begin with a more acceptable sacrifice.

*Follow the link for a South Korean choir singing John Rutter's version of 'For the Beauty of the Earth'. The words appear on the screen.*

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sb\\_EvQkHYyM&list=RDsb\\_EvQkHYyM&start\\_radio=1&t=89](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sb_EvQkHYyM&list=RDsb_EvQkHYyM&start_radio=1&t=89)

In his comments following the reading, Richard has helped us to see beyond the story as told, and explore Abraham's inner turmoil and how he resolves it. Keith also makes a link back to last week's reading to suggest that we might see some clear progression between the two events.

#### Opening Prayer

In which we can reflect how we might discern the right thing to do.

*From Prayer to do God's will (Thomas Merton)*

My Lord God,  
I have no idea where I am going.  
I do not see the road ahead of me  
Nor do I really know myself,  
And the fact that I think I am following Your will  
Does not mean that I am actually doing so.

### **Prayer for Conscience and Courage**

Loving God,  
lead us beyond ourselves  
to care and protect,  
to nourish and shape,  
to challenge and energize  
both the life and the world  
You have given us.

God of light and God of darkness,  
God of conscience and God of courage  
lead us through this time  
of spiritual confusion and public uncertainty.

Lead us beyond fear, apathy and defensiveness  
to new hope in You and to hearts full of faith.

Give us the conscience it takes  
to comprehend what we're facing,  
to see what we're looking at  
and to say what we see  
so that others, hearing us,  
may also brave the pressure that comes  
with being out of public step.

Give us the courage we need  
to confront those things  
that compromise our consciences  
or threaten our integrity.

Give us, most of all,  
the courage to follow those before us  
who challenged wrong and changed it,  
whatever the cost to themselves.

*Prayer for Conscience and Courage by Joan Chittister*

### **Assurance of forgiveness**

Jesus, in extravagant compassion,  
has already secured our forgiveness,  
and calls us to live as those who are renewed and  
thankful.

Receive this grace, and share it.  
We are so grateful;  
we will go and live differently  
because of what you, Jesus, have done for us. ([www.sacredise.com](http://www.sacredise.com))



The story of Isaac has beckoned to many artists over many centuries. For almost all the moment chosen is the second before Abraham will plunge the knife into Isaac. He is also depicted in such a way that there is no doubt to the viewer that he is going to carry out this deed.



Caravaggio

Sacrifice of Isaac 1601

Uffizi Gallery, Florence

The angel is staying Abraham's hand  
and pointing to the substitute victim.



In the first of these two modern paintings. Abraham appears to have an almost crazed look in his eyes as the angel intervenes. An unsettling portrayal to say the least.

*Sacrifice of Isaac by  
Adi Holzer  
Contemporary artist  
mainly known for  
innovative glass work  
born 1936 in Austria,  
and currently living in  
Denmark.*

*Sacrifice of Isaac (1984) by Israeli  
artist Menashe Kadishman 1932  
– 2015 Museum of Israel,  
Jerusalem*

*This appears far more enigmatic,  
yet not without an element of  
horror.*



### **Alternative collect for the Third Sunday after Trinity**

God our saviour,  
look on this wounded world  
in pity and in power;  
hold us fast to your promises of peace  
won for us by your Son,  
our Saviour Jesus Christ

### **Reading Genesis 22 1-19**

22 Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!"

"Here I am," he replied.

<sup>2</sup> Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you."

<sup>3</sup> Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. <sup>4</sup> On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. <sup>5</sup> He said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you."

<sup>6</sup> Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, <sup>7</sup> Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?"

"Yes, my son?" Abraham replied.

"The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"

<sup>8</sup> Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together.

<sup>9</sup> When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. <sup>10</sup> Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. <sup>11</sup> But the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!"

"Here I am," he replied.

<sup>12</sup> "Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son."

<sup>13</sup> Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. <sup>14</sup> So Abraham called that place The Lord Will Provide. And to this day it is said, "On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided."

<sup>15</sup>The angel of the Lord called to Abraham from heaven a second time <sup>16</sup>and said, “I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, <sup>17</sup>I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, <sup>18</sup>and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.”

<sup>19</sup>Then Abraham returned to his servants, and they set off together for Beersheba. And Abraham stayed in Beersheba.

New International Version

## Comments

The account of Abraham’s intended sacrifice of Isaac must rank as one of the most (if not the most) unpleasant and uncomfortable passages in the Old Testament, portraying Yahweh as initially requiring a human sacrifice before accepting instead the death of a ram conveniently struggling in a nearby thicket.

