**14th April 2013**

**Genesis 22.1-14**

Love her or loathe her Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minster at a testing time in British history. Her response to high inflation, the decline of British industry and standing in the world, and the paralysing power of the unions, was dramatic and controversial. Many people applauded her for saving the nation and restoring our pride and freedom. Many communities still resent what they see as her divisive polices that caused devastation to some of the old industrial parts of Britain, mainly in the north. Some people still can’t forgive her for being made the sacrifice that enabled Britain to find the road to economic recovery.

She was a principled lady without a doubt, who was not for turning. She was also a devout Christian. Her father was a lay preacher in the Methodist Church. Her former head of Policy Lord Griffiths wrote an article in the Times this week saying how Margaret Thatcher made it clear on numerous occasions to him that the theology of Methodism was evangelical, emphasising the call of each person to a personal encounter with God. She believed that we were all created in the image of God and therefore people and families could be trusted to be responsible. This led her to have a high view of the ability and decency of the ordinary person, which was a major factor behind policies that would empower people and families such as the sale of council houses, the creation of wider share ownership and lower taxes. People should be trusted to make their own decisions and run their own lives and be liberated from government bureaucracy and given more control over the money that they earned. Griffiths concludes that her strong personal faith was the basis of her world view and her approach to public policy. So we can either blame the Methodists or thank the Methodists depending on whether we love or lathe Mrs Thatcher!

Leadership is always a test and you will encounter challenging situations that will test your faith and values. There will be challenges calling for decisions that may mean making sacrifices. Often the practice of leadership is an act of faith.

During the next few Sundays we return to looking at the story of Genesis and how God’s people formed around the leadership of Abraham and his offspring. Today we look at the well-known but unsettling story of the test of his faith.

Testing times can come on people in all sorts of ways. Testing of relationships, of emotions, of ability to do a job, of your competence, your skills. The test of old age, ill health, grief and loss. Maybe you are being tested at the moment?

Scripture reveals that testing is part of God’s education of his children so that they may come to maturity. Abraham, in our passage today from Genesis, has his faith tested to the limit. Abraham, if you remember, had been chosen by God to be the father of many nations and from whose offspring would be the people of God. Abraham has been promised a son, even though he was in old age. His patience was tested as he waited for the promise to come true. His wife Sarah had finally given birth to Isaac. Now God tests Abraham – sacrifice your son!

At several levels this is one of the most powerful passages within the whole Bible. In one sense it is, or should be, a cause of profound difficulty. What would the present-day media make of a story of a father who set out to kill his son on the grounds that he had been commanded by God to do so? Jews and Christians seem sometimes not to realize how utterly offensive this story would be in ‘real life’ terms. It is a story that is not told to children these days. You are unlikely to get this down at your local Primary School. Yet it is a story told to illustrate a particular set of beliefs in a particular culture, at a particular time, and must be treated as such. It may help to understand it more by the widespread practice at the time of Abraham of child sacrifice – to appease the gods. This story is told to make the clear distinction that the God of Abraham doesn’t do child sacrifice – there is a new ethical turn in human religiosity.

Let’s first consider the character of the story. Perhaps the first thing to strike us is the extraordinary economy with which it is told. No mention is made of Sarah, Isaac’s mother; no picture is given of any agonizing self-doubt on the part of Abraham. He hears a call which he takes to be from God and without a word and without delay (early in the morning) he obeys. He realizes that the men he takes with him must suspect nothing of what is to take place, and so he deliberately misleads them, ‘we will come back to you’ he says. He misleads his own son – when Isaac asks him where the sheep is for a sacrifice he replies ‘God will provide a sheep for sacrifice’. At this stage God has promised no such thing. Instead God has explicitly told Abraham that Isaac will be the sacrifice. Isaac is old enough and strong enough to carry the wood to a place far away yet does nothing to resist his father’s murderous intentions.

In these ways the story retains its intensely dramatic qualities.

Isaac and Abraham ascend the mountain, which in Judaism and Islam has been associated with the dome of the Rock, the site of the Jerusalem Temple. Muslims believe that the son that was nearly sacrificed was probably Ishmael, which adds another interesting aside to the story.

Here, Isaac is bound on the altar pile and Abraham grabs his knife poised to slay him. At the last moment the angel of the Lord stops him. And says ‘now we know that you are a god-fearing man you have not withheld your only son’. At that moment a ram is caught in the thicket and Abraham offers the ram as a sacrifice in place of Isaac and names the shrine ‘The Lord provides’ or in Hebrew ‘Jehovah Jireh’.

