

## WHY BAD STORIES CAN LEAD TO TRANSFORMATION<sup>1</sup>

**A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, 2 July 2023**

Quite frankly, today's first reading is horrific. God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, and he obeys until his action is forestalled. Who would believe in a god who asked that? What father worth anything would obey?

That's clearly a 21<sup>st</sup> century question. To understand what's happening here, we need to go back to a now unknown world. Try to imagine a time in which life was, as Thomas Hobbes suggested, "nasty, brutish and short".<sup>2</sup> Such a world developed a fear of the gods who were often malevolent, angry, capricious, and demanding. One way to ensure their favour was to offer sacrifices. Even so, favour couldn't be assured. If times were good, sacrifices were still required to ensure that the gods stayed happy. If times were bad, sacrifices were needed to restore their favour. In essence, it was a never-ending succession because, no matter what happened, sacrifices were required. They included the sacrifice of humans.

The case of Abraham is even more terrible because Isaac had been born late in his parents' lives. Also, Genesis says that Isaac was to be the road ahead for an innumerable people. Why demand that he be killed? Although the text says that this was a test for Abraham, as Rabbi Ari Khan says, it also marks the abolition of human sacrifice among the Hebrews. Rabbi Khan also notes that no Jewish reader expected that the story would result in Isaac's death.<sup>3</sup>

My friend, Bishop Richard Randerson, has noted in his discussion of preaching this morning, God does not require sacrifices for sin, let alone child sacrifices. God is a God of love, not retribution.

But, as my other friend, Andrew McGowan of Yale Divinity School, suggests, I have just given you the standard opening of a sermon on this Genesis text. His comment is that the text is not about sacrifice at all. Sacrifice, a common practice in that location and time, is the vehicle for a discussion about faith.<sup>4</sup>

Our examination of this story shows that, when confronted by the many apparently unacceptable biblical stories, we have two tasks. The first is to come to some understanding of the context; an intellectual exercise. Can we imagine ourselves into this foreign place and time? The second is more subtle. Can we see through the story to an inner message? Once we have understood the context of Abraham's experience, can we discover a new respect for human life? Can we see ways in which our contemporary life treats persons as forms of human sacrifice bound to an unforgiving altar of human desire? Once we take this second step, we can confront ourselves and our society in new ways.

As Russel Reno says:

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<sup>1</sup> Readings: Genesis 22:1-14; Psalm 13; Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42

<sup>2</sup> ["Nasty, Brutish, and Short": Hobbes on Life in the State of Nature – 1000-Word Philosophy: An Introductory Anthology \(1000wordphilosophy.com\)](https://www.1000wordphilosophy.com/anthology/)

<sup>3</sup> [It Never Crossed my Mind - Rabbi Ari Kahn on Parsha - OU Torah](https://www.ou-torah.com/parsha/it-never-crossed-my-mind/)

<sup>4</sup> [Sacrifice, Slavery, and the Promise of God \(substack.com\)](https://www.substack.com/p/sacrifice-slavery-and-the-promise-of-god)

Isaac represents the potency of human fertility. In our bodies, we possess the ability to reproduce and perpetuate our family identities and thus make the future. ... Isaac represents all our worldly efforts to make the future: our plans and projects, our accumulation of goods and savings put aside as a bulwark against unforeseen difficulties, our traditions and habits, and much more.<sup>5</sup>

Abraham represents the necessity to renounce our fundamental existential fault, that we are the makers of our world. The truth is that, although our world cannot be made without us, it cannot be made by us alone. In the deepest sense, we must be participants with God in a continual creation. If we are to achieve this, we must, as McGowan suggests, have faith. The point is not the acceptance or abolition of human sacrifice but the acceptance of a covenant with God.

That the necessity of faith is presented in such an unacceptable story suggest to him that

God is not offered in this story, or in scripture generally, as the impeccable but distant source of worthy moral imperatives (towards which liberalism's doctrine of God usually devolves), but as the one whose promises and demands will often not be as we want, but which will never fail us.

To receive this story as good news is thus hard—no harder of course than receiving the Cross as good news. And yes, of course there is a deeply disturbing element in both stories, namely the possibility that God's action in the world can somehow catch up into itself, not condoning but redeeming, actions and motives and consequences that in themselves we find impossible to accept. The way scripture works is rarely to offer neat propositions for our assent, but rather to present confronting possibilities for our transformation.

