

Testing and Provision, Sunday 2nd July 2017

Third Sunday After Trinity

Genesis 22

Also briefly Matthew 10:37-end

*Noskie was a former Iman in the southern part of the Philippines. He was a devout Muslim and one who was held in respect in the little community where he lived. Coming home from a fishing expedition one day, he was shocked to discover that his two daughters had converted to Christianity. He was well aware of the shame that this would bring not only to his family but to the whole community.

In his anger he physically beat them without mercy hoping they would renounce their new faith. But the daughters remained faithful to Christ.

They loved their father and knew that nothing was impossible with God, so they started praying for their father's conversion. Sometime later, while fishing, Noskie felt a sudden piercing pain in his stomach. As the pain grew, his belly began to expand like a balloon. He twisted in unbearable pain. He prayed, but nothing happened. Desperate, he cried out to the God of his daughters, Jesus Christ, and...

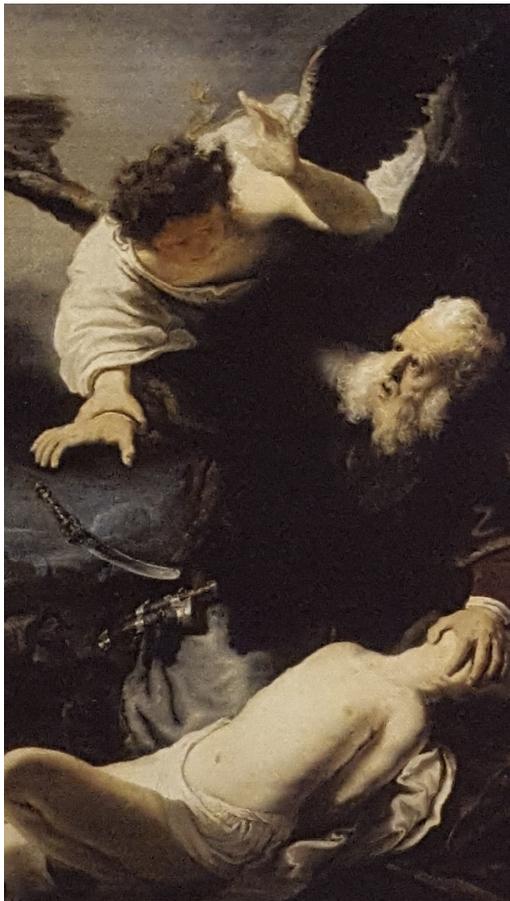
He was instantly healed.

Noskie emerged from his experience a new person. He submitted his heart and surrendered to the Lordship of Jesus

Christ. Today he faithfully serves the Lord as a lay pastor. His daughters help in that ministry.*

** A true story provided by the Christian charity, Open Doors UK.*

A huge test for these new believers and later they see God's provision of life in an unexpected way...



Abraham and Isaac, by unknown author, but contemporary of Rembrandt

Abraham and Isaac – very well known by many of us. When we consider the whole of Abraham’s story, we see earlier parallels with these events recorded here in Genesis 22. At the start – in Genesis 12 – there is a call to go, a step of faith needed, there is the act of obedience and the promise made about the future. And here again, the Lord speaks asking him to go, Abraham takes a step of faith and shows obedience and there is a promise made, restated.

He is told to Go. Abraham is tested. We see how God tests and at the end God provides. For many of us, one of those words probably sounds more appealing than another. But in some parts of Christian community, many will want only a God who provides but not a God who tests. Some in our areas where we live or in the places where we work, will say both are silly ideas – saying God does neither and so you don’t rely on these events, suggesting God does not interfere in our lives to test or to provide – we are free but also life is simply down to us... Yet Abraham, our Scriptures, will not let us away with ignoring one and only embracing the other. Even our Lords prayer – the testing is recognised – lead us not into temptation... and the provision – give us each day our daily bread.

Testing.

In the Old Testament only one Hebrew word is used for testing and temptation. The word can be called test suggesting meaning an event designed to build you up; temptation – something negative to pull you down. Our NIV translation, which we use here at All Saints, Genesis 22 says ‘God tests Abraham’, but the

King James Bible (KJV), says ‘God tempts Abraham’. It sums up the position Abraham is in – is it a test – something to build him up, or will it be a temptation to bring him down...

God tests and it is a very difficult place Abraham is in. The challenge of it is heard in God’s own words: *“take your son, your only son, whom you love, and go and sacrifice him.”* This is the first time ‘love’ is used in the Old Testament, emphasising even more what is being asked of Abraham. The Son he and Sarah had waited years for. The Son of Promise. In fact, he had a few years before, as we looked at last week, said goodbye to his stepson, Ishmael. God asks him to give up the last of his line. It is the test of the greatest level... Why does God allow these to come, or why does he initiate them? This is the mystery. He remains sovereign and our Lord chooses to act as he wills.

Abraham’s response to God’s request. We know. But consider. When the Lord reveals his plans about Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham intercedes for that city with Lot and others in mind. He stands and argues. Here it says – *“Early the next morning Abraham got up ... and he went.”* You would say, that surely if he interceded before Sodom, he should here – not only for his only son, the one he loves, not only for him and Sarah and Isaac, but also to intercede for the Promise, for it is through Isaac the offspring will come, that blessing will come to the nations. But no, Abraham gets up and goes. Why? An African theologian put it profoundly simply *‘Abraham had come to believe and know that God knows what he is doing.’* An act of trust in God, as well as obedience.

