

The Sacrifice of a Beloved Son

It is not possible for a Christian to live in modern, secular culture and not be affected by it. The predominant mentality has ways of inserting itself into our ways of seeing things. Thus I sometimes find a tendency in myself and among other Catholics to think of God as somehow not as enlightened as we are. It is as if God were a doddering old man who just doesn't get it, and he would do better if he would only take our advice and see things from our enlightened point of view. We fashion God as a kind of grandpa who is endearing but irrelevant.

This would seem to be the basis of those who feel the need to reinterpret God's revelation to better fit current problems, which we understand "oh so much better" than anyone before us could have. The doddering God is also the image of those whose practice of the faith is reduced to "God gave me so much, I figure I could at least give him an hour a week." Going to church becomes kind of like a weekly visit to the nursing home.

As the elderly grandparent might say strange things that we don't understand, so at Mass we might hear God revealing some strange stuff, especially in the Old Testament readings.

The elderly ancestor can anger us with his old-fashioned closed-mindedness, or we can nod our heads kindly and leave the visit unaffected by what we see as his ramblings. So also there are people who shake their heads at certain readings at Mass and put themselves into the very frightening position of judging God, while others kindly ignore difficult passages or make little jokes about them and move on.

Perhaps no story in the Bible provokes these kinds of reactions more than that of God's asking Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. This is particularly interesting since Abraham's attitude toward God in this passage could not be further from either of these reductive ways of conceiving of him.

ABRAHAM AND HIS SON ON THE MOUNTAIN

It is clear that for Abraham, God is everything. Abraham knows that he is the man he is because God has entered his life. God is the source of Abraham's hope, for he is the source of the promises that correspond to the desires of Abraham's heart. It is not that God has given Abraham "so much" but that God has given him everything, and everything includes Isaac. For Abraham and Sarah did not deserve Isaac; their son was a gift of God.

Let us also note that Abraham, like us, lived in a time and place that affected his mentality. It was not uncommon for other peoples to sacrifice their children to gods; and in the end, when God spares Isaac, he could be showing Abraham something new: that God is not requiring his people to sacrifice their children to him. God is revealing himself to be completely different from the gods imagined and fashioned by the peoples of the Middle East at that time.

This in itself is quite a revelation. And yet, when we read

this passage in the light of Christ, we see that God is revealing much more.

God says to Abraham, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you" (Genesis 22:2). We can think that Abraham is a terrible father for not refusing or arguing, but again, Abraham has an acute sense that everything comes from God and that God can be trusted.

When Abraham gets to the mountain, he has Isaac carry the wood for the offering. Isaac asks his father, "Where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" to which Abraham responds, "God will himself provide the lamb." At the top of the mountain, just as Abraham takes the knife to slay his son, God says to him, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me" (see Genesis 22:7-8, 12).

How many of us really think of our children, our friends or our family as gifts of God? When people get angry at God because of the death of their loved ones, do they ever think about the fact that without God, their beloved would never have existed? And that God is their only hope that their beloved still does exist?

We tend to think of the world as having "been there." God sort of comes along as the custodian of what was already there and rightfully ours. We need to realize that God is the source of everything. There is simply nothing "there" without God's goodness, and everything that exists is a free gift of God and a sign of his presence.

Even if we are aware of all this, the scene of Abraham and Isaac on the mountain can be profoundly disturbing. For we are human, and God has created in us a strong bond with our children and an undying love for them. God's request to Abraham to offer his own son to God, even knowing that son came from God, seems unfair. To sacrifice the joy of one's heart seems too much to do, too much to give, too much to even imagine.

We recoil in horror at this passage in Genesis, despite any arguments for its legitimacy. If we keep in mind this very human response of our own heart to Abraham's sacrifice, it becomes a window into the heart of God and the love of God.

GOD THE FATHER AND HIS SON ON THE MOUNTAIN

As the first creation story is incomplete without the second, the sacrifice of Abraham and Isaac is incomplete without the fulfillment, which happens in the sacrifice of the Father and the Son at the cross.

