

Genesis | Alt*red state: A text of terror brings good news

A reflection on Genesis 22:1-14 (Year A, Proper 8)

Alison Sampson, South Yarra, 2 July 2023

Summary:

The usual interpretation of the binding of Isaac is that God requires us to sacrifice everything, even, if asked, our own children. But could a contextual awareness reveal a more life-giving reading?

Sermon:

All around the world today, people will be listening to the story of Abraham and Isaac. And the preachers will preach and the teachers will teach that Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his beloved son is a model of faith; and so we, too, are called to sacrifice everything for Jesus' sake—even, if necessary, our own children. And some adults will nod wisely, thrilled by such demands; others will feel sickened, and maybe leave the faith; and any children who are paying attention will be horrified. They will wonder why anyone would want to worship a god who might ask their parents to hurt them, and that is an excellent question.

For the usual reading says that God may require the sacrifice of vulnerable people entrusted to our care; and this is why, for example, many pastors and missionaries have felt able to work so hard and sacrifice so much of their own children's childhoods. I myself was uprooted every two years as my mother was called to each new church, a process I found incredibly difficult; and friends were sent to boarding school at 4 so their parents could work as missionaries, unencumbered by the burden of parenting.

But is there another reading that does not demand sacrifice, a reading more consistent with the God of love? I think there is; but it requires us to read the story carefully, thinking about its context and looking at language. If we do this, I believe we will find that this is a story which celebrates life. Not death, but life.

The first thing to note is that the story was told at a time and in a context where the blood sacrifice of children was normal. It was the right and good thing to do. In the Ancient Middle East and in many other cultures, children were sacrificed to appease the gods. Indeed, the abduction and ritual murder of children by sorcerers and witchdoctors still happens in some countries today, most notably Uganda. We may feel revulsion at the story of Abraham and Isaac and the knife, but we need to understand that nobody hearing it for the first time would have raised an eyebrow. Abraham

was doing the right thing: called to sacrifice his son, he prepared to do so.

The second thing to note is the changing name of God, often masked in the English translations. The story opens with 'El', the generic word for god. El is the god that everyone knows, the god like all other gods: and it is this god which demands the sacrifice of Abraham's son. But it is Yahweh, or the LORD, who stays Abraham's hand. Yahweh is the personal, relational God revealed to Israel: and it is a messenger from Yahweh who calls to Abraham and says, "Do not harm the boy..."

The third thing to note is that, when this god speaks, Abraham does something brave and radical. For he listens to this new voice: the voice which tells him not to harm his son, the voice which demands he act differently to everyone else. The good, the right, the proper thing would be for Abraham to sacrifice his son, but he does the harder thing: he comes back down the mountain, and he brings the boy with him. And then, one imagines, he has to try and convince all his neighbours and friends and relatives that he has done the right thing, while they, no doubt, are terrified that, in his failure to sacrifice the boy, God will punish them all.

We can get so caught up in the shocking thought that Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son that we can miss the point: In his context, the shocking thought is that, based on new information and a new understanding of God, Abraham did NOT sacrifice his son. But that is precisely the point: followers of Yahweh, the God of Israel, DO NOT sacrifice their children, and this is a major shift in understanding.

It's so huge that it is hard for Israel to believe it. And so, as the history of Israel unfolds, people do fall back into child sacrifice from time to time. But each time the prophets rage against it, and gradually, the refusal to sacrifice children becomes the norm. Abraham was willing to give everything he had to God, and this is wonderful; but what is even more wonderful is the revelation that the God of Israel, Yahweh, does not demand destructive sacrifice.

This understanding grows and grows until, much later, the prophets reveal that God does not even demand the sacrifice of animals. Instead, this God seeks only justice, mercy, kindness, and peace. In other words, anything which demands the sacrifice of children or other vulnerable people is not the God of Israel, our God: instead, it is an idol.

It's a good thing that we all get this—or do we?

Actually, we don't. We sacrifice children—our children, other people's children—to idols and ideals all the time. At the extreme

end, all over the world, children are in armies and sex shops and kept out of school, sacrificed to idols of militarism, and violence, and the patriarchy, and adult desire. Children slave in cocoa and coffee plantations, and work in factories and sweatshops, making our clothes and the food that we eat; they're sacrificed to the idol of consumerism and our lust for consumer goods.

In the US, labour laws are being changed to enable children to work in heavy industry; closer to home, young children have recently been found to be working in fast food joints, all sacrificed to the idols of cheap labour and the pressures of an avoidable poverty. Meanwhile, children here as young as ten are thrown into jail for minor offences and breaches of bail; even young children are kept in solitary confinement; Indigenous children bear the brunt of this; all sacrificed to idols of law and order.

What else? Children seeking asylum live in the hell of visa limbo, sacrificed to the idols of national sovereignty and border control. Autistic children are removed from mainstream classrooms, sacrificed to the idols of 'normality' and political games. Same-sex attracted and transgender children are turned into political pawns. They're bullied at school and excluded from churches, sacrificed to the idol of heteronormative ways of being.

All children are kept out of many church services, sacrificed to the idol of well-ordered, quiet, cerebral forms of worship; and don't get me started on the children sacrificed to priests and the power and reputation of the church.

In private homes, children are given the dregs of their parents' time, energy, and focus, sacrificed to the idols of careerism and 'me-time'. Children are fought over by controlling adults and divorcing parents, sacrificed to the idols of adult egos and needs: and anyone who has watched Succession has seen just how horrifically this can play out. Which is all to say, we might not slaughter children on stone altars, but children are sacrificed all the time to the demands and values of our society.

But our God is the God of life, the God who says, "Do not harm the child..." Our God will watch as we lay children upon the altars of militarism, or consumerism, or heteronormativity, or ego, or status, or money; but, just when all seems lost, our God will demand that we stay our hand. And we choose. We choose which voice we listen to. We can choose to act like everyone else, sacrificing children to ideals and idols and our society's rapacious greed—or we can choose to live differently. We can risk approbation and censure, and seek to get children off plantations and out of sweatshops; free children from detention; educate and feed all children; honour children's needs when our work demands

escalate or our relationships break down; to care for the planet for the sake of our children's children; and to welcome all children into our lives and our churches, however noisy or messy or uncomfortable our lives become.

We can opt for the violence of normal life, the life that is a living death; or we can choose for the god of life: the one who demands only justice, mercy, kindness, and peace, and who, in human form, placed a little child at the heart of things and told his disciples to do likewise.

Sacrificing children is the default setting: it's the easy option. But if you seek the God of life, the God here revealed to Abraham, you must live differently. You must come down the mountain and face the harsh criticism of the people of the tents: your relatives, your neighbours, your employers, your politicians and your priests.

They'll call you a hippie do-gooder, a bleeding heart, naïve; they'll accuse you of undermining traditional family values; they'll mock how you raise your children, and how you worship, work, shop and play. But do not be afraid. You will not be alone. For coming down the mountain, you will be walking slowly and listening to chatter: for you will be hand in hand with a little child, who trusts you to do as God asks. Amen. Ω