

2nd Sunday of Lent (B), 2018

(Gen 21:1-2,9,10-13,15-18; Rom 8:30-34; Mark 9:2-10)

Today's reading of the near-sacrifice of Isaac is certainly one of the most dramatic narratives in the OT. It is also superbly constructed. Like a good narrative, it leaves a lot of blanks for us to fill in. Do you wonder how Abraham felt, what thoughts went through his mind? We ask the same about Isaac. Much of the artistry is lost because our lectionary leaves out important parts. For example, as Abraham and Isaac are going up the mountain Isaac addresses his father, "Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?" My son," Abraham replies "God will provide the sheep for the burnt offering." Then the two walked on together. How poignant, how pregnant the silence that follows!

There is wonderful balance in Abraham's three-fold response: When God first addresses him: "Here I am": when Isaac addresses him on the mountain: "Here I am!", and when the angel addresses him from heaven: in each case the response is, "here I am."

The fact that the narrative is beautifully constructed doesn't necessarily mean it's true. A modern thinker might ask, "What kind of a monster is a God who would put a father through such a trial?" Granted that Abraham didn't have to go through with the slaughter of his son, why cause such unimaginable suffering to a parent?

My response is that it probably didn't happen. Infant sacrifice was widely practiced among the peoples around Israel, and though we consider it repulsive, there was something sublime about it. If one is to offer sacrifice, why not the best, the dearest thing--one's own child? When the disciples asked Jesus, "Why is it that John the Baptist's disciples fast, and the Pharisees fast but we don't?" they were suggesting that something might be lacking in their observance. We can imagine the Israelites asking the "why don't we?" question. The response to that question is given in a narrative of Abraham, the great father of faith; it declares the Israelite is willing, but that, unlike the Baals and Molechs, the so-called gods that others worshiped, that is not what God wants, the God Israel worships is not that kind of God. In other words, this narrative is catechesis rather than history.

But there is a further catechesis here. We are led to reflect on the heartbreak of a father offering up his son and the motivation that could lead him to do this. It's amazing that, although the NT sees typology in many OT texts--the paschal lamb, the passage through the Red Sea, the manna in the wilderness, even Noah's ark, it never exploits the Abraham-Isaac scene to illustrate what Paul says in today's reading from Romans, "He who did not spare his own Son but handed him over for us all." "He who did not spare his own Son" God did for love of us what, in the narrative,

He did not let Abraham do. Jewish tradition makes a great thing of that narrative, called the Aqeda, the "Binding of Isaac." It holds that Isaac asked his father to tie or bind him lest, at the last minute, he struggle to save himself. The new Isaac offered himself freely, as Paul tells us: "he gave himself for our sins that he might rescue us from the present evil age" (Gal 1:14); "he gave himself for us ... to cleanse for himself a people as his own" (Titus 2:14). It was a conspiracy of love between God the Father and His Son.

When Peter objected to Jesus' prediction that He would have to suffer and die, Jesus reacts violently: "Get behind me, Satan; you are not thinking as God does." Yet crucifixion was so horrible a prospect that in Gethsemane Jesus prayed, "Abba, Father, all things are possible to you. Take this cup away from me," but then adds "But not what I will but what you will." In John's gospel, when Jesus realizes His hour is at hand He says, "I am troubled now. Yet what should I say? 'Father, save me from this hour? But it was for this purpose that I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name.'" When He was taken prisoner in the garden and Peter strikes out with his sword, Jesus tells him to put up his sword, asking, "Shall I not drink the cup my Father gave me?" Without doubt this is the true Isaac who goes willingly to what He and the Father had determined upon.

Of the Father John says, "God so loved the world that

he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life" (Jn 3:16), and of the Son Paul says, "I live by faith in the Son of God who has loved me and given himself up for me." The Father and the Son acting as one.

Today's gospel tells of the Transfiguration, an event worthy of its own celebration (August 6th). As a narrative it is clear enough, but Scripture scholars find it puzzling; there is nothing else like it in the gospels, this manifestation of Jesus' glory during His earthly life, so that some have suggested that it is a resurrection narrative that has somehow been displaced from its proper location.

Mark introduces the scene with the words, "After six days ..." Six days after what? The reference is probably to the occasion of Peter's confession of Jesus as Messiah. On that occasion Jesus foretells that He would have suffer a shameful death. When that does take place these favored apostles, Peter, James, and John, will be able to look back to this revelation of Jesus' glory, normally hidden but now manifested, and their faith will be renewed.

The presence of Moses and Elijah--the law and the prophets--tells us of Jesus' place in God's overall plan; the glorious cloud which covers them puts us in mind of the cloud that filled the Tabernacle in the wilderness and, later, the Temple of Solomon.

It is worth reflecting for a moment: Jesus' glory,

normally hidden but here revealed. Perhaps the greatest miracle is that it IS normally hidden. One OT narrative tells of a military force that came to kidnap Elisha. His servant was frightened, but Elisha simply said, "Do not be afraid; our side outnumbers theirs," and he prayed, "O Lord, open his eyes, that he may see," and the servant saw the mountainside filled with horses and fiery chariots around Elisha." There are spiritual realities around us that we do not see. If the Lord were to open our eyes we would see the blinding beauty of souls filled with sanctifying grace, we would see with wonder the glory of the angels who come worship with us.

These readings give us much to ponder during Lent. We think of what Jesus, the new Isaac, must undergo, we think of the love of the Father and of us that leads Him along this path, and we think of the glory that is ultimately to be His in His resurrection. Jesus alludes to it while descending from the mountain--puzzling to the apostles but, thanks to the Easter that we can anticipate, a vision of glory that we all are called to share in.