

Archdeacon Mark Ireland

Genesis 22: 1-18

When I was living in Pakistan I used to often visit Lahore, where I used to notice a handsome little pagoda on Mall Road, outside the Provincial Assembly building, which was empty, having previously housed a statue of Queen Victoria, removed after Independence in 1947. One day whilst I was there I noticed a new statue had been erected in the pagoda, not of a person, but of a book, the Qur'an. This symbolised for me the desire of a nation that had been ruled by a colonial ruler to be ruled instead by the word of God.

As a Christian I am a student of the Book, which for me is the Bible, which I read and reflect on every day, usually morning and evening. As a Christian I believe the form of the Bible is human, but the sense is from God; the human writers were inspired by the Spirit of God, and so the words of this book are the Word of God, through which God speaks to me, teaches me and inspires me.

One of the stories that is very precious to me is the one we have just heard, from Genesis 22, Abraham's sacrifice of his son. This story appears in a different form in the Qur'an in Surah 37, which we will listen to and which Imam Fazal will reflect on shortly. It is appropriate to study this event in the life of our common ancestor Abraham at this time of year, when Muslims have just celebrated it in Eid al-Adha, which literally means 'the Feast of the Sacrifice'.

In Genesis 22 we read that God tested Abraham – and what a test! He had waited 25 years for God's promise that he and Sarah would have a son, born eventually when he was 100 years old. Young Isaac must have been the apple of his eye, his wife Sarah's only child, and the one through whom God had promised to bless all the nations of the world.

And yet suddenly Abraham hears God telling him to sacrifice his son, a terrifying and totally inexplicable thing for God to ask. Interestingly, in the Bible the son is named as Isaac (v.2), whereas in the Qur'an the son is not named, though Muslim scholars identify the son as Isaac's half-brother Ishmael.

Child sacrifice was a pagan practice clearly forbidden elsewhere in the Old Testament, so why did God command Abraham to do this? The text suggests that God needed to know that his gift of a son was not now more important to Abraham than God himself (see v.12). In the Christian tradition we think of God as 'a jealous lover' (a phrase from *The Cloud of Unknowing*), one who loves human beings with a passion and will not accept second place in their affections.

In v.3 we read that 'Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey...' What incredible obedience he shows – and to respond so quickly, the very next day and as soon as it was light. I fully understand why Muslims think of Abraham as 'the first Muslim', for Islam means 'submission' and Abraham submitted to God in the most costly way possible, and without delay. And seemingly without discussing it with his wife Sarah – we can't imagine what she might have said when she eventually found out what had happened: 'You tried to do what?!!'

In v.4 we read that on the third day of his journey, 'Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance.' Like many of you perhaps I have been to Jerusalem and visited the Dome of the Rock, which covers the rock which Jews, Christians and Muslims all revere as the site of this event. I have also visited the cave under the rock, through which in the days of the Jewish Temple the blood of the many Passover lambs and other sacrifices would have flowed, out into the Kidron valley.

In vv6-8 we have the incredibly moving scene of the young Isaac walking along with his father, perhaps holding his hand, and carrying the wood for

the sacrifice. He asks, 'The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?'

This question must have cut Abraham to the heart, and yet he somehow holds it together, and gives his son a somewhat mysterious answer, which seems to satisfy him for the moment, 'God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.'

Abraham's answer may have been no more than a way to fob off Isaac, but he spoke much truer than he knew. In v.13 we read that God did intervene at the last moment, crying 'Abraham! Abraham!' and he provided a ram caught in a thicket for Abraham to sacrifice instead of his son.

And as a Christian I read this text as pointing forward to the Passover lambs which were sacrificed in Egypt to rescue the Israelites from the tenth plague and so that they could escape from slavery to the Promised Land. And after the Israelites arrived in Palestine and built the Temple, Passover lambs were sacrificed every year at this same rock, now covered by the Dome of the Rock, to remind the Israelites of their deliverance.

And Abraham's words point still further into the future, to the sacrifice of Jesus, who was killed on the cross at Passover time, at the very time the Passover lambs were being killed on this very same mountain. St. Paul describes Jesus as the Passover Lamb who takes away the sin of the world.

However, unlike Isaac, who did not know what was going to happen to him, Jesus knew from the beginning that this was his Father's will, and he willingly laid down his life as a sacrifice for sin.

And in the story of Isaac we see the incredible love of God, who did not ask Abraham ultimately to sacrifice his son – his submission to God's will

was enough – but ultimately himself made the sacrifice that Abraham was spared from. For in the Christian tradition God is the loving Father who allowed his Son to take upon himself the sin of the world and to die as a perfect sacrifice. There is nothing more precious than a parent's love for their child, and God is revealed in the Bible as the loving Father who gave what was most precious to him, his own Son, to save the world.

In the words of the most famous verse in the whole Bible, 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.' (John 3.16)