A recent commentator remarks that, “the author [of Genesis] has crafted the text so as to *heighten* the very difficulties we find nearly unacceptable,” [italics in the original]. But why, I wonder, does the commentator consider it to be ‘nearly unacceptable’ rather than ‘utterly unacceptable’? Let’s be honest – the depiction here of Yahweh is appalling. Not a smidgen of acceptability about it.

I’d like to suggest a different view on the matter (other views are, as they say, available).

If we shift our perspective away from Yahweh and onto Abraham, something emerges about what makes human beings human: we are moral agents, and as such we sometimes find ourselves in situations where we need to make a choice which, although it’s ethically the correct one, could land us in big trouble. The Abraham and Isaac story, whether we take the biblical account to be historically and literally true or more of a legendary episode with symbolic power, depicts a major step forward in the development of moral awareness in humankind – defying the highest possible external authority when that is the ethical thing to do. Abraham rebels against the status quo of the ancient world which often required sacrifices, human or otherwise, in order to keep the relevant tribal god happy, but rejecting the conventional wisdom of the time entails both insight and courage: insight to realise that the proposed action is fundamentally wrong whatever the tribal god might think about it, and courage to act on this insight regardless of what the consequences might be.

Abraham tramps up the mountainside with Isaac, servants and a bundle of wood in order to do the deed, but at some stage in the proceedings he realises, “Hey, this is a nonsense. I’m not going along with it. It simply cannot be right to kill my son even if our tribal god throws a wobbly about it.” This realisation is described in the biblical account as being prompted by the intervention of an angel, but it is Abraham (not the angel, not Yahweh) who has the

responsibility of deciding between following the customary way of doing things or flouting convention by being true to this new insight. Choosing the latter is a massive step forward in ethical awareness. And in the same way that the story of what happened in the garden of Eden tells us in mythical form about the relationship between God, creation and humanity, so this story tells us something about humankind's relationship with the moral order of the universe. Abraham stands for us all.

In rejecting the course of action which we now recognize as being utterly unethical, and choosing to act in a way he saw as being right, Abraham shows us that being human entails having a right, and indeed a duty, to be willing when necessary to go against the prevailing norm, go against some authority, go against common sense – even though admittedly it would usually be easier to keep our heads down and ignore the little voice that says, “Hey, this is a nonsense. I'm not going along with it. It simply cannot be right to [fill in the blank] even if the tribal authority throws a wobbly about it.”

The biblical author attributes the change in the course of events to Yahweh being satisfied that Abraham had passed the test. But we, with hindsight, can also attribute it to a development in the moral awareness of Abraham and, symbolically, to the moral awareness of humanity. We are all moral agents. We are each of us potentially an Abraham.

P.S. Abraham substituted for Isaac a ram to be the sacrificial victim. The next stage in developing moral awareness (the ‘expanding circle’ as animal rights philosopher Peter Singer calls it) might be to see that a ram has a right to its own life, and sacrificing it might also be somewhat questionable – but that's another story.

Keith makes a link back to last week's reading of Abraham, Hagar and Ishmael.

Last week we saw how Abraham followed the divine command that he should dismiss Hagar and Ishmael, despite his own misgivings. With only limited provisions, wandering in the wilderness must have contained the high possibility of dying. There is no comment in the narrative to suggest that Abraham was aware of what happened to Hagar or at least not before the Isaac event. So perhaps he was feeling guilty about it. If so it would suggest that in the Abraham and Isaac story we see a clear step forward in Abraham's moral awareness. The biblical author, concerned to tell the story of God's special relationship with his chosen people, would not want to show the development of morality as a purely human trait, but inspired through divine revelation.

*You might now like to access*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U21b6h8q7PM>

*For the Hymn ‘Once to every man and nation’ (Note there seems to be a gap before the music starts.)*

*Words by James Russell Lowell, 1845. He was an American professor who wrote much moral and sacred poetry, including anti-slavery poems. Words are below.*

1 Once to ev'ry man and nation  
Comes the moment to decide,  
In the strife of truth and falsehood,  
For the good or evil side;  
Some great cause, some great decision,  
Off'ring each the bloom or blight,  
And the choice goes by forever  
'Twixt that darkness and that light.

