

the Sunday Readings



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(Mark 9:2)

2nd SUNDAY IN LENT (b)

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*a preview of human solidarity*¹

introduction

In Mark's gospel, the preceding scene told about Simon Peter's profession of faith. Peter was eager to acknowledge *Jesus as the Messiah* – yet he was slow to appreciate what was entailed for the practise of discipleship. Jesus takes an opportunity to point out the necessary conditions for being his disciple. He takes Peter, James and John with him up a high mountain. These are the same three disciples who had witnessed the healing of a child whom everyone thought was dead. A mountain is the classic place for an important revelation and there, on the mountain, Jesus' transfiguration occurs.

first reading: Genesis 22 : 1 – 2, 9 – 13, 15 – 18²

[the command to sacrifice Isaac]

After these things, God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am."(1) He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you."(2) . . . When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.(9) Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son.(10) But the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am,"(11) The angel said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me."(12) And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son.(13) . . . The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven(15) and said, "By myself I have sworn, says the Lord: because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son,(16) I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies,(17) and by your offspring shall all the nations of the Earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice."(18)

God's promises are always "at risk" to human obedience. As the story of Abraham and Isaac shows, experience of life includes times of great 'testing' of faith in and obedience to God. The story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac develops a new understanding of God. The Lord had previously tested Abraham by calling

1 Cover icon: The Transfiguration of Jesus – written by the Studio of St. John the Baptist, Takapuna, Auckland.

2 The biblical excerpts are drawn from the New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), published by Oxford University Press (1994).

him from Mesopotamia,³ and requiring him to endure a famine. Although Abraham seems to have failed this test, he meets angelic visitors, who announce that God will in some way fulfill the promises that have been made by the birth of Isaac.⁴ The testing in the passage isn't about Abraham being tempted to engage in Canaanite practices of child-sacrifice. Isaac is the child of God's promise. In a legal sense this '*testing*' was a special rite, or ordeal, that is used to bring to light the guilt or innocence of an accused person. Abraham had responded appropriately to the earlier angelic visitors – and they go on to announce Isaac's birth.⁵

In the test, God asks Abraham to sacrifice the child of promise. The patriarch complies in, '*fear of the Lord*!' Abraham carries out each detail of the preparation for sacrifice. His faithfulness is answered by God's delivering on the promise. The themes of: *testing, fear of God/obedience* and *the great blessing* – are fundamental to the blessings of Covenant. The passage ends with the Covenant being re-affirmed. God promises Abraham a large number of descendants; victory over his enemies; that other nations will bless themselves by Abraham's descendants. The story celebrates the faithful obedience of the patriarch. Abraham is the source of the the blessings of Covenant. Abraham's faithfulness is answered by God's commitment to fulfil the Covenant promises.

response: Psalm 116 : 10, 15 – 19

[thanksgiving for recovery from illness]

*I kept my faith, even when I said:
"I am gratefully afflicted."(10) . . .
Precious in the sight of the Lord
is the death of his faithful ones.(15)
O Lord, I am your servant;
I am your servant, the child of your serving girl.
You have loosed my bonds.(16)
I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice
and call on the name of the Lord.(17)
I will pay my vows to the Lord
in the presence of all his people,(18)
in the courts of the house of the Lord,
in your midst, O Jerusalem. Praise the Lord! (19)*

This psalm begins the second part of '*the Egyptian Hallel*'⁶ and would have been sung by Jesus' community at their celebration of Passover, immediately before they left the upper room for Gethsemane. The speaker has been given a

3 cf. Gn.12

4 see Gn.18:1ff

5 [vv.15-18] – were probably added when the story of Abraham was brought together with the covenant traditions. These verses reaffirm the covenant with a promise that all the nations of the Earth will be blessed through Abraham's '*seed*'. Abraham's '*obedience*' and his '*fear of the Lord*' are the basis of the blessings of the Covenant. The story celebrates the faithful obedience of the Patriarch as the channel of all the blessings of the Covenant.

