

This year as we go through the season of Trinity we are following in our Old Testament readings the stories of the old Hebrew Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and we will move on to the story of slavery in Egypt, of Passover, of Exodus, of entry into the Promised Land.

These are well known stories; we will have heard them in Sunday School. As we reflected last week, these are often challenging stories, involving real human beings, with human emotions, prejudices and blind spots. As I said last week we are not dealing with plaster cast saints but by the same token it is their very humanity that speaks powerfully to us.

So last week we reflected on the story of Sarah and her son Isaac that she thought she would never have. Sarah, fiercely protective of her son, insists that Hagar and her son Ishmael, whom she bore to Abraham, be driven away. But ultimately Sarah's fear and jealousy could not frustrate God's ultimate purposes for Isaac and Ishmael.

These stories are so well known that we can find ourselves hearing them but not listening. Take our passage today, the story of Abraham hearing God's call to sacrifice his son. We've heard it so many times, we find ourselves focussing on the pain of Abraham, torn between the love of his son and his faithfulness to the God who called him. If you look at all the commentaries on this passage and pretty well every sermon you will have heard on it, there is this same focus on Abraham – poor Isaac is almost reduced to a supporting role.

I remember being pulled up short on this in the course of a visit I made one Monday afternoon in Ahoghill. I was brought into the house, sat down, offered a cup of tea and then the man of the house eyeballed me and said, 'I've a bone to pick with you.' I thought what had I done to this man. 'What about?' was all I could say. 'Yesterday's sermon.' Well that narrowed it down a bit but I

couldn't think of my heresy I had preached. My sermon had been on the passage we read this morning. I had reflected on Abraham's obedience and pain. So again I said, 'What about it?'

'What about it? You talked about the father's pain. Did you ever stop to think about that poor child? Suddenly tied up by the father he loved and a knife put to his throat – he must have been terrified.' He was right of course – I had just thought of Abraham, I had not thought of poor Isaac. I went back home, looked up my various commentaries and – surprise, surprise – they did not think of Isaac either.

So from that point on, I have looked at this passage with a broader perspective. This morning, I want to reflect on this passage from Isaac's perspective. As we read the story, Abraham at least acted in the assurance that he was doing God's will, however painful that was. On that mountain top I would suspect that for Isaac must have seemed God seemed a long way away. This sets me thinking of circumstances in our own lives when maybe it is hard to see God in the situation of pain or suffering that we, or a loved one, may be in.

As I have recalled before, some eight months before I was due to be ordained I got a phone call from my elder brother. He was ringing to tell me that our mother has been diagnosed with an inoperable cancer and that we were looking at about six months. I was absolutely devastated. Some five years earlier my father had suffered a severe brain haemorrhage from which, against all the odds, he had made a recovery. He was not however the man he was and he depended on my mother. We had assumed that Dad would die before Mum and she was facing into a long widowhood. Now my father was to be robbed of the one he depended on and Mum was to be denied the retirement that she and Dad had looked forward to so much.

I was cross, I was hurt, I was angry. At that time I attended morning and evening prayer on a daily basis as part of the disciple of a theological student. I remember that for three weeks I was unable to say the creed – it just stuck in my throat. As it turned out, around that time we received a series of lectures on the Psalms which was just what I needed at that particular point in time. Our lecturer pointed out that these psalms contained the full range of human emotions – from pure joy to deep despair before God. The wonderful insight for me was that the Psalmist could be himself before God. If he was happy he praised the Lord and called others to do so with every instrument available, drums, trumpets, cymbals the lot. If he felt that God did not seem to care, he told him – why had God abandoned him, why did the wicked seem to prosper, why, why, why?

But having got all that off his chest, he was able to see God's purposes, even in his pain. That spoke to me in my situation – I discovered that I could be honest with God – he knew how I felt anyway. At that particular point in my life there would have been no point saying 'Lord your ways are wonderful' because I would have been lying and God would have known that. But I felt that God heard my pain and could begin to see my life, with all its ups and downs, in the context of his purposes.

Going back to Abraham and Isaac; the Bible is silent on whether the two ever discussed what went on that day on the mountain top, whether Abraham ever tried to explain, whether Isaac ever fully understood the actions of his father that day. But one thing we do know is that Isaac grew up to play his part as one of the Patriarchs of Israel. He came to see that his life, the whole of his life, had a purpose before God.

Some of you will have heard me say, 'There are times when life is a bitch', times when life is very hard to understand, times when life is very unfair. As I

read these Old Testament, As I reflect on the breadth of the Psalms, the psalms of pure joy, the psalms of deep pain and questioning, I become more and more convinced that I am not alone, God does hear our pain, God does understand. I will close with a passage I have quoted before. It is out of a book I have at home, ‘Out of the Deep’, a series of reflections on the Psalms. It begins with the author remembering a time of crisis of faith for himself. His father had died suddenly while he was at school. He was studying music in Rome, prior to returning home to go to University. One rainy afternoon he found himself in one of the great basilicas in Rome:

‘When I went there teenagers were playing football in the park and hurtling around the piazza on motor scooters. I was suddenly gripped by a terrible loneliness; and when I entered the vast and dimly lit basilica with its eighty marble columns and gorgeous mosaics I was overwhelmed, not just with awe but with anger, at the God who had taken away my father and yet seemed to enjoy dwelling in buildings of such icy magnificence; anger too at a world which could go happily about its business as heedless of my loss as God was. I gave vent to my feelings in tears of fury and self pity; and neither the laughing footballers nor the God of the great basilica took any notice. Yet I was left with a strangely clear awareness that it was all right to be angry and lonely and to say so – and that, in some inexplicable sense, what I had said had been heard.’

(Out of the Deep – page 2)

Psalm 139

- 6 Where can I go then from your spirit? ♦
Or where can I flee from your presence?
- 7 If I climb up to heaven, you are there; ♦
if I make the grave my bed, you are there also.
- 8 If I take the wings of the morning ♦
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
- 9 Even there your hand shall lead me, ♦
your right hand hold me fast.
- 10 If I say, ‘Surely the darkness will cover me ♦
and the light around me turn to night,’
- 11 Even darkness is no darkness with you;
the night is as clear as the day; ♦
darkness and light to you are both alike.