

February 28, 2021 The Binding of Isaac – A Cautionary Tale:

“And Abraham picked up the knife to slay him”

One of the most celebrated artists in the history of Western Civilization is the Italian master, the painter Caravaggio, who lived in the late Sixteenth and early Seventeenth Centuries. His paintings are luminous, capturing on canvas profound mysteries of the faith. In one of his unforgettable paintings, he depicts a child whose father has taken a knife to his throat and is prepared to slaughter him. It certainly grabs your attention. The artist’s inspiration was the emotionally charged story of the “binding of Isaac” - today’s first reading from the Book of Genesis. It is one of the masterpieces of world literature. The words are chilling and are likely to startle the attentive listener:

“Then God said: ‘Take your son, Isaac, your only son, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah. There you shall offer him up as a holocaust on a height I shall point out to you’”. (Gen. 22:1)

God put Abraham to the test.

God commands Abraham to surrender his beloved son, the child of his old age and the bearer of the promise that he will be blessed in his descendants. God needed to know about Abraham’s heart.

Abraham passed the test with flying colors. With total trust in God, he obeys him. He unquestionably accepts God’s will, however mysterious. He submits to God’s command without uttering a single word of protest. But nevertheless he was deeply troubled. According to the rabbis, as Abraham raised the knife and is about to take his son’s life, tears fall from his eyes into the eyes of his son, and Isaac’s vision is impaired for the rest of his life! At the end of the biblical narrative, we are told that God blessed Abraham because of his obedience.

What lessons may we derive from this reading?

First, the text was performed to teach us about the nature of faith... that it requires something of us. True religion does demand some sacrifice of us, but not human sacrifice which was commonplace in the ancient world. It is important to note that the life of Isaac was spared. Abraham did not take part in the ritual murder of a child. Recall one of the Ten Commandments, “Thou shall not kill”. Many Jewish scholars are of the view that human sacrifice is evil and contrary to the will of God.

Second, we are reminded that inevitably our faith will be put to the test. So often life can seem unfair. When we are faced with a tragedy our faith is challenged. The question is can we go on believing and trusting in God whenever our faith is sorely tested.

A true story: In the concentration camp of Auschwitz a group of Jewish prisoners decide to put God on trial for what was happening to them. After collecting all the evidence they all agreed that they could find no reason to exonerate him. They decided he deserved to die. They sentenced him to death! When trial was over, the rabbis said, “The trial is ended. It is time for the evening prayer”. The faith of the Jews remained steadfast even in the midst of unspeakable cruelty and unjust suffering.

When the Sixteenth Century English martyr Thomas More was awaiting execution in the infamous Tower of London, he wrote a letter to his daughter, Meg, in which he confessed of his fear of denying the faith under extreme duress. He prayed that his faith not weaken and that he remain faithful to the end of his days. He was beheaded.

This story of the binding of Isaac is a prequel of God offering his beloved son for the salvation of the human race. The Fathers of the Church have seen in Isaac, Abraham's son, the figure of Christ. Isaac did not resist his father. He opened not his mouth. Jesus was the lamb led to the slaughter. He freely accepted death on the cross. He surrendered himself to his Father's will.

Today, in many parts of the world, every faithful Christian parent knows that he or she might be subjecting his or her children or grandchildren to premature death simply by living as Christ commanded.

In closing, let us reflect on the words of the Psalmist: "I believe, even when I am greatly afflicted". (Ps. 116:10)

Let us pray that the inevitable trials in this life not weaken or destroy God's gift to us, our faith.

Amen!