

# The Thirteenth Sunda of Ordinary Time – YrA – 2 July 2023

## Message

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Source of All Being, Eternal Word, and Holy Spirit, one God in three persons, lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil that we may be transformed into the likeness of Christ. **Amen.**

There are occasions when, after a bible reading, one wonders whether the Spirit is saying anything to the Church. The story of God testing Abraham might be one such occasions. Hearing a voice telling you to kill someone is generally considered a sign of a psychotic break and you should be seeking urgent medical assistance.

The theme of our reading from the Hebrew scriptures is set out in verse one, 'God tested Abraham.' In this light some say, God never intended Abraham to sacrifice Isaac but this fails to acknowledge the shocking nature of the story: How can a loving God even suggest it. Today, if nothing else, we would want to treat Isaac for post-traumatic stress. This story appears to damage to a person and a relationship.

We can view the passage as allegorical, but it is a strange story to make a part of the foundation narrative of a nation as it goes against the later laws of the nation. It seems likely the passage came to its current form at a time when Israel was experiencing testing, possibly the late period of the monarchy. Perhaps, the story expresses the bleakness of oppression that the people of Israel were experiencing. Lives did appear expendable, that was the reality.

This is the only place the word to test, try, or prove, 'naw-saw', occurs in Genesis. Its dominant usage in the Hebrew Scriptures is God testing Israel, and Israel testing God. Other than two late occurrences, it is not used in a faith sense of individuals. It seems likely that Abraham is in some way a representation of Israel in this passage.

This passage makes us aware of some of the tensions held within the Hebrew Scriptures. The Hebrew Scriptures were formed over a long period of time and authored by a range of people, in diverse circumstances. They do not have the unity of the New Testament, which was written over a much shorter period, to a more limited audience, with a more restricted purpose. Even in the New Testament we find some contrary views, so the much wider range of views in the Hebrew Scriptures is no surprise.

We hold that the scriptures are important, that they are a pillar of our faith, and that they draw us closer to God. So, we need an understanding of them that can accept this diversity while still expecting the Holy Spirit to speak through them today. We are on some difficult ground.

The story of God testing Abraham, his faithful obedience, and Isaac's willing submission are foundational to the covenant with Israel. The final five verses of the passage, which we didn't read, are the fullest description in the Hebrew Scriptures of God's promise to Abraham. Abraham to this point has been a little haphazard in his faithfulness to God. This time Abraham has shown that God comes first.

Yet, this idea of God testing us to see if we are worthy of blessing is quite contrary to the teaching of Jesus. By God's

grace, all who ask for forgiveness in Christ's name are forgiven and welcomed into the Kingdom of God. No testing is involved, no demonstration of faithfulness is required, God longs to welcome us all. The beatitudes set a completely different agenda for what it means to be blessed.

The word that is used in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures for God's testing of Abraham and of Israel, is the word used of those who tested Jesus publicly and his testing in the wilderness. There are some contrary points in the New Testament but the dominant view is that God does not test us though God does allow us to be tested.

This view had been slowly emerging in the period between the formation of the Hebrew Scriptures and the birth of Christ. The apocrypha and other religious writings slowly move away from the idea of God testing us as evil is personified in Satan. This new understanding is the dominant one of the New Testament.

Despite this change of worldview, the importance of the account of God testing Abraham remains for the early Christians to the point that the imagery is repeatedly drawn on in the New Testament, most notably by the writers of Hebrews and James (2:21-23). As James puts it *"Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works. Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness', and he was called the friend of God."*

James read the story from the new perspective but still understood it as a narrative of faithfulness lived out in action. He saw to the truth of the story, through the details that can get in our way.

When we read the bible, we need to understand the worldview that existed at the time. We cannot view the whole of scripture through a single lens. We must understand what is behind any passage before we apply it to our lives, only then can we possibly hear what the Spirit is saying to the church; much easier for some passages than others.

I will confess, at this point, that I also have a pet aversion to the idea of God testing us. There is a strand of Christianity that explains every challenge of life as a test from God. Not only is this inconsistent with the New Testament, it also ignores the fact that people of faith and no faith face the same challenges in life. Were we to either suffer more, or fewer, challenges than others that would be God intervening in the world in a way that could be scientifically tested. Faith would no longer be about freewill. It would be a matter of accepting the evidence. This is perhaps already true. But, were it a repeatable experiment, it would be much harder to deny the reality of God.

Faith should make a difference to our live. Predominantly, it is not in the experiences of life but in our attitude to the world, in our response to the world. It may also be in the world's response to us too and our response to that response. Life may be harder because we have a set of values and priorities that are not always shared by others. We will experience temptations but, as best as we can understand, these are not from God though they are allowed by God.

To return to the letter of James (1:2–4) “<sup>2</sup> My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, <sup>3</sup> because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; <sup>4</sup> and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.”

These are perhaps not the kind of blessings we naturally have in mind. Yet, however we understand the testing of Abraham, I am sure that it would have changed him. Within Jewish tradition is also the idea that Isaac submitted willingly. As odd as it seems, this would have been a life changing moment for them both and hopefully a step towards God.

For all of us, the challenges we face in life can allow us to grow closer to God. It is rarely the easy option. Yet it is the option that will lead to fullness of life. As we observe life's inequalities are we also able to notice all that we do have. Are we able to embrace the way of the cross, the seemingly contradictory way of suffering that is also the way of perfect freedom and to fullness of life.

And, when you look back, how often are those challenging experiences the events that make you who you are, that refine you and equip you to express God's love in the world more fully. Without many of those challenges we would be less than we are. God has given us the mysterious ability to bring goodness out of even the most terrible situations.

In us the Kingdom of God can come one step nearer, if we are prepared to allow the trials of life to transform us and to reveal the love of God.

Amen. Amen. Amen.