

Sacrificing Children to your gods

A sermon on Genesis 22:1-14 by Nathan Nettleton, 2 July 2017

© LaughingBird.net

Message

What we do with our children is one of the great tests of our faithfulness to the God of Jesus, and tragically, child sacrifice is common in our society.

Sermon

The story we heard from Genesis 22 tonight, the story of how Abraham nearly killed his only child, is a story that sends chills up my spine. I sometime wish it wasn't in our Bible at all, or at least not in the cycle of stories that we read in worship. But, this story won't go away. Not just because it is in the Bible – there are lots of stories in the Bible that we almost never hear – but because this story strikes chords deep in the human heart. This story speaks of things that we know in our guts really matter, even if we can't articulate what they are.

Christians, Jews and Muslims have kept coming back to this story, over and over and over, because it touches on realities about ourselves, about our common humanity, that are dangerously perplexing and terrifying, but which are even more dangerous if they are never named and faced and grappled with.

And I think that for us in this congregation, the jarring juxtaposition of this frightening story with our chosen path of honouring our children as full participants in our worship is challenging us to ask how these differing aspects of our faith can speak to each other. If this story doesn't mean anything when we are worshipping alongside our children, then does it really mean anything at all? And if all the lovely things we like to say about children don't mean anything in the face of this story, do they mean anything at all?

A first encounter with this story shocks and horrifies us. We instinctively begin asking ourselves how anyone could seriously contemplate killing their own child as a sacrifice to please God, any god. We ask ourselves how anyone could believe that God was asking them to kill a child.

And if we are brave enough, we may begin asking ourselves what kind of god would test someone by asking them to kill a child, and whether this could really be the God that we worship. Could a god who would do such a thing be worthy of our worship?

These questions are really important, and I'm not dodging them, but there are a couple of other things that must be noted before we can do them justice. The first is to note that these questions arise from our horror over the whole idea of the ritual sacrifice of children, but such questions would not have jumped up in the same way in the days when these stories were first told. In Abraham's day, and in the days of the early Israelite nation when this story was being told as part of the collection of stories that shaped the nation's understanding of itself, the religious sacrifice of children was not much of a shock at all.

The fact that the later law of Moses explicitly prohibited the offering of children as religious sacrifices is evidence enough that the practice was common enough to need addressing. So rather than provoke shock at the very idea, this story originally served as part of the

explanation for why Israel, unlike many of her neighbours, didn't sacrifice children. Most of the Genesis stories have this kind of explanatory function.

Just as the Exodus story is told at Passover each year in response to the ritual question, "Why do we celebrate this night differently from other nights?", so this story answers the question, "Why are we different from other nations in that we don't allow the sacrifice of children?" The answer would be given something like, "Long ago our ancestors were just like everyone else and believed that sacrificing children would please God, but one day our God revealed that we should not do so. This is how it happened: Once upon a time Abraham and Isaac went up the mountain ..."

The other thing to note is that a big part of the difficulty we have with this story comes because so many of us have only ever been taught to ask Sunday school questions of these stories. We start with the dubious assumption that the most important thing about these stories is that they are historically accurate, rather than that they teach us the truth about ourselves. Whether or not they actually happened won't make a jot of difference to the kind of people we become. Whether they teach us the truth about ourselves and God can make all the difference in the world.

The simple Sunday school version of this story says that God told Abraham to sacrifice his only son in order to test whether Abraham was as obedient as he should be, and apparently Abraham passed the test because he would have gone through with killing Isaac if God hadn't stopped him. And with that reading of the story being the only one most of us have ever been offered, it provokes serious serious guilt. We think that we are not faithful enough because we would have refused to kill our own child for God. Am I right? Is that how many of you have heard this story?

There are numerous problems with this reading of the story, and the most obvious and important is that the text doesn't actually say that the test was to find out whether Abraham would obey. It simply says God tested Abraham. It doesn't actually say what the test was aiming to find out. And of course, the question of what the test was seeking to find out is crucial to our questions about what sort of God would set such a test.

I can't confidently give you an alternative explanation of the test, because the text simply doesn't tell us, but hopefully I can help you to see that there are alternatives that are both faithful to the text and more consistent with the nature of the God made known to us in Jesus.

