

In our first reading this morning, from the book of Genesis, we have the story of God asking Abraham to offer his son Isaac as a burnt offering, a sacrifice to God.

And it's a terrible story from which none of the characters can possibly emerge unscathed.

God is a monster for asking a father to sacrifice his son.

Abraham is a monster for going along with it,

And Isaac, well, he has to come to terms with the traumatic truth that his father was willing to kill him.

The story does not mention Isaac's mother Sarah but very shortly after this story she dies and the rabbis have speculated that she died of a broken heart,

so traumatised was she by these events.

From a psychological and emotional point of view this story is bad news because it seems to overwhelm us with questions about the will and character of God that cannot easily be answered.

What kind of God would require a father to sacrifice his son?

What kind of father would go along with that request?

And it may be cold comfort to know that in the end God does not actually require Abraham to kill his son.

The very fact that the question was raised is terrifying enough and for some people there is no coming back from that.

One commentator I read pretty much refuses to preach this text, such is his visceral response to it.

But I think there are some things that can be said that may allow us to hear this text more clearly.

The first thing that can be said is that child sacrifice was in fact a part of the wider cultural milieu of the time.

There was a Canaanite deity named Molech who was associated with child sacrifice and there are a number of references in the Hebrew scriptures which explicitly denounce the offering of children as sacrifice to Molech.

But part of that denunciation was because the people of Israel were themselves engaging in this practice.

The prophet Jeremiah condemns the people of Judah for “doing evil in the sight of the LORD” because they have been offering their children as burnt offerings.

And Jeremiah is very clear that this is something that God did not command.

Jeremiah says,

“it did not enter God’s mind they they should do this abomination”.

Clearly, however, the people had been doing this abomination.

So, all of this is to say that while child sacrifice is abhorrent to us, it was a reality in the world in which the people of Israel lived.

And this reality may have been further complicated by the fact that the Law handed down to the people of Israel through Moses stipulated that every firstborn son belonged to God and had to be redeemed through the sacrifice of a sheep.

Through this practice the people of Israel remembered how God killed every firstborn in the land of Egypt so that Pharaoh would let the people of Israel go.

And although the Law expressly forbade child sacrifice it may be that some understood it as a means to fulfil this requirement of giving their firstborn son to God.

And both these things - child sacrifice and the redemption of the firstborn - are present in our story this morning.

God says to Abraham,

“Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and offer him as a burnt offering”.

An angel of the LORD intervenes before Abraham can go through with this and a ram is provided instead.

As a result of this intervention, some scholars see the purpose of this story as moving the people of Israel away from the practice of child sacrifice to the substitution of animal sacrifice instead.

The story sets up a situation whereby God apparently requires child sacrifice.

Abraham faithfully goes along with it but equally faithfully responds to Isaac’s question regarding the whereabouts of the lamb that ought to be sacrificed by saying,

“God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering”,

which is what God does.

So the point of the story is that God rather than requiring child sacrifice actually averts it.

I think there is more to this story than anti-child sacrifice propaganda, though.

I think that there are other equally challenging dynamics at play here because the story is actually built on the premise that God is testing Abraham.

God needs to know something about Abraham,

most specifically, whether Abraham is willing to continue on the path of faithfulness to God.

God has promised that Abraham would be the father of many nations.

God makes this promise a reality through the birth of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah in their old age.

But the birth of Isaac is not the end of that promise.

What God wants to know is whether Abraham will continue to trust in God even if the future that Isaac represents should suddenly be placed in doubt.

When God tests Abraham, the test is not just about whether Abraham trusts God to provide a substitute for Isaac.

It is not just about whether Isaac will be saved.

It is about whether Abraham could trust God enough to give up all that Isaac represents and start again.

Does Abraham trust God to fulfil God's promise even without Isaac?

Now, I think its fair to say that that degree of trust is quite frightening.

It is a real test to us.

And of course now the question that this story raises for us is not so much whether our God is a God who might require child sacrifice, but is our God a God who tests us?

And I think the answer to that is that our faithfulness is always being tested - not by God, but by the circumstances of our lives.

Life is not always easy.

And we may find ourselves confronted with the same question which confronted Abraham:

Can we start out on a journey with only our trust in God?

And can we continue on that journey when the future that we had hoped for suddenly changes and casts doubts on all our previous hopes and certainties?

This story tests us with the question:

are we up for that kind of journey?

But it also teaches us that in all of that journey God is utterly and ultimately faithful to us.

We may be tested by the circumstances of our lives, but we are also being called to trust in God's provision.

We are called to journey into the unknown with the assurance that God will show us the path and provide for us.

This journey may take us into circumstances that we cannot control.

It may seem that God is asking the impossible of us.

And it may be that we will not see the fruition of God's work begun in us.

The journey may not even be what we thought it was when we started as we grow and mature and change as God transforms us.

But whatever the nature of the journey, it is not our own provision that guides and sustains us.

It is God's.