

'What would you sacrifice?'

Genesis 22:1-14; Matthew 10:40-42

It caught my attention straight away. It was a radio charity appeal raising money for different people who have been hit hard by COVID-19. The woman speaking was a mother. She'd lost her job, money was vanishing, and she was ashamed to use a Foodbank for the first time. Even then there wasn't quite enough food to go around. "It doesn't matter if I have to make a sacrifice. It doesn't matter if I miss food for two or three days. As long as my children get enough to eat. That's what matters. I can make a sacrifice for that."

Sacrifice. It's a word deeply attached to our faith. It's a word that goes to the heart of Christianity. There can be no love without sacrifice. Jesus, and His work on earth, is the epitome of sacrifice. Giving of yourself, sometimes all of yourself, for others, because of others. Some of you may remember the old sweet advert for Rolo, which ended, 'Do you love anyone enough to give them your last Rolo?' What we're talking about here in the Bible, in our lived-out faith, is so much more than that. It's so much deeper.

I want to be clear here that the story from the Old Testament about Abraham, or is it really a parable, is not about child-sacrifice. What this story is about is about giving up all that you have to God. It is a story about trust, deep trust, life-changing trust, ultimate trust.

The Abraham story is meant to make us think, 'what are we prepared to offer to God, and what does God offer us?' It is not a transaction; it is a relationship. Abraham, an archetype, is prepared to give to God everything that is most precious to him. And not this, God gives back the gift. Abraham offers up all his love. God offers back all God's love. There is no love without sacrifice.

I wonder if it is also the case that there is no sacrifice without love?

If you think about this story, it echoes in so many ways the story of Calvary. "God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son..." That's one of the things about the Old Testament stories: they're often news to most of us, and they resonate, on so many levels, with the power and the love and the glory of the gospels.

In this searching story, Abraham keeps responding, “Here I am”. In this searching story we learn again that Abraham trusts. In this searching story we learn that God will provide.

There are times when in our lives we feel we God hasn’t given us enough – talent, skills, imagination, beauty, money, happiness, the list could go on. I wonder if it is not rather that we refuse to use what God *has* given us. How many of us spend our lives lamenting that our glass is half empty when in fact it is half full?

Throughout our lives we will be able to think of people who have sacrificed much on our behalf. The family members who have gone without so that we might have something; the partners who have sacrificed their right to speak out simply to keep the peace when we have been out of order in our behaviour, holding on in love until we calm down and see sense; the people who make decisions about how they are going to spend their money so that they are able to make gifts to charities that they know will make the world a better place; the people who turn down job offers because they work out that to move a family at a certain time will disrupt education, or cause heart-ache. Where there is love, there is often sacrifice.

The athletes who sacrifice their social lives so they can train and be the best in their field. The people who didn’t do well at school who, in later life, sacrifice leisure time to put themselves through night-school or distance learning to improve their chances. The parents who hold down multiple jobs, or work long hours, to ensure their families have enough. It all comes at a cost, sometimes a great cost. Where there is love, or ambition for a better future, there is often sacrifice. What would we be prepared to give up? For the benefit of our loved ones? For the greater good of our community and country?

Over these last weeks I am aware of significant sacrifices people have been making in order to combat COVID-19. Not seeing family and friends. Complying with irksome regulations in shops and public transport. Closing down church buildings, and so many other facilities, in order that, in time, we will be able to emerge safely and hopefully from the lockdown. Never since World War Two has there been so much real sacrifice in our country. And it has not come lightly or cheaply. The cost of sacrifice will be with us for a long time to come.

But as we have sacrificed, as we have given up, it is not all been a negative experience. Sometimes in the act of sacrifice we realise that we are not as bad as we thought we were. We realise that there is a kindness, an altruism, a heart that goes beyond what we sometimes fear is our selfishness and self-interest. As we have given up in this time of sacrifice, what have we been given back? What has God provided, and still provides?

I'm not going to answer that for you, because it is something that you need to reflect on for yourself.

Where there is love, there is sacrifice. Where there is sacrifice, there is trust. Where there is trust, there we find God.

In the story of Abraham we see a foreshadow of the action of God in Jesus. The God Who sacrificed and did not hold back. The God Who gave everything that we might have something. The God Who has placed His trust in us, and given His gifts to us, in the hope that we might respond with our deep trust in Him.

Sacrifice is a costly thing: for us, for God. But for us, and for God, where there is sacrifice, there is love.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen