



One of these little ones

2 July 2017

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Genesis 22:1-14

Psalms 13

Matthew 10:40-42



http://www.stlukesinthecity.org.nz/sermons_pid_22.html

A number of us from St Luke's were at the screening of the documentary 'The White Helmets' on Friday evening, in support of Paul and Deb Hercock's daughter Bethana who travels this week to Greece to support refugees, many of whom have come from Syria and the Middle East. It was a gruelling portrayal of the work of the White Helmets, the local urban search and rescue teams in Syria who are first on the scene of bombings, fighting their way through smoke and dust and destroyed buildings to rescue whoever is still alive amidst the mayhem unleashed by the fighter pilots streaking overhead, or nowadays faceless drones as well.

But amidst the horror of the wanton destruction of civilian lives, caught in the crossfire, there was beautiful and moving depiction of the love of these men for their families. A young father tenderly kissing his 2 year old daughter goodbye as he goes out on duty. The triumphant and dangerous rescue of a one-week old baby boy from a tiny hole in a bombed building, bringing to tears a White Helmet team member who has a 2 week old boy at home. The joy of the team meeting that same little boy again when he's now a toddler, lifting the bewildered little chap high in the air. Those who say they once fought on one side or other but now are just committed to helping every person who is in need, of any age or ethnicity or religion, all made in the image of Allah, of God.

What remains with you though is the expression on children's faces, the absolute horror of what they have seen and experienced in their short lives, the trauma that must damage them forever, and yet still the trust they show in those who seek to bring help, to show love, as Bethana will be doing in Greece.

Sadly enough it feels like we have learned nothing in the centuries since our reading from Genesis today, where we seem to find a horrifying scene, an abusive father Abraham, a vulnerable child Isaac, a mother Sarah who is completely absent from the story, and a God who seems to be orchestrating the unthinkable - child sacrifice - how can we make any sense of this?

Perhaps it will help us a little to get this shocking story into some sort of context. First of all we need to remember we are talking about a time about 4000 years before our own, roughly 2000BC. And the reality was that child sacrifice was a well-known part of pagan religious practices of the time, probably seen as a way of appeasement of the gods.

We know from later parts of the Hebrew Scriptures (Leviticus 20:2-3; Jeremiah 32:35) that child sacrifice was as abhorrent to Jews as it would later be to Christians. Perhaps in this Genesis story we see reflected an ethical shift within the understanding of God's people - Abraham's shift in perception from a God who *could* demand child sacrifice to a God who *does not*, and indeed provides an alternative. Abraham ultimately takes a counter-cultural stance, and so does his God.

It's been put this way: 'Abraham's faith consisted, not of almost doing what he didn't do, but of *not* doing what he almost did, and *not* doing it in fidelity to the God in whose name his contemporaries thought it should be done.' Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 140

So much for the broader cultural context. The immediate context of this story is important here too - in the chapter before, Abraham has sent off his older son Ishmael, along with Ishmael's mother Hagar, into the desert to fend for themselves and likely to die. Was Abraham yet again seeking to manipulate the situation for his own ends, rather than trusting in God to fulfil promises in his own way? The Bible considers this story is about the *testing* of Abraham's faith: will Abraham trust and obey the Giver of the gift of Isaac, or is his interest and concern ultimately only for the Gift itself?

Abraham passes the test of faith, the letter to the Hebrews (11:17-19) puts it this way: 'By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, ¹⁸of whom he had been told, 'It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named after you.'¹⁹He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead—and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.'

Abraham is portrayed here as a hero of the faith, confident that God could even bring Isaac back to life from death. But don't you wonder about the cost of this to Abraham, and to Isaac? The Genesis account is pared back to the facts, Abraham seems dogged and unfeeling in what he does to our more over-heated sensibilities. Yet three times Abraham makes the response 'Here I am' – once to God, once to his son Isaac, and once to the angel of the Lord preventing him from harming his son. 'Here I am' is the mark of one responding to God, words of surrender and self-offering.

But we protest, what about Isaac? This experience must have scarred him for life! I recall a psychologist commenting tartly on this story, Abraham and Isaac were never very close after this...and what about Sarah? Did she even know about this little episode or was she just left out of the picture?

There are few suggestions in the Genesis account of the emotions, the depth of feeling involved. Yet Hebrews also reminds us that faith learns obedience through suffering (Hebrews 5:8) - so it was no doubt for Abraham, in facing the possibility of the death of his beloved son, and his own part in it.

Some of us have listened to a remarkable video clip referencing this story of Abraham and Isaac by former Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in relation to one of Leonard Cohen's final songs "You want it darker". (You can find it as a YouTube clip.) Cohen sings "You want it darker? We kill the flame".

Sacks sees Cohen speaking in the voice of Abraham who, like Job, argues with God and protests against the cruelty of a world where people out of love for God kill other people, just as Abraham nearly killed Isaac. How can *love* of God give rise to such *hate* for people made in the image of God? "We kill the flame". Yet Cohen includes in the song 3 times the word 'Hineni' – "here I am", I'm ready, my Lord, those words of self-offering, somehow linking together the self-offering of Abraham and of Isaac, along with the chant of the Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead, which is ultimately in praise of life and of God. Somehow he is seeking to hold together the mystery of love and suffering. Cohen includes in his song the words "Magnified, sanctified, be thy holy name, vilified, crucified, in the human frame". God's name crucified in the human frame. We as Christians hear resonances all through this story, this song of that other beloved Son, Jesus, who carried the wood of the cross, and there died for us. But lest we say that God has learned nothing, that at the cross God is guilty of 'divine child abuse' as some would say today, we need to recall that 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself' (2 Corinthians 5:19). The self-offering of the cross is not understandable without holding alongside it the mystery of God in Trinity, and so the self-sacrifice of God in love for the world, the one the German theologian Moltmann called the Crucified God.

From the child Isaac in Genesis, we turn finally to the unnamed child of the Gospel. Not for the first time, Jesus uses a child as the model of a disciple: "whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple...will not lose their reward" (Mt 10:42). (See also Matthew 11:25; 18: 2-6, 10.) Jesus sends his disciples out to embody the love of God, and tells them that despite suffering and persecution, they will receive the reward of being drawn into the circle of God's love: "whoever welcomes *you*, welcomes *me*", Jesus says, "and whoever welcomes *me*, welcomes the one who sent me". May we hear Jesus' call to us afresh today, may we have the courage to respond, Here am I, I'm ready, my Lord, and may we go out in faith to serve God's little ones in our needy world, wherever God calls us, with the love of Christ. Amen.