God describes Isaac in Genesis 22:2 as Abraham's beloved son. Interestingly, the only time God the Father audibly speaks in the Gospels is when he calls Jesus his own "Beloved Son." The Father speaks these words from heaven at Jesus' baptism and later at the Transfiguration (see Matthew 3:17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22; Matthew 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:35).

As Abraham's beloved son carried the wood for sacrifice up the mountain, God's beloved Son would carry his wooden cross. Abraham's beloved son asked about the lamb of sacrifice, and Abraham told him that the lamb would be provided by God. Abraham may not have known that he was speaking prophetically, for God would provide the Lamb for the sacrifice, *his* own beloved Son, Jesus, the Lamb of God.

God spoke from the heavens to spare Isaac, but there was no such voice to stop the sacrifice of his beloved Son on Calvary. While the Father's voice was silent, nature seemed to manifest his heart as he watched his beloved Son die: darkness came over the land, the earth shook, rocks were split, the curtain of the temple was torn in two (see Matthew 27:45, 51–52; Mark 15:33, 38; Luke 23:44–45). God spared Abraham's beloved son; he sacrificed his own.

These two sacrifices seen together shed light on one another and become yet another way in which God reveals to us the depth of his love. God does for us what we could not conceive of doing for him. This God is unlike us, and he is unlike any god the pagan peoples imagined. These peoples could imagine their gods' demands for the lives of their children, but who could imagine God the Father's sacrifice of his Beloved Son for us! God's ways are not only different from ours but unimaginably contrary to our ways of thinking.

The Father's voice in the Gospels resonates with greater richness when we keep Abraham and Isaac in mind. We can hear him saying: "This is *my* Beloved Son. Abraham's beloved was spared; now see how I will sacrifice my own Beloved for you, and then you may understand my love for you. My love for you, my children, is far beyond the love you could ever have for me. It is a love infinitely greater than you could ask for or imagine or ever deserve, even with an eternity of righteous deeds."

To doubt God's goodness because of the request he made to Abraham is like doubting a parent's goodness because of the discipline the child receives. When a child grows to full stature, he understands that his parents were loving him the

whole time. When the sacrifice on Abraham's mountain is fulfilled on Calvary, we understand that God has loved us at every step in his plan for our salvation and that every step mysteriously communicates this love.

In light of these two complementary events, it seems too little to say that God loves us. Psalm 8 aptly expresses God's relationship with us:

What are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?
Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honor.
(Psalm 8:4-5)

FOR REFLECTION:

1. Have I set myself up as God's judge?
2. Do I take my life and all its benefits for granted?
3. When have I made a connection between a particular gift in my life and God as the giver?

Mystery Men of Old and New

Krzysztof Kieslowski was a Polish director who made a series of films inspired by each of the Ten Commandments. The main characters in the first film, *Decalogue I*, are a boy, his father and his aunt. There is a fourth character who seems to have no particular purpose. He is simply a man who sits by the side of a pond. The camera focuses every so often on this unexplained man. The director clearly has a purpose for this character, but it is not immediately evident to the viewer.

At various times I have shown this film to students ranging in age from twelve to seventeen years. The students are always fascinated by this character, if for no other reason than that he is mysterious. Frequently students have commented, "He must represent God," or, "I think he's supposed to be Jesus."

Let us leave the man at the pond to be pondered by film buffs, and let us turn our attention to three mysterious characters who exit as quickly as they enter into the Old Testament accounts of Abraham, Jacob and Joseph.

ABRAHAM AND THE KING

In Genesis 14 Abraham goes into battle against an alliance of kings because they have captured his nephew Lot. When he returns from victory, “King Melchizedek of Salem, . . . priest of God Most High,” brings out bread and wine and blesses Abraham. Melchizedek arrives in verse 18 and completes his blessing in verse 20, never again to appear in Abraham’s story.

Who is this man? He will be mentioned only once more in the Old Testament, in Psalm 110, where a Davidic king receives the promise, “You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek” (Psalm 110:4).

Like the man in the film, Melchizedek becomes the topic of much discussion. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews writes at length about him, explicitly stating that Melchizedek is made to resemble the Son of God. He points out that “King of Salem” means “King of Peace” and that Melchizedek is not only a king but also a priest, one whose priesthood will last forever (see Hebrews 7:1–3).