6 Pss. 113 – 118

new lease of life affirming that life in the future will be spent in God's presence. It is God's presence that has rescued the speaker from afflictions in the past. The expressions of gratitude fit the experience of Isaac – as described in the reading from *Genesis* (see above). The deliverance of the just one from affliction recalls the deliverance of Isaac (see *Gn.22*).

Faith in God, sustained the speaker through the experience of harassment. Because of God's reliability, the speaker claims release from the powers of death. The final verses link with the practices of communal thanksgiving around temple worship (*vv.18-19*). The speaker now identifies with a community of thanksgiving. In the temple ritual of preparation for a thanksgiving sacrifice, such a psalm was sung in the sanctuary in front of the assembly of the people.

second reading: Romans 8 : 31 – 34

[God's love in Jesus Christ]

What then are we to say about those things? If God is for us, who is against us?(31) He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?(32) Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies.(33) Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.(34)

Paul understands the death and resurrection of Jesus as the earliest or "*first-fruits*" of this transformation of all things. Although sin and disobedience (to the Torah) are still part of the human and Christian experience, Paul insists that righteousness in Christ is more than sufficient to counter the effects of sin and disobedience, precisely because our imperfect human obedience is no longer the foundation of our relationship with God (*v.34*).

Paul attributes this rescue from evil to God's free gift (*v.32*). There was a problem for the Israelite-Christian community at Rome of the relation of *the gospel of Jesus' free grace*, with the legal traditions of the *Israelite Torah*, or *Law of Moses*. For Paul, the new possibility is the freely given gift; the freedom of a believer living in a community based on the promise. Such a promise is not negated by oppressive obedience to the Law. The force of Israelite law can't nullify God's will for a community that trusts in God's promises (*vv.31-34*).

Maturity in the good life often comes by abrasive and disruptive events which seem to shatter our control. Such shatterings at key points in our lives, make us, not initiators but recipients of gifts and surprises that we often don't want to receive. God's commitment to being our '*power for life-giving*' or '*grace*' given in the vulnerability of an Isaac, or Jesus, leads to a *new righteousness* (*new power for life-giving*)! The empowering emerges from our experience of exile, alienation, discontinuity; but only God's gift of grace makes this faithfulness and obedience to Covenant-keeping, possible (*v.33*).

God is known – through the person and deeds of an Isaac or Jesus. God is THE *Life-giver*. Others, who derive strength, gifts and authority from God, may also be endowed with power to be *life-givers*. This is a social reality, where the giving of life is always to another and never a securing of some benefit for oneself. Life, always and necessarily is a gift. It is the giving of the substance, and the ability to choose one's way of life and to be able to shape one's future.

gospel reading: Mark 9:2–10

[the Transfiguration of the Lord]

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them,(2) and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them.(3) And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus.(4) Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."(5) He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.(6) Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"(7) Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.(8) As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.(9) So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead could mean.(10)

Peter, James and John, are members of Jesus' inner-circle of disciples. They had witnessed the resurrection of Jairus' daughter.⁷ Jesus now prepares them for what will follow. In *chapter 13*, Mark contends with people who had pinned their hopes on the establishment of God's new reigning on the traumatic event of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 c.e.. These people are disillusioned, because that hope had now been dashed. Was Jesus after all, no greater than Elijah and Moses – people who also had been rapt to heaven? Jesus could not be the Messiah then, so their expectations were disappointed. But Mark defends the uniqueness of Jesus (v.7). Peter talks of building some shelters or tents because the prophets had said that with the Messiah, God would live again in a tent in the midst of the people, just as God did in *the first Exodus*. Peter didn't know what he was saying – because it was unrealistic that they should stay there on the mountain. They needed to begin their own 'exodus' towards liberty.

The cloud (v.7) in the Israelite Scriptures is an image of God's presence. God accompanied the people in the shape of a cloud during *the Exodus*. On Sinai, God appeared surrounded by clouds. When the Temple in Jerusalem was established it was said that God's presence filled the Temple like a mist. That's also the reason the gospels report that at Jesus' ascension, he was enveloped by cloud. The cloud is something visible and yet at the same time it restricts visibility. That's why it is

⁷ Cf. Mk.5:21-24

an image of God's presence. A God revealed to us and at the same time hidden from us – or rather – a God who is revealed to us as mystery.

