

2nd Sunday of Lent (B), 1997  
(Gen 21:1-2,9,10-13,15-18; Rom 8:30-34; Mark 9:2-10)

Today's reading of the near-sacrifice of Isaac is certainly one of the more dramatic narratives in the OT. Like a good narrative, it leaves a lot for us to imagine and to question. A modern might ask: was Abraham right to go through with the deed, even though he thought it was God's command? If he were charged with murder, would his defense be accepted? These are questions we are not supposed to ask. We might better ask what thoughts, what feelings were in Abraham's mind. Here again the author leaves us to our own devices, though the compilers of our lectionary left out a crucial hint that the biblical author supplied. Why do our readings leave out passages contained in the Scriptures? I suppose it's because the compilers think we can't sit still that long. One liturgist of my acquaintance, when the Church first adopted a third reading for Sundays (from the OT, in addition to the epistle and gospel), expressed the opinion that it was **A**pastorally a disaster, people won't sit still for it. **@** I think it was because he didn't much like the OT. He was fond of quoting an EBC Abbot as saying, "The OT is the most over-rated book ever written."

The passage omitted in our lectionary has this as

Abraham and Isaac are walking up the mountain: "As the two walked on together, Isaac spoke to his father Abraham. 'Father!' he said. He replied, 'Here I am,' *hineni*, in Hebrew. This phrase expresses not so much presence as ready obedience. It come three times in this passage. At the beginning God calls "Abraham" the response is *hineni*. The third time is when the angel called to him, "Abraham! Abraham!" the response is *hineni*. Here, after addressing his father, Isaac goes on, "Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?" 'My son, "God will provide the sheep for the burnt offering." Then the two walked on together. How pregnant this silence that followed! We can only imagine Abraham's thoughts. Does the narrator gives any insight into Isaac's thoughts? Does Isaac have any inkling of what is to come? Why is his father so quiet, so mysterious? The narrator leaves us to guess, but Jewish tradition is not so reticent, it has an answer. The event is very important in Jewish piety and spirituality. It is called the **A**Aqeda,@ the binding of Isaac. According to this tradition, Isaac knew all along what was planned and was willing for it to be. But he feared that at the last moment he might weaken and resist, and so he asked Abraham to bind him so that this couldn't happen. Another tradition Jewish tradition, less pious, says that from that moment on, Isaac never turned his back to his father.

These are questions the narrator does not answer, but certain things are clear. We know that the story has two important points: one is the sublime faith and obedience of Abraham. The second is the repetition of God's promises: at the end, after speaking through the angel of Abraham's numerous progeny, He goes on to say, "in your descendants all the nations will find blessing, because you obeyed my command."

And this reminds us of the third important theme, for us Christians, especially for Lent: Abraham's offering of his son is a type of God the Father's giving up His Only Begotten Son for our salvation. Unlike Abraham, whose son was spared, God's offering of His Son goes to its consummation. What God does not demand from Abraham, He requires of Himself. And there are other differences. Throughout the action, Isaac is passive, uncomprehending. Jesus, however, is fully aware and cooperates through His obedience. The Epistle to the Hebrews quotes Psalm 40 as Jesus response:

Sacrifice and offering you do not want;  
but ears open to obedience you gave me....  
so I said, "Here I am; (Not *hineni*)  
your commands for me are written in the scroll.  
To do your will is my delight.

In the OT type, God never intended the death of Isaac, but

the Father of Jesus gave His firstborn for our redemption. Truly, through Him All the nations of the earth will find blessing. @

Does the gospel of the Transfiguration, coming so strangely early Lent, relate to this at all? Yes, because it already calls to mind the theme of Jesus= death and resurrection, which come at the climax of Lent. The Transfiguration comes six days after Peter had confessed Jesus to be the Messiah, at which time Jesus foretold His death and resurrection. The three disciples with Jesus for the Transfiguration are the same three He chose to be with Him for His agony in the garden. This glimpse into Christ's inner glory heartens them for Jesus= agony, and us for the weeks of Lent ahead of us.

In the second reading St. Paul suggests a climax in all this, a climactic point in his great epistle to the Romans. Up to this point Paul has carefully developed the theme of God's love, which through the resurrection of His Son and the gift of the Spirit, assures our salvation. Here, in today's reading, he can sum it up in a couple of rhetorical questions: "If God is for us, who can be against us?" The first reading, so poignant and meaningful in itself, helps to put the next question into context. Paul's question is almost a triumphant exclamation: "Is it possible that he who did not

spare his own Son but handed him over for the sake of us all will not grant us all things besides?@ The first reading, which so poignantly depicts the anguish of Abraham, reminds us what it means for a father "not to spare his own son but to hand him over."

Seldom, if ever, will we be called upon to render the sort of obedience that Abraham did, or the greater obedience of Jesus. But if we would be true followers of Jesus and true children of the Father, we must make our own that spirit of ready obedience, with that response hineni, "Here I am." To cultivate this is to cultivate the true spirit of Lent, to direct ourselves toward participating in the joy of Easter that Jesus won for us as the reward of His obedience.