2 Then to side with truth is noble,  
When we share her wretched crust,  
Ere her cause bring fame and profit,  
And 'tis prosperous to be just;  
Then it is the brave man chooses  
While the coward stands aside,  
Till the multitude make virtue  
Of the faith they had denied.

3 By the light of burning martyrs,  
Christ, Thy bleeding feet we track,  
Toiling up new Calv'ries ever  
With the cross that turns not back;  
New occasions teach new duties,  
Ancient values test our youth;  
They must upward still and onward,  
Who would keep abreast of truth.

4 Tho' the cause of evil prosper,  
Yet the truth alone is strong;  
Tho' her portion be the scaffold,  
And upon the throne be wrong:  
Yet that scaffold sways the future,  
And, behind the dim unknown,  
Standeth God within the shadow,  
Keeping watch above His own.



This four-second time-lapse photo of a Los Angeles freeway illustrates the complexities of decision-making, as one driver appears to have made a late change of mind while most drivers decided in advance whether to stay on the main road or take an exit ramp. | Photo: Susanica Tam

In Stamford University Magazine

### **Affirmation of Faith**

We believe in God who is love  
and who has given the earth to all people;  
We believe in Jesus Christ, Son of God, who came to heal us,  
and to free us from all forms of oppression;  
We believe in the spirit of God  
who works in and through all who are turned towards the truth;  
We believe in the Church: the community of faith  
which is called to worship and serve God  
and to be at the service of all people;  
We believe in God's power to transform and transfigure,  
fulfilling the promise of a new heaven and a new earth  
where love, justice and peace will flourish. Amen

### **Prayers in the time of the pandemic**

(adapted from a Church of England booklet)

God of compassion,  
keep us, we pray,  
under the shadow of your mercy  
in this time of uncertainty and distress.  
Sustain and support the anxious and fearful,  
and lift up all who are brought low;  
that we may rejoice in your comfort  
knowing that nothing can separate us  
from your love in Christ Jesus our Lord.

**Amen.**

God of community,  
through your son Jesus Christ  
you taught us to love our neighbour,  
and to care for those in need  
as if we were caring for him.  
Give us strength, in this time of anxiety,  
to comfort the fearful,  
to tend the sick,  
and to assure the isolated  
of our love, and your love.  
In the name of Christ.

**Amen.**

Gracious God,  
give skill, sympathy and resilience  
to all who are caring for the sick,  
and your wisdom to those searching for a cure.  
Strengthen them with your Spirit,  
that through their work  
many will be restored to health;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen.**

Creator God,  
may your Holy Spirit enable us to say:  
we are not people of fear:  
we are people of courage;  
we are not people who protect our own safety:  
we are people who protect our neighbours' safety;  
we are not people of greed:  
we are people of generosity;  
we are your people,  
giving and loving,

wherever we are,  
whatever it costs,  
for as long as it takes,  
wherever you call us.

**Amen**

God of all,  
in this time of the viral pandemic  
keep us, we pray, responsive to other ills of the world:  
the pandemics of racism, injustice and economic hardship.  
Direct our way toward the attainment of healing-salvation  
for all, not just the few,  
that among the changes and chances of this mortal life,  
we all may be defended by your gracious help,  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen**

### **A short Spiritual Communion**

*The Book of Common Prayer reminds us that if we offer ourselves in penitence and faith, giving thanks for the redemption won by Christ crucified, we may truly 'eat and drink the Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ', even when we cannot receive the sacrament physically in ourselves.*



Lord, have mercy.  
Christ, have mercy.  
Lord, have mercy.

O God,  
help me to trust you,  
help me to know that you are with me,  
help me to believe that nothing  
can separate me from your love  
revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

*As we prepare for communion you might like to access the Taizé chant 'Bless the Lord my Soul'. Words are on the screen.*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3IC2XWBxktk>

*Giving thanks for Christ's death and resurrection you may wish to say*

Thanks be to you, Lord Jesus Christ,  
for all the benefits you have given me,  
for all the pains and insults you have borne for me.  
Since I cannot now receive you sacramentally,  
I ask you to come spiritually into my heart.  
O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother,  
may I know you more clearly,  
love you more dearly,  
and follow you more nearly, day by day. Amen. (after the Prayer of St Richard of Chichester)

### **Post-Communion Prayer**

O God, whose beauty is beyond our imagining  
and whose power we cannot comprehend:  
show us your glory as far as we can grasp it,  
and shield us from knowing more than we can bear  
until we may look upon you without fear;  
through Jesus Christ our Saviour.

