

October 31, 2004
The Twenty-second Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Genesis 22, which narrates Abraham's obedience to God in sacrificing his son Isaac, provides a singular example of a trial of faith. In the preceding chapter God had promised Abraham that his true posterity would come through Isaac (Genesis 21:12), but now He commands him to offer up his "only son," this same Isaac, as a holocaust (22:2).

It is important to the dramatic structure of this story that Abraham does not know he is being tried. Nor does Isaac. Indeed, only God and the reader know it (22:1). In this respect, the story of Abraham resembles the Book of Job, where the reader, but not Job, is instructed that a trial is taking place. In the case of the Abraham story, this notice to the reader is absolutely essential, because both the Jew and the Christian know that the God of the Bible hates human sacrifice. A trial of faith, on the other hand, is exactly what we should expect from the God of the Bible (cf. 1 Peter 1:6-7).

Abraham's obedience to the command is both immediate and unquestioning. It is not that Abraham is bashful. The reader, recalling Abraham's earlier "haggling" with the Lord on that business of Sodom and the plight of his nephew Lot (18:16-33), knows that this ancient Semite is not the least bit inhibited about speaking his mind to the Almighty. On the other hand, the reader also notes that when Abraham receives a direct order from God (12:1-4), his obedience is prompt and without reservation. It is the same here. Abraham consistently demonstrates that the real test of faith is obedience (cf. James 2:20-24).

Thus Abraham and Isaac, father and son, climb the mountain of sacrifice (Genesis 22:6). In the enigmatic conversation between the two climbers (22:7-8), the attentive Bible-reader perceives a rich mystery concealed in Abraham's reply that "God Himself will provide the victim for the sacrifice." Truly He will! Abraham's words are a prophecy of the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Isaac himself, however, says nothing in reply (22:9-10). Indeed, Isaac remains entirely silent after Abraham speaks. He is like a sheep led to the slaughter that opens not his mouth (Isaiah 53:7). Although the concentration of the story is directed at Abraham, we must not lose sight of Isaac, who prefigures in this story the mystery of our redemption.

We discern this mystery in the victim substituted for Isaac, the ram caught by its horns. This is the Bible's first instance of a "substitution" made in the matter of sacrifice. This ram caught in the bush foreshadows, first of all, the paschal lamb of the Mosaic Covenant, which would be slaughtered on behalf of Israel's firstborn sons on

the night of the Exodus. Here in Genesis 22, then, we are dealing with the Bible's earliest configuration of a category important in biblical soteriology.

The Apostle Paul appealed to this category when he wrote that God "did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all" (Romans 8:32). Echoing this text from Romans, Irenaeus of Lyons wrote: "Abraham, according to his faith, adhered to the command of God's Word, and with a ready mind delivered up, as a sacrifice to God, his only-begotten and beloved son, in order that God also might be pleased to offer up, for all his seed, His own beloved and only-begotten Son, as a sacrifice for our redemption" (*Against the Heresies* 4.5.4).

Hence, Isaac carrying the wood up the sacrificial hill has always signified to Christian readers—at least since a paschal homily of Melito of Sardis in the second century—the willingness of God's own Son to take up the Cross and carry it to the place of immolation.

One of our earliest Christian references to Isaac stresses also the mystery of the Resurrection. Abraham's obedience in offering Isaac, according to Hebrews 11:17-19, was based on a conviction that "God was able to raise him up, even from the dead." Hence, in receiving Isaac back again, Abraham enacted a "parable" of the future. The "parable" of this event indicates its prophetic sense, according to which God, in the Resurrection, received back His only Son, whom He had handed over in sacrifice for our redemption. (It is worth remarking that the NKJV, by translating *en parabole* as "in a figurative sense," distorts the intent of the text. Abraham did not receive Isaac back "in a figurative sense," but in a very literal sense.)

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All Saints Orthodox Church
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America
4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641
Church Office: (773) 777-0749
<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor
phri@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:
www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html
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