

HOMILY PENTECOST FIVE

Genesis 22.1-14

Psalm 13

Romans 6:12-23

Matthew 10.40-42

It is very tempting to focus only on the Gospel this week, with its message of hospitality as discipleship, and Christian welcome. I say this because it is very tempting to avoid the confronting narrative of our God testing Abraham by demanding the sacrifice of his son. And then, it is also a struggle to take on Paul's teaching of sin and obedience – which he acknowledges in his somewhat patronising *“I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations.”* Indeed. As we lean more and more into these scriptures though, we find the gift of teaching connection, in our relationship with God who does indeed ask us, through Christ, for total commitment in discipleship.

So to God's demand on Abraham. There are many interpretations of this story, including what I have intimated in total giving to God. There is also those who see it as an allegory of turning away from human sacrifice. Others interpret it as Abraham's unquestioning obedience, and also his trust that God would not be cruel and would intervene. Which of course proved true. Whatever way you approach this scripture passage, it is painful and difficult to take on.

It seems to me that the essence of Abraham's humanity is also ours. We do all we can to live as obedient Christians, and often find it very difficult to sense the presence of God in this painful world. Indeed, to have trust in God in the seeming deepening crisis of human sin and frailty that confronts us at global and community level. The psalm of today, expressing despair at the beginning of wondering what God has in store for us, in conclusion comes to aid us in that trust:

Yet I put my trust in your unfailing love:

O let my heart rejoice in your salvation.

When we reflect on the extraordinary obedience and total trust of Abraham, to kill his heir and indeed the living promise of God for the future generations, the imagery and reality of the killing of God's own son, Jesus, is strongly present. In the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, and in his total obedience to do God's will, comes the eternal promise

of the future generations of God's kingdom, in all time. It also seems to me that God is clear in not expecting anyone except God to make such sacrifice – because for God the crucifixion is the divine power and gift of resurrection, and only God Godself could and can do that. The unconditional love of Abraham for God sitting above the love of his own son is the complete foreshadowing of the action of the cross. There is an extraordinary thread of old covenant and new covenant opening up between Abraham's obedience and the human/divine obedience of Christ.

We limited humans, as Paul points out, can only go a certain way with this kind of obedience and even acceptance of what the unconditional love of God means. However, it is the basis of the teaching of Jesus on discipleship which is the focus of Chapter ten of Matthew's Gospel. Jesus is pretty hard-hitting about the costs, as well as the rewards, of discipleship with him. The verses today actually outline the risk of not being welcomed, because a disciple is entrusted to representing Jesus Christ and not everyone is open to that. Jesus is preparing his followers for exclusion and persecution – as well as at the same time encouraging and demanding them not to deviate from the costly path of discipleship. We are called to take this path in our response to the gift of the cross ... as Paul says
The free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

It is only in our complete trust of the goodness of God working in all things that can bring hope to the world – we become that hope in our faithfulness. How the world needs this hope and light – and even in our uncertainty, in our lack of discipline in discipleship, in our fear of the unknown and darkness around us, we are called to be strong in faith, to keep trust in Christ's teaching and to be courageous in holding onto that light and hope.

I want to share with you a profound insight on this offered in one of Richard Rohr's daily meditations this week, by

Retired Episcopal bishop and Choctaw citizen Steven Charleston. Bishop Steven draws on his Native American experience for comment in this time.

As I do so, we remember this is the beginning of NAIDOC week in Australia, and we reflect also on the experiences of our Indigenous brothers and sisters.....

“We inhabit a period in history that seems to be filled with conflict. The world has become an uncertain place, a dark place, where we cannot see what may happen next. All we know, based on our recent experience, is that things could—and probably will—get worse....

For millennia, my ancestors followed a spiritual path that was respectful of the earth, inclusive of all humanity, and visionary in its transformative power. That tradition has survived. It is one of the oldest continuous spiritual paths on earth. My ancestors’ faith continues to this day despite every hardship and persecution it has been forced to endure.... I was asked to write a brief commentary about the Christian theology of the apocalypse: the final, terrible vision of the end of the world. I said my Native American culture was in a unique position to speak of this kind of vision, because we were among the few cultures that have already experienced it. In historic memory, we have seen our reality come crashing down as invaders destroyed our homeland. We have lived through genocide, concentration camps, religious persecution, and every human rights abuse imaginable. Yet we are still here. No darkness—not even the end of the world as we knew it—had the power to overcome us. So our message is powerful not because it is only for us, but because it speaks to and for every human heart that longs for light over darkness.

Hope makes room for love in the world. We can all share it, we can all believe in it, even if we are radically different in every other way. We no longer need to fear our differences because we have common ground. We can hope together—therefore, hope liberates us. It frees us from our fear of the other. It opens our eyes to see love all around us. It unites us and breaks our isolation. When we decide to embrace hope—when we choose to make that our goal and our message—we release a flow of energy that cannot be overcome. Hope is a light that darkness can never contain. [2]

.....

The example of Abraham’s living hope in a God of unconditional love is before us. And Christ’s voice is clear in Bishop Steven’s message – as his followers we have the common ground that means we can hope together – and indeed that hope liberates us. Nothing in the world can overcome the hope and light Jesus Christ is, and gives. In that faith and trust we are glad to be his followers, and, as the psalm says, our hearts rejoice in his salvation.

Amen.