

Genesis 22:1-14

Matthew 10:40-42

**Choice or no choice: obedience or ethics?**

**Introduction to readings**

In this first half of the long season of Pentecost, that takes us all the way through to Advent at the end of November, the lectionary invites us to explore the community of faith and *how we are as a community of faith*.

Last week John talked about the theology of the Trinity and how theologians today are exploring that doctrine from the perspective of *community* and the variety of ways we can experience God – context, culture and need always influencing those experiences.

Now you are going to hear two stories, addressing different communities, which deeply reflect their contexts. The stories have the capacity to deeply trouble us as they would have troubled their initial audience.

The first is a horror story and the second a love story.... or both can be heard as love stories if you have an agile mind! Both make big demands of us as they did of that original audience.

The stories require a bit of work on the part of us 21stC Christians to understand them- or more importantly see them as still speaking to us in any meaningful way. And we might even wonder why the Genesis story was included!

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The Genesis reading: often simply spoken of as the ‘sacrifice of Isaac’, is most difficult for me. I have struggled to find a way to address it that does not react to its face value impact nor try to explain it away. Both those responses would be to do a disservice to the Biblical literature. And anyway, my feminist training demands that I address such texts and not back away from them just because I do not like them. This text needs exposing for what it is... a horror story for any parent or child! Some have written about it as ‘child abuse’ - with the excuse ‘God made me do it!’

Phyllis Tribble a feminist theologian, calls texts such as this ‘texts of terror’. God is not portrayed well, in as much as he ‘plays with humanity’ and tests the human relationship with God – tests Abraham’s faith – and the pawn in this adult male ‘game’ is a child... Abraham does not look too good either! He is prepared to sacrifice his longed for son! Poor Sarah! Both these patriarchs – God and Abraham – leave a lot to be desired in male behaviour. The story is full of horror - terror - especially for Isaac the young lad.

There are many ways of explaining away the terror and horror; many ways of looking at the story... perhaps most helpful is the view that this is a ‘left over’ story, recorded from the oral tradition of a much more ancient time when sacrifice, and even child sacrifice, was practised as a way of proving allegiance to a powerful god (proving that you would even do what is most difficult for a parent) and appeasing that god’s wrath – buying protection or points to call on.

Certainly the audience of Israelites would have been familiar with that ... and they would also have had the awareness that, as their prophets told them, it was their disobedience to the covenant with God through Moses that caused them to be a homeless and wandering people in the first place ... God on the other hand, from this point of view, was faithful to the covenant ... and so the story portrays God as generous, and life-giving, saving Isaac at the last minute.

I still don't like the story, nor do I find the God that is portrayed in it the God I can respect and celebrate.

This story runs contrary to the understanding of God that develops through the sweep of the Biblical literature with the grand themes of

- generous unconditional love,
- care and concern for the 'little ones' (the least amongst us in social measure),
- fairness and loving kindness that brings us all to our full potential,
- with ready forgiveness and respect.

There are some of these horror stories that crop up from time to time. We cannot pretend they don't exist, and we need to face them. It seems to me that they have the potential to reflect back to us our own behaviour, the horror in our society and communities - They make us think about how we mistreat children today and what excuses we make for not protecting them.

The Matthew reading, written about 40-50 years after Jesus, is from a time when all people knew how dependent they were on the hospitality of strangers if they wanted to travel anywhere beyond the lands and network of family. 'Welcome and hospitality' speak about that: it is shown in generosity toward the stranger - for we never know what message they might bring or from whom they come.

In the cultural context of this writer and those who would hear this exhortation, a messenger was to be treated *as if they themselves were the one from whom the message was sent* - and a cup of water may well be the difference between life and death. Clearly the writer is reminding us that Jesus said "in as much as you do it to one of these you do it to me."

This second story is much easier to understand and see as relevant to being a Christian community today.

In these readings there are at least two different experiences of God reflected: one, a God who demands unquestioning obedience, and the other a God who is known through a behavioural rule to be welcoming and hospitable.

What both these stories do, and what seems to be their impact for me as we launch into the long season of Ordinary Sundays, is challenge us to ask ourselves why we do the things we do, why we behave the way we behave.

- Is it because we feel duty bound to obey a set of rules
- Is it because we are scared of God?
- or hope to prove our faith to God?
- Or are we hoping to accumulate brownie points for ourselves and prove ourselves worthy of a reward?

We have to ask ourselves what it is that motivates us to the behaviours we engage in and the expectations we have of ourselves and of each other and of our leaders.

If it is **obedience** to rules or a consuming passion – for fear of God, or the law of the land; or **hope of a reward** - then we are not living ethically no matter if we conform to the rules!

If on the other hand we are **choosing** to do what is right because we have caught a vision of a community living well together, and our actions promote community wellbeing, then we are living ethically according to the Christian ethical framework that Jesus points toward. If in our heart we *know* how wonderful it would be to live in peace and harmony with one another, caring for each other with concern and loving kindness, and our attitudes and behaviours promote this living, **then we are living ethically, then we are living as Christians.**

For ethical living we must be able to **freely choose**, without coercion of any kind - we can question and challenge, we can engage in shaping the vision we share, and we can participate in actions (lifestyle) to take to bring that vision to fulfilment.

This latter, this ethical way of living, makes us co-creators with God in creating that community of loving kindness that welcomes strangers and gives to all the water they need to live.