

Today's first reading, from the Book of Genesis, in one of the most famous stories in the Old Testament: Abraham and Isaac. I've suggested before that the Old Testament is not about God, it is about his Chosen People and their understanding of him: who God is, what is he is like and, above all, about their relationship with him. At times, this understanding is fairly primitive. In the Book of Exodus for example, the Lord says to Moses:

"I for my part will make the hearts of the Egyptians so stubborn that they will follow them (into the sea). So shall I win myself glory at the expense of Pharaoh, of all his army, his chariots, his horsemen. And when I have won glory for myself, at the expense of Pharaoh and his chariots and his army, the Egyptians will learn that I am the Lord." (Exodus 14: 15).

This describes a God whose love for his people is best shown by killing their enemies – and that's how they saw him. Not a very sympathetic understanding to our contemporary minds – but that's how it was. Today's story of Abraham and Isaac could be seen in the same way. After all, if God is omniscient, seeing all things, he would already know that Abraham was a God-fearing man – why, then, put him through the agony of thinking he has to murder his own son? And what kind of God would demand that a man kill his child to prove himself obedient and faithful? Who would want a young boy as a sacrifice, anyway? In this particular story, God

does not come across as particularly kind or loving – in fact, he appears to be rather cruel.

This is why we have to go beneath the surface and look a little deeper – because however primitive or unsophisticated the ancient Jewish understanding of God might sometimes have been, the stories that were gathered together to form the bulk of the Old Testament offer poignant lessons in humanity to every one of every age – including ourselves. This was the point made by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks to a discourteous and petulant Richard Dawkins in a ‘BBC Think’ programme some years ago. Rabbi Sacks, in a subsequent interview, was charitable enough to say that God sent Richard Dawkins for a purpose; I do not think Dawkins would have returned the compliment.

Going deeper into the passage from Exodus that I quoted above, we could say that yes, it shows a fairly undeveloped understanding of God; but at a far deeper level the lesson it is teaching us is that however strong we think we are, whatever our external or internal resources may be, however much we think we have righteousness on our side, we need, always, to depend totally upon God. He alone can bring all our affairs to the best end – the end that we need, not necessarily that we want. Sadly, wanting and needing are very rarely the same thing. Of course, this requires a degree of trust in him – and human beings are more often suspicious – or at least cautious – than trusting. Yet the Lord is our safety net: however our lives and loves may unfold, we will

always be held in the safety net of his love. It cannot be otherwise. This is the meaning of Exodus 15, despite the off-putting wrapping – a product of its time – that it comes in.

The meaning of the story of Abraham and Isaac has an equally unappealing external appearance but, inwardly, it offers a jewel of wisdom. Jonathan Sacks has summed it up like this: “We cherish what we wait for and what we most risk losing.” This is very clear in today’s reading because Abraham and Sarah waited a long time for a child of their own and, when Isaac was born, he was cherished as a gift from God. It was this gift he thought he would lose – even by his own hand.

The story is suggesting that we should never take anything for granted; because of its long history of oppression and persecution, Rabbi Sacks suggested that “Judaism is a sustained discipline in not taking life for granted.” I would say that this applies to all of us, whatever our religious tradition; our heart is only split open with the most profound realisation of how much we love another – absolutely anyone or anything – when we think we might lose them. The sacrifice and loss in today’s story is specifically that of a child and, here, I think it is worth quoting again from Rabbi Sacks’ commentary on Abraham and Isaac:

“Today, when too many children live in poverty and illiteracy, dying for lack of medical attention because those who rule nations are focused on fighting the battles of the past rather than shaping a safe future, it is a lesson the world

has not yet learned. For the sake of humanity it must, for the tragedy is vast and the hour is late.”

Ultimately, and, however hard it may be for us to believe, no one and nothing we have ever cherished in life can be lost in death. Death truly is just another door – yet the fear of death is as old as humanity itself. How can anyone be persuaded that death is nothing more than a moving on, a step further in the pilgrimage of the one eternal life? A contemporary ‘secular mystic’ (if I can put it like that) has this to say:

“When a loved one passes, do not worry. Weep, mourn, grieve, yes, honour their memory, but do not worry. They haven't gone anywhere, strictly speaking. They have simply quit location and time. You can no longer pin them down, say, “there they are”, find them in their materiality, or seek them in your personal world. But you see, they were never tied through their bodies in the first place. Their eyes, their face, fingertips, their heart and brain, these were not the things that defined them. You loved them in the physical body, yes; you were attached to it; expected it to continue; it was familiar to you; but it was not the height and depth of your love. You are being called now to remember a deeper love, a universal love, a love that’s not attached to form, a love that knows no bounds, a love that does not flee into the past or future but remains so very present as you go about your days. A love that does not depend on word or place, that follows you wherever you go, that is inseparable from

your very own presence, that whispers in your ear late at night... *"I am here."* Do not search for your loved one in time or space; do not reach for them; you will find them absent, your hands empty. They are far closer than that! It will take a while for you to adjust, of course. You will be called upon to let go of dreams, yes; and there will be much pain to be felt, much grief to know with courage and willingness. Yet... get ready to break your heart open for love's sake. Because, oh, the joy of discovering your loved one is right where you left them! And the astonishment of a relationship shattering open onto the infinite. You must know that they cannot leave you. You must know that they never will. For they are always in your presence... and you in theirs."

I find these beautiful thoughts deep within the story of Abraham and Isaac. Come what may, Isaac will always be in his father's presence... and Abraham in his. And both will ceaselessly be in the presence of God.