



Sermon preached by Revd Dr Robert Pope on 28th June 2026

Readings: Genesis 22:1-14; Psalm 13; Matthew 10:40-42

My sister was a keen fan of Harry Potter long before I was. But when she received her copy of the next book in the series, she would read the last chapter first. She needed to know where the story ended in order to cope with reading the story itself. For me, that would spoil the tension that arises when following a story as it unfolds, though I accept that great stories – and even not so great stories – stories that you particularly like or enjoy can be turned to time and again.

Sometimes it's better to see how the story unfolds; sometimes it's better to know what the ending is going to be.

Each Easter I am struck that we know where the story ends up: the desolation of the cross is in many ways lost, eclipsed by the surprising joy of resurrection. But in truth, we can only begin to grasp the depth of meaning that resurrection holds when we have experienced the depth of despair, of helplessness, of uselessness, that sense that all is lost – *all is lost* – that the disciples must have experienced when they saw the Lord dying and dead. Knowing where the story ends up is a help to get through Good Friday, but it can mask the fact that it is at the cross that God chooses to be revealed to us.

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On a grander scale, we hold that in faith and hope we live between the times. We have received something which we hold to be true about God, life, the universe and everything, but our knowledge is partial, we share in creation's groaning as we long to see face to face rather than in a mirror dimly. We have a sense of the whole, but living as we do in the middle of the story, walking each day according to the light that we have been given, we still experience worry, suffering, tragedy, injustice, violence and warfare in our lives and in the world. We long for the day when there is peace and no more crying or mourning and the nations learn war no more.

It's a puzzle; it's a challenge. From the little we know we cry out 'How long O Lord!', but sometimes there is little we can hold on to other than God's answer to Paul – 'My grace is sufficient' (2 Corinthians 12:9), the message of Micah 6:8 – 'you know what the Lord requires to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God' – and a sense that it is not judgment, violence, hatred but mercy, forgiveness, grace, love that sit at the heart of existence.

In many ways that is what gives us the hope and vision to carry on: Jesus' resurrection changed everything; we live under the promise that God's kingdom has come and is coming. Knowing what the end of the story is, helps us to live in the middle of it.

Today's lectionary reading from Genesis 22 has been considered by some to be one of the most disturbing passages in the whole of Scripture. It is so disturbing, that I don't recall ever having tried to speak on it before; it is so disturbing that I thought about abandoning the lectionary today. Let us turn to the text and see what it says.

The passage begins by placing a context for what is about to transpire: 'After all these things God tested Abraham' (v.1).

What follows is to be a test and the fact that the reader knows this somehow alleviates what is about to unfold – but only slightly. We are privileged with information about which, on the surface, the

characters presumably are intended to have no clue. But that will still leave us with questions for which there are no easy answers.

‘Take your only son Isaac ... and offer him ... as a burnt offering’ (v.2).

Some commentators tell us that the story reflects a period in Israel’s pre-history when child sacrifice was practised. This story is seen as the confirmation that child sacrifice was set aside because God provides an alternative. It’s not entirely satisfying, but it might point to the angst caused by a collective memory which is at least soothed to some degree by the ending of a diabolical practice.

With little comment telling us what Abraham thought about the command, or indeed the practice itself, he prepares himself and his son for the journey.

Remember that God’s promise to Abraham was that his descendants would be a great nation, as numerous as the stars in the night sky. And Isaac was the one on whom the promise seemed to depend – Abraham and Sarah were too old for further children. They had been old when Isaac was born, but how many years had passed since then? The fact that the story says Isaac carried the wood suggests that he was not a small child at this point.

Some commentators suggest that the testing of Abraham lay in whether or not he hoped in God to fulfil God’s promise to him or was his hope placed on his son. He is clearly revealed as trusting God but, given that this was to the point that he seems prepared to kill his son, does that argument really satisfy?

As with other parts of the story of Abraham, God speaks and commands and Abraham obeys. Isaac speaks only once to ask where the animal for sacrifice is and Abraham answers ‘God himself will provide’ (v.8).

Off Abraham goes with Isaac and two men on the journey. It’s a physical journey to the mountain where sacrifice is to be made. It’s a spiritual journey where Abraham’s faith that God will provide is proved right. But the whole story leaves us dissatisfied.