When we talk about testing someone in a relationship, we often don't mean a kind of pass or fail test on whether they can achieve some task. If we speak of a couple using a period of engagement to test one another or to test their relationship, it is about finding out who they really are and what they are really made of. It is an examination of character, not a "can you do this?" kind of test. Perhaps God was not putting Abraham through something he would either pass or fail. Perhaps instead God was seeking to know Abraham more fully, to find out what sort of person he really was

Perhaps too, as part of that, God was seeking to find out what Abraham would sacrifice his child for. You see, as much as we recoil from the idea of ritual sacrifice, the truth is that in our culture, just as in Abraham's, people sacrifice their children all the time. People routinely decide that there are causes worth sacrificing their children for. In 1939 no one was shocked

by the suggestion that freedom from Nazi or Japanese rule was a cause worth sacrificing our young people for. Our nation and the USA decided that stopping communism in Vietnam, toppling Saddam Hussein, and destroying ISIS and the Taliban were causes worth sacrificing our sons and daughters for. Our nation decided that border protection and immigration control are causes worth sacrificing the children of refugees for.

Our suburbs are full of people who are sacrificing their marriages and children in the quest for to gain another rung on the corporate ladder or to keep up with the marketed mirage of the perfect house, perfect backyard, perfect body, perfect wardrobe, and perfect cuisine. And when these apparently perfect families break up, it is horribly common to see both parents sacrificing their children in their endeavours to punish each other.

Perhaps the question was not “would Abraham be prepared to sacrifice his child?”, but “for what would Abraham be prepared to sacrifice his child?” And surely that is the question of us too. It has been insightfully said that if you really want to know what God a person worships, look to see what they will sacrifice their children for.

Perhaps, similarly then, there is a test of what god Abraham trusts. This is especially likely since, as we have already seen, this story takes place in the context of a changing understanding of who God is and what God requires.

There is an interesting textual suggestion of this in the story. In its original Hebrew, there are two different names used for God in this story. In the first part, the name is “El”, which is the oldest Hebrew word for God, and which is also used as a generic name for the gods, any gods. But when God says, “Stop, do not harm the child,” it is Yahweh, the sacred personal name which is only known after God’s self-revelation to Moses. Now you can’t build a definitive interpretation of the passage on this bit of terminology, but it does tell us to be alert for an unfolding understanding of God, for a move from an understanding of God as just another local god with the same sort of tastes as the rest of them, to a very specific God, a God who is known by name and who relates us to us in justice and compassion and calls out to us to do no harm to the child.

Perhaps then, the focus of our consideration of Abraham’s faith here should fall, not on his willingness to respond to the first voice, but to the second; on his obedience to the voice that commanded him not to harm the child. Perhaps the positive example of Abraham’s faith is not to be found in his almost doing what he didn’t do, but in his not doing what he almost did. When the voice of Yahweh, the God of justice and compassion, cried out, “Stop. Do not harm the child,” Abraham responded in obedience and faithfulness. He was faithful to the very God whose name he might have invoked to justify the killing of the child, and in whose name his neighbours would have accepted that he had done the right thing.

And perhaps that is where this story is calling us: are we able to be faithful to God and to our children by refraining from sacrificing them to the gods that everyone else is sacrificing their children too. When the gods of war and greed and anger and selfish ambition demand that we sacrifice our children to buy their blessing, will we have the courage and integrity to resist them and instead obey the voice crying “Stop. Do not harm the child,” the voice of the God made known to us in Jesus the Christ.

Perhaps even here in this church, when we are tempted to sacrifice our children in order to protect the pristine and uninterrupted stillness of our personal experience of worship, will we have the courage to recognise that for the idol it is, and welcome the children in to make their contribution to the offering of worship which God will otherwise regard as impoverished. It is a paradox, isn't it, that by trying to make our worship more beautiful for us, we might make it far less acceptable to God. We are called to choose; to choose between a God of exclusions and violence and a God who comes to us embodied in a child.

In our gospel reading tonight (Matthew 10:40-42) we are told that to welcome and care for those who are on mission as representatives of God's kingdom is to welcome and care for Jesus himself. And elsewhere in the gospel, we are told that it is the children who most clearly represent the kingdom to us, and that to welcome them is to welcome God. And it is precisely in their vulnerability before us, in the ease with which we can disregard them and sacrifice them in clambering after our own interests that children embody the nature of God to us. We are called to have the courage and integrity to welcome and defend those whom others would sacrifice, for in welcome and protecting them, we welcome and honour God.