

Second Sunday of Lent – Year B

A key theme running through the readings of today is gift. In the first extract from the book of Genesis the patriarch Abraham is given a test by God to see if he would be prepared to sacrifice his only son at God's request. Paul mentions Christ's gift of himself for the sake of humanity and Mark alludes to the death and resurrection of Jesus who is the beloved Son.

Genesis 22:1-2, 9-13, 15-18 In Jewish tradition the binding of Isaac by his father is referred to as the Aqedah (= the binding). The boy was not actually sacrificed but was bound, so it is not accurate to speak of the sacrifice of Isaac. This strikes us as a curious story and yet it is one of the best told stories in literature, containing the cruel command to Abraham to sacrifice his only and much-loved son, the pathos of the journey to the mountain and the conversation between father and son, and then the binding of the boy and the climax of the father raising a knife to cut his son's throat. The technical difficulty here is that Isaac is not Abraham's only son. His other son is Ishmael, but the narrator is adding to the sadness of the situation by highlighting the fact that the blessings and promises given to Abraham can only be fully realised in Isaac.

We tend to ask what kind of a God would ask a father to do such a thing and yet the narrator has indicated that this is a test. But surely God knows the outcome, we would argue, and so does not have to test Abraham. The spiritual lesson of the incident becomes clearer when we consider that the narrator is not concerned with practical issues such as, what would the boy's mother, Sarah, think of this? Where is she at the time? Why doesn't Isaac react when he suspects what is happening? At this point we can see that the narrator is showcasing Abraham's faith in God and his unquestioning obedience. The test is so extreme that it draws attention to Abraham's exceptional character and the strength of his relationship with God. In the end the patriarch's incredible trust is rewarded with the promise of blessings and many descendants.

The psalmist vows to remain loyal to his word and dedication

Psalms 115/116 The responsorial psalm picks up the idea of fidelity to God and shows up the delight God takes in those who are loyal and honest in their relationships. The poet declares his fidelity even in the face of affliction and pain. We see here a maturity of character that is not swayed by superficial attractions but is ever true to its commitment. We occasionally encounter individuals who make a commitment but will go back on their word when a better offer comes along. The psalmist acknowledges the steadfast fidelity of God and in return vows to remain loyal to his own word and dedication.

If God is for us, who can be against us?

Roman 8:31-34 The short reading from St Paul's letter to the Romans is part of Paul's encouragement to live the life of the Spirit. He argues that those dedicated to Jesus Christ are called to live a higher lifestyle that is not driven by earthly values. He acknowledges human weakness but insists that the Spirit is there to help us and then goes on to say that if God is on our side then we have a guarantee of success. If God supported the gift that Jesus gave of himself for our sake then God will surely be on our side.

Mark 9:2-10 The gospel reading from Mark gives the account of Jesus' transfiguration. This is a passage that is rich in symbolism and yet it is so easy to focus on the actual transfiguration of Christ and miss the other important messages that Mark is trying to convey.

Tradition has it that this event took place on Mt Tabor which is in southern Galilee. In ancient times mountains were often dedicated as sacred places because they were above the ordinary mundane world and in the language of metaphor seemed to reach toward the heavens. Jesus takes Peter, James and John up this mountain to have quiet time and prayer and there they see a side of Jesus they had not been aware of. The gospel tells us that Jesus was transformed to the extent that the apostles saw something of the glory of the Son of God. From a theological point of view Mark is spotlighting the divine nature of Christ and presenting a preview of the future risen Lord.

In this ecstatic moment, the apostles see Jesus conversing with Moses and Elijah – a symbolic tableau that highlights the Jewishness of Jesus who is perfectly at home in the religious tradition of his ancestors. Moses represents the Law and the centuries of covenant dedication that the people of Israel enjoyed with God. Jesus, as a pious Palestinian Jew, always showed deep respect for the Law of Moses and the traditions that flowed from it. He encouraged his fellow Jews to live by fidelity to the Mosaic Law and his whole mission

was to bring his own people back to the original spirit of the Law so that they could be fit to enter world of God's reign.

Elijah represents the prophets of Israel who turned up in times of crisis and who acted as social commentators chiding their contemporaries when things were going astray and striving to bring their people back to a faithful and loving relationship with God. All the prophets were reformers and Jesus is portrayed in the gospels as a reformer who reacted against interpretations of the Law that distracted people from its ultimate purpose, namely, to facilitate a right and healthy connection with God and neighbour. In fact, everything that Jesus focused on and spoke about was directed at showing us the way to right relationships.

There is no glory without suffering

The transfiguration is associated in all the three Synoptic gospels with the sufferings of Christ. This makes the point that there is no glory without suffering. So, while Jesus reveals something of his glory, he tells his three friends that he is destined to suffer and be killed. He tells them on the way down the mountain to keep their ecstatic experience to themselves until after he had risen from the dead. He also stressed elsewhere that his followers need to be prepared to carry their cross by working through life's difficulties and trials before entering into the glory of God's reign.

The voice of God bestowing approval and blessing on Jesus the Beloved Son reminds us that Jesus is pure gift to us. Everything about him is gratuitous and undeserved gift. The three apostles begin to appreciate this as they declare how good it is to be there with Jesus.

One powerful lesson we can take from this episode is that we cannot be part of the reign of God unless we ourselves are transformed. Our spiritual growth requires constant change for the better and we need to be mindful of renewing our effort to meet the challenge that Jesus Christ presents. Following his example, we strive to be people of action who are intent on improving our relationship with God and with those we encounter in our daily lives. And this is not done solely by doubling our prayer time, increasing our Lenten penances or attending Mass more often. Our practices of piety need to be authenticated by the way we treat others. John makes a solid point in one of his letters when he does not mince words but writes:

Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. (1 John 4:20-21)

Our commitment to Christ is verified when we express it through loving action. In that way we can be 'gift' to others.

This Lent could be a good time to take steps to heal a damaged relationship or give a word of encouragement. If we were to lie back on our pillow at the end of each day and ask ourselves, 'How many people did I encourage today?' we might be prompted to do better tomorrow by building somebody up, not with praise necessarily, but with a smile, or greeting or an encouraging word. When you think about it, it does not take much to encourage others – a sincere smile, a reassuring word, a random act of kindness.



Words can be a powerful healing tool if used with loving intention, to uplift, encourage and inspire.

John McLeod (American motivational speaker who spent his life in a wheelchair)

Those who are lifting the world upward and onward are those who encourage more than criticize.

Elizabeth Harrison (American pioneer in early childhood education)



John's wife was not so good with money, so he decided to have a chat with her about economising. The next day he met up with his mate.

'So,' asked his mate, 'do you think your little chat worked?'

'Yes, I think so,' said John. 'I'm going to give up beer and fags.'