Does Abraham’s faith in God leave him able to trust that even at the last moment, when all seems lost, when the wood has been laid and the knife is about to kill his son, that God would in fact redeem the situation and stop the murder?

Maybe it is a test. Maybe Abraham is tested to see the degree he trusts God even to the point of being willing to do the unthinkable and kill his son. We knew from verse 1 that it was a test and that therefore all would be well in the end, providing Abraham is faithful. In the end Isaac isn’t killed and Abraham seems to have passed. However, we hear no more of Isaac in the chapter. In verse 19 (which we didn’t hear this morning), he has mysteriously disappeared: ‘So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went to Beer-sheba; and Abraham lived at Beer-sheba’. What are we to make of that?

The passage raises more questions than answers. What an awful test – to be prepared to kill your son in order to show fidelity. And what do we make of God, for it is not Abraham who came up with the plan (according to the story) but God? There is no easy explanation possible.

Abraham hears God twice. The first lies among the most awful testing he could possibly have imagined. The second claws the situation back from the abyss, the crisis is averted, the murder is prevented. It feels as if it should be a redemptive moment, and yet, is it?

With all our questions remaining, while we continue to feel uneasy, we can at least see the ambiguities, the difficulties, the confusion that can emerge when faith is tested. We pray to God ‘lead us not into temptation’ or ‘do not put us to the test’. And yet, for different reasons to Abraham, and not because God sanctions it, we can feel tempted too. We dare not suggest that God tests our faith, but who among us has not ever felt faith to be under pressure? It might not be as severe or extreme as the test Abraham is given. Perhaps it is more like the testing of which the Psalmist knows.

Psalm 13 takes us to the heart of the matter, believing in a God who loves and is love when all around seems to see violence and hatred as the governing marks of the universe. The Psalmist knows what it is like to feel far removed from God, to feel that God is distant, even absent. *'How long O Lord'*, says verse 1, 'will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?'

These are angst filled exclamations from one who knows that God is; that who knows that God is love; who knows that God is *for* him, and yet his life is lived so frequently as if God were not there; not so much as if God was hidden, but as if God deliberately hides himself and the wicked have their day. Despite faith in the goodness of God, the Psalmist comes under the ridicule of enemies. There is something utterly desolate about it: 'Give light to my eyes or I will sleep the sleep of death' (v.3). And yet when things get to the bottom, when the only way is up, the Psalmist seems to get it together again: 'I trusted your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation' (v.5). And so 'I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me' (v.6). Knowing how the story will end brings the Psalmist back from the brink of despair.

The Psalmist's journey is a profound one. It grapples with his experience; he knows God to be good, but is in danger of being crushed by the fact that goodness does not always prevail around him. It is absent. But as the Psalmist considers it all, he is drawn back to what he might see as his first love. And he knows again that despite what seems on the surface to be going on, God's steadfast love really does prevail regardless of what enemies think and regardless of the extent to which the powers and principalities seem to be in the ascendent.

It is a sobering and encouraging message for us today as we see the vicious, the violent, the destructive forces of death, the evil that threatens apocalypse, having its day. It looks as if God is absent. But we hold to this that 'the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases' (Lamentations 3:22), That is what lies behind the universe. And so we can hope and so we can continue.

Redemptive elements can be found in the reading: Abraham trusts in God to the full and insists that God will provide a way out, a redemption. But they are mixed up in other things that distress us: it is a hideous situation, a cruel test for Abraham but also for Isaac. And it is God who specifically lies behind it according to the text. The problems this raises find no solution in Genesis 22 itself.

When we find ourselves in such a situation, what is there to cling to? We know that our understanding of God is not directed by Genesis 22 but by Jesus Christ.

The whole system of sacrifice in which Abraham seems caught up is rendered unnecessary because Jesus was killed in order that no one else need suffer the same fate. He is memorialized, in part, because he brings that awful system to an end. Jesus confirms to us, despite the questions we inevitably have following our discussion of Abraham and Isaac, that it is love, not hate, it is peace not violence, it is life not death which God affirms.

And so knowing where the story ends enables us to live in the middle of it. To live a life of purpose that loves God and neighbour, that has received peace and can live peaceably, that has known grace and can live grace-filled lives, that has been reconciled to God and to each other that the ministry of reconciliation can continue, in a world so longing for peace, grace and reconciliation.

May it be so.

Amen.

Robert Pope
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