

Morning Worship

28 June 2020

from the United Reformed Church at
Morpeth, Widdrington & Gt Bavington

Opening Words

**If God is on our side, who is against us?
He did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us
all;
how can he fail to lavish every other gift upon us?**

Welcome to our worship this morning. We begin our service by offering to God our hymns of praise and thanks as we sing: For the beauty of the earth.

1 For the beauty of the earth,
for the beauty of the skies,
for the love which from our birth
over and around us lies:

Refrain:

**Gracious God, to thee we raise
this our sacrifice of praise.**

2 For the beauty of each hour
of the day and of the night,
hill and vale and tree and flower,
sun and moon and stars of light:

3. For the joy of ear and eye,
for the heart and mind's delight,
for the mystic harmony
linking sense to sound and sight:

4 For the joy of human love
brother, sister, parent, child,
friends on earth, and friends above,
for all gentle thoughts and mild:

5 For each perfect gift of thine,
to our race so freely given,
graces human and divine,
flowers of earth and buds of heaven:

6 For thy people, evermore
lifting holy hands above,
offering up on every shore
their pure sacrifice of love:

F. Pierpoint

As we come to worship today that last verse we have just sung resonates through our readings that we will

share this morning: "For thy people, offering up on every shore their pure sacrifice of love." We will this morning be reflecting on sacrifice as we hear of Abraham taking his son Isaac up a hill to be sacrificed, and we will consider what this says to us today, in particular what it says about our worship which is this sacrifice of love. It was also **Armed Forces Day**, yesterday, so we shall during our service be thinking about the very real sacrifices that have been made, and continued to be made today by those who serve in the armed forces.

Let us begin though, by continuing to offer our praise and thanks to God as we pray together:

Lord God,
We worship you with reverence and awe
and come to offer our thanks and praise today.
You have come to your people
and have made yourself known to us.

We thank you that you spoken to us
through Abraham and the people of Israel
whose stories we can share and read today.

We thank you that through these scriptures
you reveal yourself as a faithful, just and righteous
God.

We thank you that your Word came to us
as Jesus Christ, your Son,
who in his life and his death, revealed to us
that you are a forgiving and loving God.

We thank you that you still speak to us today
through the Bible, through the prayers and words of
your church,
and through the beauty of your creation.
In all these things we are assured of your strength,
your beauty,
and your love for all that you have made.

Lord God
we give you thanks that you have given yourself to us
and promised us that nothing
can take us away from you.

Assured of this love
we worship you.
AMEN

Readings

Our readings today are read by Sue Rutherford and Adele Elkins, first from Genesis 22:1-18 and then Matthew 10:37-42

Hymn: For ourselves no longer living

For ourselves no longer living,
let us live for Christ alone;
of ourselves more strongly giving,
go as far as he has gone:
one with God who chose to be
one with us to set us free.

If we are to live for others,
share as equals human worth,
join the round of sisters, brothers,
that encircles all the earth:
all the fullness earth affords,
is the people's, is the Lord's.

Fighting fear and exploitation
is our daily common call;
finding selfhood, building nations,
sharing what we have with all.
As the birds that soar in flight,
let us rise towards the light.

Let us rise and join the forces
that combine to do God's will,
wisely using earth's resources,
human energy and skill.
Let us now, by love released,
celebrate the future's feast!

Fred Kaan

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Sermon

Those who watched last week's service, and who paid close attention, will recognise that we included some of the same verses in Matthew's gospel that we included in last week's readings. Verses that talk about families being divided, about those whose love for their sons and daughters is greater than their love of God, not being worthy of him.

Last week too, we heard of the story of Abraham and Ishmael, and how Abraham chose to send Ishmael and his mother Hagar away, into the desert to fend for themselves because of rival jealousies in the family. This week, Abraham is called by God to sacrifice his other son, Isaac, and is tested to see how faithful he would be.

The story of Abraham and Ishmael, can be interpreted on different levels as they attempt to explain the origin of different nations and their relative disposition against each other which ultimately would

lead to conflict and war. But the story of Abraham is at the heart of it, a story of a very real family and their relationship with God. To read the story on different levels should not detract from the very personal story of Abraham and his faithfulness to God.

Today's story of Abraham being called to sacrifice his son Isaac, is a story of Abraham and God. It is a personal story, and does not necessarily hold any lessons for us. It does not have to teach us anything, or say anything, other than this very singular story of how Abraham was tested by God, and how God spared Isaac, his son, before it was too late.

But I want to reflect this morning on Sacrifice and Worship, and to look at this reading of Abraham and Isaac to see what God might be saying to us in this.

With the horror of Abraham being asked to kill his own Son, we sometimes overlook the aspects of worship in this passage. To build an altar and to make a sacrifice was an act of worship. There was no other reason that Abraham would be asked to take firewood and make the sacrifice of his son. So the primary themes from this passage are about sacrifice and worship.

We are told too that the mountain Abraham ascended with Isaac was in the Moriah region. Mount Moriah was the rocky outcrop in Jerusalem upon which Solomon would build the Temple, in which for generations to come the Jewish people would continue to make sacrifices to God. So this story is set on the very spot in which the focus of Sacrifice and Worship would be for the Jewish people for centuries, and in perpetuity.

So what might be the message that speaks to us through this passage today?

Well, we might come to see that worship is not about us but about God. It is about us sacrificing everything, and letting God be God. About submitting to God and letting God be God. If we come to worship but withhold parts of our lives from God, then can this be true worship? If we offer only sacrifices to God that we are willing to make, then are these really sacrifices?

