

THE PASTOR'S CORNER

NUNC DIMITTIS

Lately we decided to remove one of the lessons of the Old Testament from our Family Formation packets: the story of the sacrifice of Isaac by his father Abraham (Genesis, chapter 22). The story of Abraham and Isaac is a difficult one for families to share with children. The content seems violent and disturbing, but there's more to the story, of course, than what may come from a cursory reading. It requires, maybe, a more mature faith. An equally violent image, the crucifixion of Jesus, would be understandably challenging as well, if faith did not teach us this was the greatest love.

Reading the Old Testament isn't easy. It was written and edited by numerous authors (under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit) over the course of centuries. In the Church's life, the Old Testament's misinterpretation has led to a number of mistaken notions about the faith. Marcion of Sinope, for example, in and around 144 AD, believed the Hebrew Bible was about a deity different from the God of Jesus Christ. It was a popular heresy but short lived because in truth, nothing can match the beauty and goodness of the Gospel as taught by the Apostles and their successors.

The story of Abraham and Isaac has an especial meaning for us when we celebrate the Presentation of the Lord on its feast this Tuesday. First, it should be said that the barbaric idea that God would ask a father to sacrifice his son even if only to test Abraham's faithfulness could be ascribed, among other possibilities, to the patriarch's misinterpretation of God's message in its entirety and the contemporary belief that the gods of other "civilizations" demanded sacrifice and often human. When Abraham walks up the mountain with everything he needs to make a sacrifice except a lamb for the burnt offering, Isaac calls his attention to it and Abraham replies, "God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." God indeed provides an animal, a ram, for the sacrifice after the angel stays Abraham's hand that is clutching a knife poised over his son. The meaning must have been clear to every Israelite: the God of Abraham is a God who does not require the sacrifice of children or anyone else. This certainly set Israel apart from the

rest of the world. Yet, the words of Abraham have a fuller meaning; they suggest something more than the immediate provision of a ram for a burnt offering. If, as the Church says, every word of scripture finds its fulfillment in Jesus, then Abraham is prophetic in his promise that God will provide of a lamb of sacrifice. He speaks of Christ and his sacrifice on the cross.

Abraham's statement reverberates centuries later in the exclamation of the righteous and devout Simeon (Luke, chapter 22!), who realizes that Abraham's prophecy has been fulfilled at last in the small child before his eyes who had been brought for his presentation in the temple by his mother and St. Joseph. In the song known as the *Nunc Dimittis*, St. Simeon exclaims:

Now, Lord, let your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.

Indeed, God has provided a lamb for sacrifice that will cleanse all of humanity of sin and bring it into the presence of God again. Simeon's own prophecy to Mary and St. Joseph, that the child would be a sign of contradiction and that a sword will pierce Our Lady's heart, recalls the horrible necessity of a sacrifice to heal the world of its ills.

We can see in the Presentation of Jesus in the temple how the Lord asks Mary and Joseph to offer up God's own Son as the pledge he made to Abraham long before, and how by that sacrifice, portended when Jesus was a small child, we would be offered up with him "so that He might love in us what He loved in His Son" (Sunday Preface of the Mass in Ordinary Time VII). We reprise the Presentation of the Lord whenever we lift the Host and the Chalice and hear the words, "we offer you in thanksgiving this holy and living sacrifice." (Third Eucharistic Prayer of the Mass). The feast we celebrate this week is one of the oldest in the Christian Faith and is known in some areas of the world as Candlemas Day because of the tradition of bringing candles to church to be blessed for use in the home throughout the year, always reminding us of Light of the World and that through Him, with Him, and in Him, we are happily present before his Father in Heaven.