I want to ask you three questions from this difficult story. What is the test? Where is the sacrifice? Can you trust for the provision?

It was a personal test for Abraham, who was called by name. It was also a lonely test, which he shared with no one. He bore the full force of this instruction to offer his son as a sacrifice, his one and only son, whom he loved. God demands seemed to go contrary to his promises that it would be through Isaac’s that Abraham’s decedents be named as the people of God. This instruction to sacrifice his only son seemed to go against the divine promise not to say against common sense and human reason. The shock was not unlike that felt by airplanes when the reverse thrust of the engines is used to bring a plane to halt. God’s promises seemed to be put into reverse gear after all the years of looking forward to the birth of Isaac. Perhaps he sustained himself on God’s statement that it would be through Isaac his descendants would live on. Perhaps even though it didn’t make sense, at whatever level, Abraham still believed God could provide an alternative sacrifice or even raise the dead? Yet it would be Abraham’s steadfast faith under great testing that made him into the example he became of the man of faith.

What is your test? The evidence of scripture suggests that God tests. Abraham, like Job was a blameless man who feared God but was tested. The Israelites were tested. Jesus was tested. The apostle Paul says the followers of Christ will be tested. We pray in the Lord’s Prayer ‘lead us not into temptation’. The prayer commended by Jesus is that God should not put us in a testing situation where we are driven to choose, decide, and risk for our confession of faith. The prayer is the petition that our situation of faith may not be so urgent that we will be found out. Behind that prayer is fear: fear that we will be found wanting if such testing comes.

The philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard talked about genuine faith which has to go through dread before the self is yielded to God Abraham has an anguished acknowledgment that God is God and is freely sovereign. The testings which come in history and which are from God will drive us to find out whether we mean what we say about our faith being grounded solely in the gospel.

What is your test? Maybe at work or in your personal relationships you are being tested to behave in a un Christian manner. In your ambition, your money, your personal life we are always being tested to accommodate to the world, to yield to the pressures that lead to a compromised confession of Christ. For the most part, faithful people cringe from having to decide. Few respond as readily as Abraham. Where is your test of faith?

Nelson Mandela has been seriously ill causing the world to contemplate his death. No doubt when he does die the reaction to his death will be in marked contrast to that of Margaret Thatcher. Mandela, once described by Thatcher as a terrorist, is now universally seen as a man who brought reconciliation to South Africa and showed the way to forgiveness. But it may not have worked out that way. President Bill Clinton told the story of how he watched on TV his release from prison in 1990. He later asked Mandela about that moment. He said ‘when you were released the camera caught sight of your face, I had never seen such anger and even hatred in any man as was expressed on your face at that time. That’s not the Nelson Mandela I know today. What was that all about?’

Mandela answered, ‘I’m surprised that you saw that, and I regret that the cameras caught my anger. As I walked across the courtyard that day I thought to myself, ‘They’ve taken everything from you that matters. Your cause is dead. Your family is gone. Your friends have been killed. Now they’re releasing you, but there’s nothing left for you out there. And I hated them for what they had taken from me. Then, I sensed an inner voice saying to me ‘Nelson! For twenty seven years you were there prisoner, but you were always a free man! Don’t allow them to make you into a free man, only to turn you into their prisoner!’

As we know Mandela came through his test, and his forgiveness, his desire for freedom and justice for all, inspired a nation and the world – hence the birthday celebrations the other day.

Where is your faith being tested?

What sacrifice may you have to make to hold onto to your faith? For Mandela it was the sacrifice of his anger and his desire for revenge. It you want to forgive and find release and freedom – you have to sacrifice the resentments, the bitterness – they can’t live together. Often we have to choose in life. Abraham is asked to choose. God does not simply ask for good behaviour, that we live honest, moral and law abiding lives. He asks for much more. God demands that Abraham surrenders himself willingly and completely, trusting all that he is and has, including his son, that which he holds as dearest and most precious. We often hear people say they would sacrifice everything for their family – it’s a bit of a cliché. It’s similar sentiment to serving King and Country. As we know – blind patriotism or partisan family loyalties can lead to evil and injustice. You are so committed to tribal loyalty that you end up doing something that is wrong, or defending something that is unjust. It is not for nothing that the scriptures scream out at us – put God first – get your priorities right. There is an order to the universe. If you put what is not God at the top you will lead a disordered life. If God is your first prioritise you will be committed first and foremost, not to your family, nor your country, but to what is good, what is loving, what brings joy and peace, what is kind, what is just. There was a story a while back about a father in Burnley, of all places, who told the police that he found a loaded gun in his son’s bedroom. His son got imprisoned for tow year. They interviewed the people on the streets and some said, he shouldn’t have shopped his son, and others thought he did what was right. Our ultimate loyalty is not to our family, our country or whatever – but to God.