The resemblance between Melchizedek, the king priest who blesses with bread and wine, and Jesus, who offers bread and wine the night before his sacrifice, is so much a part of Church tradition that the mysterious Melchizedek is mentioned even in the Mass. The Roman Canon, also known as the First Eucharistic Prayer, speaks of the bread and wine “offered by your priest, Melchizedek.”¹

Melchizedek is not the only mysterious man in the Old Testament who bears a striking resemblance to Jesus. The next two men we will look at are not even given names.

JACOB AND THE MAN

We often hear the story of Jacob's wrestling with an "angel," but in the actual Scripture passage, Genesis 32:24–32, Jacob's wrestling partner is described as a man. This man enters at verse 24, seemingly out of nowhere, and appears to be gone by verse 30.

In verse 26 Jacob asks this man for a blessing. This seems inconceivable, especially to me and my high school students. A physical assault of another student is reason for detention or suspension; you can be sure that the victim will not ask the perpetrator for his blessing. (In fact, such unfortunate encounters are normally accompanied by curses.) By asking for the man's blessing, Jacob is acknowledging that this man is somehow superior to him and somehow holy.

The man gives Jacob a new name, something that only God does. The new name is *Israel*, which means "the one who strives with God" or "God strives." Jacob has "striven with God and with humans" and has "prevailed" (Genesis 32:28).

God and humans? Is this man referring to Jacob's previous dealings with Laban and Esau? Or is he speaking of himself? Is he himself God or man? Why is *human* plural? Is this a return of Abraham's mysterious visitors?

After he receives a blessing from the man, Jacob marvels, "I have seen God face to face" (Genesis 32:30). So the mysterious wrestling partner starts out as a man and ends up being God! Who can he be?

In one class I traced through these man-to-God steps on the blackboard for the students to put in their notebooks. At the end of the outline I wrote, "A prophecy of Jesus?" One student was a bit perplexed when he finished copying. He raised

his hand and wondered why there was a question mark at the end of that final phrase. In deference to his simplicity and certainty, I erased the question mark.

The stages of revelation of the wrestling partner are especially interesting because they mark the path that Jesus' disciples will take in the Gospels. At first Jesus must have seemed like any other man. The first two disciples only noticed him because John the Baptist pointed him out and said, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). After seeing the authority with which Jesus spoke and lived, the miracles he performed and the way he looked at the people he encountered, those who followed Jesus recognized him to be a holy man, perhaps a great prophet, perhaps the Messiah.

Then the disciples began to believe that Jesus was even more than this. For Jesus did things that only God can do. For instance, he told a paralytic that his sins were forgiven, and then he healed him only to give evidence that he had authority to forgive sins, an authority that the bystanders knew belonged only to God (see Matthew 9:2–8; Mark 2:3–12; Luke 5:17–26).

At a certain point Jesus' declarations of his divinity became more explicit. Particularly interesting in light of the revelation made to Jacob is Matthew 16:13–18:

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of

Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it."

Jesus verified Simon's amazing confession. Simon, like Jacob, was in wonder that he saw God face-to-face. Like the man wrestling with Jacob, Jesus gave Simon a new name, Peter. In the end both Jacob and Peter prevail. And both have traveled the same path: They encountered a man, they understood that man to be holy, and they ultimately understood that man to be God.

JOSEPH AND THE MAN

We will consider in more detail later the Old Testament story of Joseph. Here I want to look at the man Joseph encountered on his way to see his brothers in Shechem.

We are told that "a man found [Joseph] wandering in the fields of Shechem." This mystery man does not engage in wrestling or bring forth bread and wine; he simply asks Joseph, "What are you seeking?" When Joseph asks the man the whereabouts of his brothers, the man advises him to look in Dothan (see Genesis 37:15–17).

Why should we pay any attention to this man? He enters Genesis 37 at verse 15 and is gone by verse 17, never to appear in Joseph's story again. What could he matter?

That man by the pond in *Decalogue I* also seems unimportant to the story, except for the fact that the director has chosen to include him. The director had to hire an actor, set up shots and use precious film time in order to include this mysterious man. No small thing.