We can recognise a similar argument in today's epistle reading. Paul uses the dreadful image of slavery to mark the contrast between life in Christ and life outside of Christ. Slavery was everywhere in Paul's world and its use here may seem a form of justification like the acceptance of a command to sacrifice Isaac. The effect of such comparisons is to sharpen the contrast. We would need to inhabit the first century world to understand just how sharp a contrast Paul makes. For us, the contrast is only imagined. They lived it and members of the new Christian community were themselves slaves. The point is not the abolition of slavery but the transformation of lives.

In the same way the gospel reading has a contrast. This morning's passage is the end of the sending out of the apostles that we have been reading over the past weeks. Jesus has given instructions and issued warnings. He has not deceived the apostles into thinking that they will be popular.

In the final section, however, he apparently gives some words of encouragement. But, hidden here is also a dark reference. Jesus says that, if people welcome them as prophets, they will receive a prophet's reward. What he knew very well, and what the apostles knew very well, was that prophets were rarely welcomed with enthusiasm. Jesus himself looked forward to the painful culmination of his own prophetic journey. It is as though he is saying, "If you are welcomed, the welcomers will receive their reward, but don't hold your breath".

Stanley Hauerwas, writing about Matthew chapter 10, notes that we hear nothing about the success or failure of what the apostles did or did not do. Perhaps, for the gospel story, that's

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<sup>5</sup> R R Reno, *Genesis*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible, Baker Publishing Group, p. 195.

not necessary. What we can assume is that they faithfully executed their mission. Hauerwas notes:

What the Father has done by sending the Son cannot be undone by our unfaithfulness, but the good news is that our faithfulness matters to the Father.<sup>6</sup>

The point is not whether the apostles were welcomed but whether they were faithful.

So, where are we now? Perhaps we are at the point of understanding that our faithfulness involves not separating ourselves into a clean world, keeping to our secure, special community. It involves being part of the messy and unsatisfactory world within which God works.

You know how I often end my sermons with a poem. I went in search of one about Abraham and Isaac. Not surprisingly, there are quite a few. Two caught my eye. One is by a woman rabbi, Rachel Barenblat.<sup>7</sup> It suggests that God expected Abraham to object to the command to sacrifice his son. When he went ahead, and God had to intervene to save Isaac, God never spoke to him again. This is the case in the Genesis record. After this event, Genesis records no further conversation between God and Abraham. You will find this poem in the online version of my sermon.

The other poem is similarly counterfactual. Written by Wilfrid Owen, this poem, supposes that Abraham did not take the ram in the thicket but sacrificed Isaac. Called “The parable of the old man and the young” and set, like Owen’s other famous poems, in World War I, it is about the consequences of not listening to God, of refusing the call to faith.

So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went,  
And took the fire with him, and a knife.  
And as they sojourned both of them together,  
Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father,  
Behold the preparations, fire and iron,  
But where the lamb for this burnt-offering?  
Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,  
and builded parapets and trenches there,  
And stretchèd forth the knife to slay his son.  
When lo! an angel called him out of heaven,  
Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,  
Neither do anything to him. Behold,  
A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns;  
Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.

But the old man would not so, but slew his son,  
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew*, (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible) Baker Publishing Group p. 112

<sup>7</sup> [Rachel Barenblat - Wikipedia](#)

<sup>8</sup> Wilfred Owen, “The parable of the old man and the young”. [The Parable of the Old Man and the Young by Wilfred Owen - Poems | Academy of American Poets](#)

Our text says that God tested Abraham but does not specify the nature of the test. This allows the poet an opening. In Genesis 18, Abraham tries to persuade God to reprieve the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Barenblat contrasts this against his failure to argue for Isaac's life.

Silence – Rabbi Rachel Barenblat

Abraham failed the test.  
For Sodom and Gomorrah he argued  
but when it came to his son  
no protest crossed his lips.

God was mute with horror.  
Abraham, smasher of idols  
and digger of wells  
was meant to talk back.

Sarah would have been wiser  
but Abraham avoided her tent,  
didn't lay his head in her lap  
to unburden his secret heart.

In stricken silence God watched  
as Abraham saddled his ass  
and took Isaac on their final hike  
to the place God would show him.

The angel had to call him twice.  
Abraham's eyes were red, his voice hoarse  
he wept like a man pardoned  
but God never spoke to him again.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> [Poetry Corner: Abraham and Isaac | Wilmington Friends Meeting \(wilmingtonfriendsohio.org\)](http://wilmingtonfriendsohio.org)