Could it have been that Abraham, having seen hat God’s promise of a son had come true, had now started to make his family the priority in his life and not God? Could it have been that this test was God bringing Abraham to his senses, to get the right perspective – forcing him to make the choice?

Don’t get me wrong – if you have a family, your family is still your priority – it just shouldn’t be your ultimate priority – that should be to God and the things of God. Abraham made his choice – but God didn’t make Abraham slay his son. Abraham was sent back to care for his family. Many commentators tell us that the purpose of the story of Abraham and Isaac was to teach that human sacrifice was misguided and so all of Israel knew that God did not want this. In the ancient world child sacrifice took place to placate the gods. The God of Israel pointedly said this is not what you do to worship me.

There is no worship without sacrifice. Priorities always mean choices – choices usually mean sacrifices. Seventy years ago another of spiritual giants of the twentieth century Mahatma Ghandi warned against what he called the seven social sins. He named them as politics without principle, wealth without work, commerce without morality, pleasure without conscience, education without character, science without humanity and worship without sacrifice.

There is something profound about each of these statements, not least the insight that far from securing a life of ease, prosperity and comfort, worship demands sacrifice. If the ancient practice of sacrifice witnessed to the supreme claim of God on our whole being, so did much of Jesus’ teaching. He told a story about a rich farmer who thought he had provided for his every need, only to discover too late that he lacked the one thing he really needed. And he warned his disciples that following him meant picking up a cross.

Challenging, disturbing, it is meant to be, for such is the experience of God, the God who asks for everything and offers everything. What Ghandi did not go on to say, however, is that although there is no worship without sacrifice, neither is there worship without hope and provision?

At the beginning of this story God is the tester. At the end God is the provider. Calvin and Luther are candid and unflinching about this contradiction in God. Calvin says ‘the command and promise of God are in conflict’. Luther says this is a contradiction with which God contradicts himself. The promise is that through Isaac Abraham’s descendants will be named. The command is that Isaac is to be killed. Then the provision is made for a substitute for Isaac. Luther said that no human reason or philosophy could comprehend these two marks of God. Faith is the readiness to answer this strange contradiction in God. Faith says yes to the promise and yes to the command. The story ends with God providing. A ram is given as sacrifice instead of Isaac. It is no less an act of radical faith for Abraham to conclude ‘the Lord will provide’. In a world beset by humanism and science, the claim that god provides is as scandalous as the claim that God tests. Yet we pray for it every time in the Lord’s Prayer. As well as praying about testing, we pray for providing – ‘give us this day our daily bread’

The name of the place ‘Jehovah Jireh’ has become part of the church’s heritage. Think of George Muller and his orphanages in Bristol. For him God’s provision included not only the spiritual resources but also such tangible gifts as buildings and daily bread. Many times, he received unsolicited food donations only hours before they were needed to feed the children, further strengthening his faith in God. He staked everything on the promise that God will provide for God’s work. The way of faith was no easy option, any more than it had been for Abraham, and in the face of dilemmas and tests it demanded not passive submission but a conscious bending of the will to accept sacrificial acts and the raised knife. But Muller saw God’s provision.

The life of Abraham is set in the midst of the contradiction between the testing of God and the providing of God. Faithful people will be tempted to want only half of it. Most complacent religion will want a God who provides, not a God who tests. Some in bitterness will want a God who tests but refuse the generous providing. Some in cynical modernity will regard both affirmations as silly, presuming that we must answer to no one and rely on no-one, for we are both free and competent. But father Abraham confessed himself not free of the testing and not competent for his own provision.

There are deep problems in affirming that God both tests and provides. The problems are especially acute for those who seek reasonableness in God. But God is not a logical premise but the free lord of all. God tests to identify his people, to discern who is serious about faith and to know in whose lives he will be fully God. And God provides, giving good gifts that can’t be explained or even expected. In the end the story perhaps is not about Abraham being found faithful. It is about God being found faithful.

Where are we being tested? What are we being called to sacrifice? Can we trust for God’s provision?

For God did not spare even his own son, his only son Jesus Christ, that the world may have life and know the love from which nothing in all the world can separate us.