### **Closing Prayers**

*The following prayer was composed by John Veltri, S.J., a Canadian spiritual director.*

Teach me to listen, O God, to those nearest me, my family, my friends, my co-workers. Help me to be aware that no matter what words I hear, the message is, "Accept the person I am. Listen to me."

Teach me to listen, my caring God, to those far from me— the whisper of the hopeless, the plea of the forgotten, the cry of the anguished.

Teach me to listen, O God my Mother, to myself. Help me to be less afraid to trust the voice inside — in the deepest part of me.

Teach me to listen, Holy Spirit, for your voice — in busyness and in boredom, in certainty and doubt, in noise and in silence.

Teach me, Lord, to listen. Amen.



## **Benediction**

May your day be blessed  
by moments of quietness,  
light in your darkness,  
strength in your weakness,  
grace in your meekness,  
joy in your gladness,  
peace in your stillness.

*We close this morning with 'Guide me O thou great Redeemer' sung here (as custom demands!) by a Welsh male voice choir from Froncysyllte, near Llangollen, Denbighshire.*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y3NmfmVGblw>

*The village overlooks the Pontcysyllte Aqueduct, designed by Thomas Telford in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century and now a World Heritage Site.*



**Night Prayer is on the next page**

## Night Prayer



If you are able to do so, you might wish to light a candle near a window.

The prayers and liturgy we are using tonight are part of the Iona Abbey's service for Healing, Tuesday 23 June 2020

### Opening Prayers

Our faith is in God, our Maker  
Known in creation  
Revealed in scripture  
Experienced within.

Our trust is in Jesus, our Redeemer  
Known through his body  
Revealed in scripture  
Experienced within.

Our life is in the Spirit, our Sustainer  
Known in history  
Revealed in scripture  
Experienced within God,

Creator and Lover,  
you see everything you have made,  
and all you have made is good.  
Your goodness is at the centre of our lives,  
reaching out to you, creating wholeness within.  
Amen

*You might like to access below for 'In the Lord I'll be ever thankful' Taizé chant  
Words are below*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sseOf8z14uw>

In the Lord I'll be ever thankful,  
In the Lord I'll rejoice.  
Look to God, do not be afraid,  
Lift up your voices, the Lord is near;  
Lift up your voices the Lord is near.

### **Reading**

*The New Testament reading appointed for today is below.*

### **Matthew 10: 40-42**

Whoever welcomes you welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes God's messenger because he is God's messenger, will share in his reward. And whoever welcomes a good man because he is good, will share in his reward. You can be sure that whoever gives even a drink of cold water to one who is least of these my followers because he is my follower, will certainly receive a reward.

### **Reflective prayer**

Lord God, help us to love those  
whom we find it difficult to love.  
Give us a heart that reaches out  
to those we would otherwise ignore.

Give us the strength not to cross  
on the other side of the road,  
but to play the part of the Samaritan.  
This will not be easy, Lord.  
It is not in our nature.

We spread our love thinly  
among those we can relate to,  
those who share our values,  
and those who do not threaten  
our comfortable lifestyle.

It's not easy, Lord,  
and on our own we shall fail.  
It is your example that we look to.  
You turned the values of this world upside down.  
Do the same with us. Lord.  
Help us live the reality of your Love. Amen



### **An evening collect**

Lighten our darkness,  
Lord, we pray,  
and in your great mercy  
defend us from all perils and dangers of this night,  
for the love of your only Son,  
our Saviour Jesus Christ.

### **Conclusion and Blessing**

Spirit of the living God  
present with us now,  
enfold us, body, mind and spirit,  
and heal us of all that harms us,  
in Jesus' name. Amen

The Lord bless us and watch over us;  
the Lord make his face shine upon us and be gracious to us;  
the Lord look kindly on us and give us peace.  
Amen.

*As we bring worship to a close you might like to access 'The Day thou gavest Lord is ended.'*  
*Words appear on the screen.*

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eeC6M\\_RD3oE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eeC6M_RD3oE)

### **Thanks**

*Thanks to everyone who has contributed to these services:  
Especially to Richard for the comments and intercessions in this morning's worship.*

*Other material taken or developed from various websites and blogs is normally identified in the text.*



*Le fin du travail  
Jules Breton 1887  
Brooklyn Museum*