



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Thursday, June 28, 2020
The Fourth Sunday After Pentecost

Solemn Eucharist

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A Sermon by
The Right Reverend Andrew St. John, *Bishop in Residence*
on
Genesis 22:1-14, Romans 6:12-23, and Matthew 10:40-42
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The Fourth Sunday After Pentecost

How well I remember my first visit to Jerusalem in 1986 with an ecumenical group of Australian clergy led by a Reform rabbi. It was before the first Intifada but as always there were tensions abroad in that spiritually intense and holiest of cities. On our first day we were looking down on the old city from the Mount of Olives with the Temple Mount in the foreground when we became aware of people running about pursued by police on the Mount itself. Next minute tear gas was being fired and so we observed some sort of disturbance or riot at a safe distance. It was quite surreal. For our local guide it was all in a day's work as it were; it was nothing out of the ordinary. But it brought home to me how deep passions that run around that small plot of land called the Temple Mount. What it is of course is the place where the Jewish Temple once stood on its great Herodian foundations, the latter alone surviving the destruction of the Temple by the Emperor Vespasian in 71 AD. On that mount today stand two buildings of huge significance in Islam: the El Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock. The Dome, originally built in the 7th Century and rebuilt in the 11th, is the third most holy site in Islam. For Jews the wall of the Mount, that is the Herodian foundations for the long gone Temple, is their most holy site, the Western or Wailing Wall, a place where pious Jews pray all day long. On our second day we visited the Mount itself, including the Mosque and the Dome of the Rock. I can still remember my "Aha" moment when I realized that the Rock enshrined by the magnificent, gold leaf dome and walls covered with beautiful mosaic, is none other than Moriah, where Abraham was asked to sacrifice his son, Isaac. For Moslems Abraham is one of Allah's prophets along with Moses, Jesus and Mohammed. From that rock it is believed Mohammed ascended to heaven accompanied by the archangel Gabriel. Our leader, Rabbi Levi, pointed out that the Rock was most likely the very site of the Holy of Holies in the Jewish Temple. Perhaps you begin to see the causes of the tensions between Jews and Moslems around the Temple Mount. Any infringement of rights, any untoward action by either party, can lead to heightening of tensions and as we observed outbreaks of rioting. Palestinian police and Israeli soldiers are on 24-hour guard for good reason.

But at the heart of it all is Mount Moriah, that place we heard of in the first lesson, when Abraham received the extraordinary command from God to go to Moriah to offer his only son Isaac as a sacrifice to God. We are told God did these things to "test" Abraham. Some test! You can feel sorry for poor old Abraham. Isaac was his and Sarah's miraculous child, born in their old age as a result of the angelic visitation and their hospitality at Mamre when God promised the much longed for child. Isaac was indeed a special child who would provide the inheritance that every Middle Eastern patriarch desired. So you may well ask why would God who had heard the cry of Sarah and Abraham and had given them the child Isaac then put Abraham to the dreadful test of killing him. And if you remember your Abraham stories from Genesis this was not the first test Abraham had been put through. God had already asked him to cast out poor Hagar, Sarah's servant and Abraham's mistress, and her and Abraham's son, Ishmael, whom Abraham loved. And you will remember that Hagar and Ishmael almost perished in the wilderness until the angel of God intervened (sounds familiar?) to save them.

The story of the sacrifice of Isaac though has become an archetypal narrative of mythic proportions rather like the Seven Days of Creation, or of Adam and Eve in the Garden, of Noah and the ark, or the Seven Plagues in Egypt. These are stories with their roots deep in Middle Eastern culture. That does not detract from their veracity. Rather they provide a template for interpreting divine and human action. In themselves they are great stories which bear telling and retelling for themselves alone. They deserve to be read aloud to capture the rhythm and shape of the dramatic form. Note for instance the three voices of God, Isaac and the angel of the Lord addressing Abraham who each time answers “Here I am” as well as the details of the wood, the fire and the knife let alone the enormous human drama of father ordered to kill a beloved son. The sacrifice of Isaac has provided a challenge to theologians and philosophers alike throughout the ages with its shocking command. What sort of God does such a thing? The Danish philosopher and theologian, Soren Kierkegaard, wrote a book entitled “Fear and Trembling” about it in which he interprets Abraham’s blind obedience as the essential preliminary to Faith. That remarkable faith of Abraham became central to the theologies of Paul the Apostle, to St Augustine, and later on to Luther, whose *Sola Fides*, Faith Alone, became the watchword of the Protestant Reformation. The sheer human drama of the story has inspired many artists including the two versions painted by Caravaggio with the angel grabbing hold of Abraham’s knife wielding arm with one hand while the other gestures toward the ram caught in the thicket.

But above all the Sacrifice of Isaac provides an important context and background for the New Testament accounts of the Passion of Jesus. Early Christians saw in the command to kill Abraham’s son a foretaste of the death of God’s Son Jesus on the Cross, indeed on Mount Calvary which is only a short distance from Mount Moriah in Jerusalem. In addition, the whole concept of God “testing” Abraham called to mind God’s “testing” of Jesus in the wilderness and in Gethsemane. Details like the three-day journey reminded early Christians of the Great Three Days of Holy Week; Isaac’s carrying the wood for the sacrificial fire of Jesus bearing his own cross at least according to John; and above all the pathetic cry of Isaac “where is the lamb” pointed forward to the understanding of Jesus as the Lamb of God, the one who saves and makes the ultimate sacrifice.

For all that our 3 year Sunday lectionary in the Episcopal Church which is based on the ecumenical Revised Standard Lectionary give little prominence to this pivotal passage. Perhaps it has been consigned to the “too hard basket”! The reality is that apart from today’s year A, proper 8 readings, in which it is an alternate reading, and as an alternate reading on Good Friday, this passage is not read liturgically and need never be if the alternate readings are chosen. I have to admit this is the first time in nearly 50 years of ministry that I have actually preached on the passage.

Well you may be thinking it is just as well we don’t read the Sacrifice of Isaac too often. After all it gives you an odd view of God! But at a human level it is full of possibility. Abraham had been called by God to journey forth to an unknown destination and had set out obediently. Along the way God’s promises are gradually unfolded and covenants made. Much time is spent with the succession issue until in response to the hospitality of Abraham and Sarah, God promises the longed-for son, Isaac. It is this promised and much cherished son who God commands Abraham to sacrifice as a test of his vocation. Can he give up what he loves most in obedience to God? While this may seem an extreme and cruel test, nevertheless it does not take a great stretch of the imagination to think of the things which we may be called to give up or sacrifice in pursuit of a vocation or calling, or at least the tough decisions we make in life to go in one direction or another perhaps regarding a relationship, a job offer, or a course of study. There are many ways in which we are tested on a daily basis. Just at present you may feel we are being tested too much in this pandemic and prevailing political and social unrest. A friend jokingly said the other day, “when are the locusts coming?” But returning to Abraham, he did obey, and thankfully the divine intervention in light of his obedience, did provide a sacrificial substitute for Isaac. “Where is the lamb?” cried Isaac. In reply we can cry out robustly in the faith of the Risen Christ, “It is Jesus the Lamb of God the One who takes away the sin of the world and who gives us peace” who in the words of the Romans reading, is “the free gift of God which is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” God grant us such faith in your great love and purpose for us, that we may make wise decisions ever mindful of our vocation to love and serve you and our neighbor. Amen.