There can be just obedience but you think God is totally wrong. The film *Miracle Maker* – brings that out wonderfully – it is one

of my favourite films of Jesus life and in it, there is the point when Jesus gets into Peter's boat, and asks him to put out into the water, in the middle of the day, and says put down his nets. Peter says 'if you insist Lord' but he is muttering away, 'fish don't come up in the day', and later says ' we could be hear for hours, we could be hear all day!' He obeys but does not trust that one who speaks knows what he is doing...

And that is hard. To obey. But we can all mutter but trust that God, you know what you are doing? I think of our need for a new church building...As Stefan later will say, we have looked high and low. The number of people who have said to me that if we were anywhere except Amersfoort, we could have a number of church buildings to choose from – but we believe this city is where God called for the church to be established, his promise to build an Anglican congregation here. And then I also discovered the church buildings that were sold or into legal situations before we began, Dorrestein, this church, Dollandstraat. I thought – 'Lord if only we had began this congregation a year earlier we'd have all these churches to choose from...!' but it is a test. Does God want this church to exist, has he promised to create, form, establish, does he know what he is doing. Yes yes yes...

When we read Genesis there are three conversations, and in the second one, with Isaac we hear the depth of his faith. *“God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering my son.”* Abraham is not sure, will it be another animal provided or could Isaac be that lamb... But as Hebrews 11 reminds us, Abraham

believes God can bring life where there is death. He doesn't know how but he believes.

That walk to Moriah must have been long and hard. And I think, how was it? Was it silent, Isaac carries the wood, Abraham the fire and knife. And in Abraham's mind, when will the Lord see and provide? They reach the mountain. There is no ram or other animal. They climb Mount Moriah. No animal. They reach the place. No ram. The altar is prepared. Still no ram. Did he look around, go slower? But continue he does. The wood is prepared, No ram. This is all getting very close now. The writer is slowing down the events, each movement recorded. He binds Isaac, no ram. He puts him on the wood. No ram. He takes the knife – Abraham Abraham!!!! Talk about last minute.



Abraham and Isaac, by Rembrandt

Does our spiritual ancestor teach us, that at times, the Lord takes us to the line? Why didn't the ram come earlier? Abraham has gone all the way... Of course, part of the problem is what is God's last moment is perhaps a little late for me! But the test continues to the last possible moment. The Lord knows what he is doing...

And at the last possible moment, the Lord *provides*. The ram. And Abraham frees Isaac and the burnt offering takes place, and the promises are stated. Abraham was tested, he did not fail, he was not pulled down, but built up. And the promise is restated and reaffirmed for the descendants, for them to have victory and for blessing to come to the nations...

Reflecting on this passage, theologian John Goldingay, says:

"God put a monumentally hard demand on Abraham, but it was an expectation God was also prepared to fulfil." (John Goldingay, Genesis for Everyone)

For we see the parallels with God the Father and God the Son. The beloved son – "*you are my son whom I love with whom I am well pleased*", the voice from heaven cried at Jesus baptism... The Scripture is silent as to what Isaac knew but we wonder if a teenager could not have ran away when he realised what his father intended? Or did he, Isaac, know or trust God would provide in this test. Did he, the son, accept what had to be done? As Christ accepted, and did not run away at the Last Supper embracing his hour has come, he says this bread represents his body broken for us, his blood shed for us. But there was no relief for Christ, the Father allowed the Son to die, the Son did not come down off the cross as people wanted, in

fact the plan had been to show his love, to bring victory, to bring forgiveness to bring a new creation, that his Son would die. The knife was not held back...

And that leads us to our response ... In Romans 12, Paul has spent 11 chapters sharing much theology and declaring what God has done and then he says:

“Therefore I urge you brothers and sisters in view of God’s mercy to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God, this is your spiritual act of worship.”

And in 1 Peter 2:

“you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”

In view of God’s sacrificial act, his mercy, Paul and Peter says – we offer spiritual sacrifices, we lay down ourselves. We are to be both Abraham and Isaac, as individual believers and as a Church.

We say as Abraham – we hear, we get up early the next morning and go – we trust God will *provide* in our *test* – perhaps to bring life out of a death. To perhaps take us to the last moment.

And we are Isaac as well. Willing to lay down. Willing to offer up my life, in spirit and truth. Abraham saw what Jesus taught: *“Whoever finds his life, will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”* (Matthew 10:39). Willing to lay it all down for the King. Willing to lay down our life.

Noskie's daughters in the Phillipines.. As they embraced their faith they went into a huge test or temptation to reject Christ. This test – which Jesus promised (Matthew 10:v34-39) – of parents against children, of enemies within your own family – was hard, and they saw the Lord provide – with their father's salvation. What tests has the Lord led us into? Do we trust he knows what he is doing? Our search for a building. Well, the Lord could have provided earlier but he hasn't. But we remain faithful, we walk on, knowing that there will be provision... maybe at a time or place we did not imagine or expect. And I feel that will be our experience as we offer our lives on the altar, in the tests that come, we will experience his provision...

Shall we pray...

Lord Jesus Christ

We thank you for all the benefits you have won for us,

For all the pains and insults you have borne for us.

Most merciful Redeemer, friend and brother,

May we know you more clearly

Love you more dearly,

And follow you more nearly,

Day by day.

Amen.

Revd Grant Crowe