Homily – 2nd Sunday of Lent (B)

*Gen. 22: 1-2, 9-13, 15-18; Rom. 8: 31-34 & Mk. 9: 2-10*

There are some Sundays when, despite long prayer and reflection, a preacher can find it difficult to have any thoughts at all for a homily. And then there are other Sundays when the exact opposite is the case, and the liturgy is so rich there is the risk of going on far too long! Today, this second Sunday of Lent, belongs to this latter category – so don’t say you haven’t been warned!

In our first reading, we hear the story of the “sacrifice of Isaac” from the book of Genesis. It is a strange and shocking narrative. Although the pagan religions of the Ancient Near East often did practise child sacrifice, this is the only narrative in the Hebrew scriptures when it is the Lord himself who seems to demand this revolting practice, the only time when the Lord seems to sink to the level of the “non-gods” so despised by Israel. And of course it is all the more strange, since it is through Isaac, through this same only son, that the Lord has promised Abraham that his descendants will be as many as the grains of sand on the seashore. The whole scene seems perverse. Yet we know that the story has a “happy ending”. God does not require Abraham to kill his son – he has proved his obedience in the most dramatic fashion and that is enough. Instead, Abraham offers the ram as a burnt offering, and receives a renewal of God’s promise, the promise of descendants, of land, of victory and blessing as a reward for his obedience.

For the Church Fathers, this story – a story which we will hear again on Easter night – was a prophecy of Christ himself. Isaac, carrying the wood for the sacrifice on his back, ascends the hill – just as Jesus will carry the Cross up Golgotha ready for his sacrifice. At the top, Isaac is bound and laid on the wood for the sacrifice, just as Jesus will be nailed to the Cross. Abraham receives Isaac “back from the dead” figuratively speaking, since God relents and does not demand his death, just as Jesus will return from the dead on Easter morning. But there is an obvious and important difference: Isaac, Abraham’s only son, is spared from death by God’s decree, whereas Jesus, God’s only Son, truly dies on Calvary. It is an amazing thought – the Father demands less of Abraham than he himself is prepared to give – and he does not spare his only Son for our salvation.

And then in the gospel, we hear the familiar story of the Transfiguration. Jesus takes Peter, James and John to a lonely place and there reveals his true divine glory as he speaks with Moses and Elijah – the representatives of the tradition of Israel, of the Law and the Prophets, that he is about to fulfil. Peter, overcome, babbles crazily, seeking to hold on to this moment without understanding its significance, and at once there comes the divine attestation and command: *This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him*.

I think this episode of the Transfiguration has huge importance in Mark’s portrait of Jesus’ life. In the first place, it comes almost exactly half way through the gospel – it is a turning point, as it were, in Jesus’ story. Equally, it does not stand in isolation, but – I believe – is tightly tied into the “architecture” of Mark’s gospel by its links with other episodes. Right at the beginning of the gospel, we hear similar words from the Father at Jesus’ baptism, at the beginning of his revelation, at the beginning of his ministry: *You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased* (Mk.1:11). But these are “private words” from the Father, addressed to his Son alone, at least as Mark tells us. Then, six days before the Transfiguration, Jesus and his disciples are together at Caesarea Philippi. In response to Jesus’ questions, Peter makes the next attestation: *You are the Christ* (Mk. 8:29) – and now the news is public, but shared only by a few, only by the twelve. The Transfiguration then follows swiftly, and now – again in public, but shared only by Peter, James and John – the Father himself attests Jesus’ identity: *This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him* (Mk.9: 7). And there is one final attestation, right at the end of the gospel. At the ninth hour on Good Friday, with the world shrouded in darkness, Jesus uttered his last words: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* (Mk. 15:34) and, with a loud cry, breathed his last. And the last attestation comes not now from heaven; it is not now the voice of God that is heard. Rather it is the voice of a man that is heard; and not just any man, but the presiding centurion, the representative of Imperial power, of earthly authority. It is the centurion who speaks for humanity: *Truly, this man was Son of God* (Mk.15:39). It is as if, at the moment of his dying, Jesus’ true identity is finally revealed for *all* to see, Jesus is proclaimed Son of God in the most public place possible as he is stretched between earth and heaven on the altar of the Cross.

Now, as a meditation on Genesis and Mark, that’s all well and good, possibly thought-provoking, perhaps even spiritually uplifting. But you might by now be wondering to yourselves: *OK, but what has this got to do with me?* Well, actually, I think there is a very simple answer, and one which is an important part of our Lenten journey. In Mark, sandwiched between Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi and the Transfiguration six days later comes Jesus’ most direct teaching on discipleship, offered to all his followers. He says: *If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me* (Mk. 8:34). It is the most direct description in Mark’s gospel of what it actually *means* to be a disciple, to be a Christian. It sounds so simple, but as we know from our own experience and the stories of the saints, it is the most demanding task we will ever face. And it is this task, this task of discipleship, this task of self-denial, of bearing the Cross, of following Christ, which we focus on each Lent in a special way.

And that might all sound rather gloomy, but I don’t think it is. As Abraham found, God will always give more abundantly of himself than he will ask of us, if we follow him in obedience and in faith. Or again as Paul tells us: *God did not spare his own Son... and so we may be certain, after such a gift, that he will not refuse us anything he can give* (Rom. 8:32) going on to add: *[Nothing] will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord* (8:39). And it is at the moment of his deepest emptiness, his total self-gift, that Jesus shines forth most brightly, and is recognised by the world as Son of God. So too with us, if we take Jesus’s words to heart in our lives, if we take up our Cross and follow him, will find not death but life, will find our truest selves revealed to us and perhaps even to others, will find that we have become sharers in his Transfigured and Risen glory. May it indeed be so. Amen.

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