The passage says the disciples were, *'enveloped by the mystery of God'*. Jesus is *the WORD of God made flesh on Earth*. That is the message of God – that we should love one another. That's the WORD *'the Cloud'* says we must hear. The disciples find out that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. Afterwards Jesus will reveal to them that the genuine Messiah – *'must suffer and die'*. The disciples are given a glimpse of Jesus beyond his death – and towards his glorious transformation. It seems the whole story is purely symbolic. That doesn't mean it isn't true. *'The mountain'* spoken of here isn't any mountain in Palestine. Rather it's *a new Sinai*, where God, by means of *a new Moses*, gives *a new Torah* (or Law) – *the Torah of Love*. Events are forcing Jesus to make a decision. He prays about this decision. He consults Moses and Elijah – prophets and transitional people like himself. Jesus comes to a decision. He has to confront Jerusalem with his message. But he knows the fate of the prophets awaits him there.

for sharing:⁸

- *God's own promise was placed at the risk of human obedience. Comment on Genesis 22 : 1 – 18*
- *Instead of seeing a human father sacrifice what is most precious; we come to see God make the sacrifice for us, in Jesus. Comment on Romans 8 : 31 - 34*
- *Jesus' transfiguration on 'the mountain', is a sign that he comes not to condemn, but to fulfill. Comment on Mark 9 : 2 – 10*

prayer:⁹

*Ever-faithful God,
You were well pleased
with Abraham's obedience*

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- 8 Lectio Divina: reading God's WORD in a moment of prayer and allowing it to enlighten and renew us: The practise of *lectio divina* requires a quiet space, a passage of scripture and the willingness to give time to the project. The passage used should be short. For the purpose of this leaflet, we suggest using the gospel reading of the up-coming Sunday. There are four steps in the traditional practise of *lectio divina*. The steps don't have to have the following order: *lectio* (reading) – read the passage of Scripture read slowly - more than once. If a particular word, phrase, or sentence seems significant (even if you don't know why) you may want to write it down. *meditatio* (reflection) – let the significant words fill your mind without straining to analyse them. We are in God's presence and so let the Holy Spirit lead your understanding of the words. *oratio* (prayer) – allow your heart to speak to God, in words inspired by the passage of Scripture, or by the thoughts that have come to you, while reflecting on it. *contemplatio* (rest) – let go of ideas and words and allow yourself to rest in the presence of God, in simple and wordless contemplation. This leaflet gives the context and some commentary on each of the readings and the psalm used in the Sunday's liturgy. Familiarity with the texts and the commentary beforehand, can better prepare our hearing and understanding the passages in our worship. Whatever our preparation for doing this exercise and whatever questions we may use to break open the passage, we must be conscious of Christ's promise: *'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them'*
- 9 The prayer that concludes the Lectio Divina is ICEL's 1998 opening prayer from the Proper of the Day. These prayers draw upon the concrete and vivid images of Scripture and conclude with a clearly focused petition inspired by the readings.

*and You accepted
the sacrifice of Your Son,
who gave himself up
for the sake of us all.
Train us by Christ's teaching
and school us in his obedience,
that, as we walk his way of sacrifice,
we may come to share in Your glory.
We ask this through Christ,
our deliverance and hope,
who lives and reigns with You
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
holy and mighty God for ever and ever. Amen.*

review:¹⁰

Abraham's testings point to the fact that it is God who tests us. This is how God extends us. Our instinct is to resist being 'drawn out' like this by God. In face of the growing-pains of goodness, we would rather curl up in front of the T.V., or perhaps even refuse to get out of bed. Our unwillingness to be extended, is a recognisable layer of our being. And it is so part of our experience of sin. Falling asleep over one's prayers, like the apostles sleeping on Mt. Tabor, may not rank as a grave evil, but it may be a symptom of our spiritual deafness that refuses to let in God's voice. We would rather not be the people that God wants to make us.

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¹⁰ The review – at the end of each reflection the review examines one of the themes of the readings, usually drawn from the gospel, and provides an opportunity to check our own performance, in the light of the WORD and Eucharist that we have previously heard and experienced.