

November 3, 2013  
19<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost

### Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The scene at Mount Moriah, where Abraham prepared to offer his son Isaac, has long lived in Christian memory as a source of theological reflection. Melito, a 2<sup>nd</sup> century bishop of Sardis, commented on the event at some length in a Paschal homily. In this comment we observe how easily Melito fuses Isaac's ram with the lamb in Isaiah 53, as he describes the Passion of the Lord:

In place of righteous Isaac, a ram appeared for slaughter, in order that Isaac might be liberated from bonds. The slaughter of this animal redeemed Isaac. In like manner, the Lord, being slain, saved us; being bound, he loosed us; being sacrificed, he redeemed us... For the Lord was a lamb, like the ram which Abraham saw caught in the bush. But this bush represented the cross, and that place represented Jerusalem, and the lamb represented the Lord bound for slaughter. . . For as a ram was he bound, it says concerning our Lord Jesus Christ, and as a lamb he was shorn, and as a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and as a lamb he was crucified; and he carried the cross on his shoulders when he was—as Isaac by his father—led up to the hill to be slain.

But Melito also perceives a point of contrast between Jesus and Isaac:

But Christ suffered, and Isaac did not suffer: for he was a type of Christ who was going suffer (typos tou mellontos paschein Christou). Yet, even when serving only as a type of Christ, he struck men with astonishment and fear.

Even down to particular details, Melito compares what occurred on Mount Moriah with what took place on Mount Calvary:

For a new mystery appears (theasasthai mysterion kainon): a son led by his father to a mountain to be slain; he bound his feet and laid him on the wood of the sacrifice, preparing with care whatever was

necessary to his immolation. Isaac on his part is silent, bound like a ram, not opening his mouth, nor uttering a sound with his voice. For, not afraid the knife, nor fearful before the fire, nor troubled by the prospect of suffering, he sustained bravely the character of a typos of the Lord. Accordingly there lies Isaac before us, with his feet bound like a ram, his father standing by, with the unsheathed blade in his hand, not shrinking from shedding his son's blood.

The scene in Genesis 22 prompted Cyprian of Carthage and John Chrysostom to speak of Abraham as a priest. Taking up this theme, Gregory the Theologian wrote, "Abraham, the great patriarch, was justified by faith and he offered a substitute victim and the antitype of the Great Sacrifice."

Gregory wrote of the sacrifice of Abraham,

who gave to God, as an eager offering (prothymoteron), his only begotten, the child of promise, concerning whom the promise was at the beginning made by God, who rescued him.

Elsewhere Gregory declared,

Great Abraham was a patriarch, the man who offered a new sacrifice (thytes kaines thysias), by presenting to Him, who had provided it, the promised seed as a prepared offering (hiereion hetoimon), eager for slaughter.

Augustine of Hippo was particularly impressed that the promise of Abraham's great posterity, conveyed in the covenant in Genesis 15:5, was made the subject of a divine oath after Abraham obeyed God with respect to Isaac. The informing text on this point is in Genesis 22:16-18:

By Myself I have sworn, says the Lord, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your one and only—blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.

What chiefly distinguishes this divine pronouncement, Augustine observed, was the introduction of an oath. God has not hitherto sworn to His promise, but now He does. Augustine comments on the significance:

In this way, after the whole burnt offering, which signifies Christ, the promise was made firm by God's oath (iuratione Dei firmata promissio) with respect to the inclusion of the nations in the seed of Abraham. For He had often promised, but He had not sworn before (Saepe enim promiserat, sed numquam iuraverat). What is this oath of the true and truthful God except the confirmation of the promise and a kind of reprimand to unbelievers?

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