Here in the story of Abraham, Abraham brings it all to God. He withholds nothing from God, even his own son. We see the resonance with the words of Jesus when he says "whoever loves their son or daughter more than me, is not worthy of me."

And so it is this aspect of sacrifice and worship that I think comes out so clearly from these passages. When

we come to God in worship, we should come and not withhold anything from him.

We might come to a time of worship, knowing there are things we do not want to bring before God. We might have things in our life that we are ashamed of, things that we are not willing to let go of, relationships that are destructive and we are not proud of. It is no good coming to church and withholding those things from God.

We too might come to worship, and say to ourselves, I'm happy to give this Christianity thing a go, I am happy to see what might happen. I'll listen to some sermons, say some prayers....but I'm not going to stop doing the things I like doing, I'm not going to change. I'm happy for God to change this part of my life, but not these other parts.

When we come to worship, we are to offer to God all that we are and all that we have. To say God, here I am, I withhold nothing from you. This is the sacrifice that we consider when we think of the Isaac story in terms of worship.

When Hagar ran into the desert to escape Sarah the first time, God found her and told her to return. Hagar calls God "The One who sees me" God has seen me, for who I am, and he has provided what I need. Abraham when he has sacrificed the ram on Mount Moriah calls the place "The Lord provides". God has seen Abraham, Abraham has withheld nothing and God has provided. And on this mountain the focus of worship to God would continue.

When we come to worship, we should not hide anything from God, but let him be the God who sees us, just as we are, completely and utterly. We should come to worship like Abraham, willing to put everything before God, and say God is God – he sees my need and delivers. Worship then becomes for us a place when God sees us, and our needs, and attends to them.

Amen

Prayers of Intercession

The story of Abraham and Isaac speaks so vividly about sacrifice that it resonates throughout popular culture too. In 1969, as the Vietnam war reached its peak, the singer songwriter Leonard Cohen recorded a song called "The Story of Isaac"

The first two verses tell the story from Isaac's point of view, but then the story goes on then to say "You who build these altars now, To sacrifice these children, you must not do it anymore". And the song becomes a

protest against the number of lives being lost in the Vietnam war. The song finishes with the line, "And mercy on our uniform, man of peace or man of war, the peacock spreads his fan." This peacock, a symbol of pride, being the true cause of the loss of such lives.

The same is echoed in a poem by Wilfrid Owen, reflecting on the loss of lives in the First World War. In this poem Wilfrid Owen talks about the Ram being a Ram of Pride that needs to be sacrificed instead of the innocent victims lead onto the front lines.

I thought I would read Wilfrid Owens poem as we lead into a time of prayer and pray especially for all those who have made sacrifices:

The Parable of the Old Man and the Young **Wilfred Owen - 1893-1918**

*So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went,
And took the fire with him, and a knife.
And as they sojourned both of them together,
Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father,
Behold the preparations, fire and iron,
But where the lamb for this burnt-offering?
Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,
and builded parapets and trenches there,
And stretchèd forth the knife to slay his son.
When lo! an angel called him out of heaven,
Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,
Neither do anything to him. Behold,
A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns;
Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.*

*But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.*

Let us pray:

God of Abraham and Isaac,
we pray today for all those who have made sacrifices,
and especially for those whose sacrifices have cost
them their lives.

ON this day we pray for those who are affected by
war,
and who serve in Armed Forces around the world.

We pray for those who have been injured or disabled
and suffer as a result of war.

We pray for those who suffer PTSD
and for those who faith in you, and in humanity,
has been weakened and destroyed
through what they have experienced.

We pray for those made homeless and refugees ,
for those who struggle to provide for their families,
and who have lost their livelihood and security,

We pray for those who have died,
for those who have lost husbands and wives,
children and parents,
and especially have no hope in Christ
to sustain them in their grief....

Lord in your mercy
Hear our prayer

We pray today for all those who continue to
make personal sacrifices
as they follow the call to serve in many ways,
For the NHS workers, Care home mangers,
Nurses, Doctors, and other emergency services
who have put the needs of those they care for
before their own personal safety and
the needs of the family.

Lord in your mercy
Hear our prayer

We pray today for all those who,
by answering your call on their lives,
have found themselves persecuted in some way.
We pray for people of faith in all countries
whose commitment to you God
has called for them to sacrifice their own personal
safety
and reputation.
We pray especially for those whose call to follow you
has meant turning their back on friends and family.

Lord in your mercy
Hear our prayer.

Almighty God
Infinite in wisdom, love and power
we pray for all your people, evermore
lifting holy hands above,
offering up on every shore
their pure sacrifice of love:

Amen

Minute Silence

Last Post

Hymn: The Day Thou Gavest Lord has Ended

The day thou gavest, Lord, is ended,
the darkness falls at thy behest;
to thee our morning hymns ascended,

thy praise shall sanctify our rest.

We thank thee that thy Church, unsleeping
while earth rolls onward into light,
through all the world her watch is keeping
and rests not now by day nor night.

As o'er each continent and island
the dawn leads on another day,
the voice of prayer is never silent,
nor dies the strain of praise away.

The sun that bids us rest is waking
our friends beneath the western sky,
and hour by hour fresh lips are making
thy wondrous doings heard on high.

So be it, Lord; thy throne shall never,
like earth's proud empires, pass away;
thy kingdom stands, and grows for ever,
till all thy creatures own thy sway.

John Ellerton

Blessing