

Trinity 3 La Chapelle Palluau 2017

Gen 22 1-14; Rom 6 1-12; Mt 10 40 end

Would you give Abraham a safeguarding certificate? Just imagine the conversation back at home in the evening. Sarah – ‘well Isaac, what did you do with daddy up on the mountain today? Isaac – we played a funny game. First he built the altar and piled the wood on it to burn a sacrifice. Then he grabbed me, tied me up and threw me onto the wood. What was he doing? I’d already noticed he didn’t have an animal for the sacrifice and all he’d said was The Lord will provide. I was terrified. I couldn’t move.

He took out his knife and raised it. I saw the sunlight flashing on the blade. He was going to kill me.’
Child abuse, or what?

It is a difficult story and is explained in terms of testing Abraham’s faith. Is he willing to trust God enough firstly to obey what he thinks He is telling him to do and secondly to believe that God isn’t really like other deities requiring child sacrifice and will provide an alternative? And phew, He does, at the last minute.

In spite of the difficulties this story can be seen as anticipating God’s plan of salvation through His Son, Jesus. The elaborate sacrificial system was designed as a means of dealing with people’s sin, both on an individual and national level. Animals were sacrificed and their blood washed the sins away..... until the next time. People were constantly aware of their sins and the need to offer something to God so that He would forgive them. Then God offered something to us, His own Son, Jesus whom He loves, to become The Sacrifice, to die once and for all, to take away sins, past, present and future. Like poor Isaac, and no doubt Abraham, we rejoice that God has provided an alternative.

Paul spells this out in today’s epistle, using another image, that of slavery.

Apparently there are more slaves today than at any time in history since the Roman Empire. But we are largely unaware of them, we rarely see them, and consequently this awful statistic makes little impact on us.

It was very different in Paul’s day. Slaves were everywhere and so the image he uses in today’s epistle would have been more easily understood; but it remains dramatic.

Slaves had no rights. They belonged to their masters. They could treat them as they wished, even to the point of putting them to death. If a theft or crime were committed in a household a routine enquiry would probably involve torturing the household slaves. It is hard for us to imagine having no freedom, no choices, having to do what we are told, whenever we are told without being consulted or considered. What must it be like to be reduced to the status of an object, rather than a human being?

Paul continues his exploration of the grace of God, unconditional love and salvation offered to all through His Son Jesus Christ which we accept through baptism in which we are joined to Christ’s death and raised to new life in Him, a foretaste of being joined to His resurrection when we die.

So when we come to Christ our sins are forgiven, we are born again, filled with the Holy Spirit and promised a place in heaven when we die. But how do we live our Christian lives until then? In particular what happens when we sin after we have been baptised?

A ridiculous argument which Paul rejects out of hand is that because we are saved from our sins by God's grace, the more we sin the more grace we receive. Not so he says emphatically. Our belief in Jesus marks a new beginning, a new birth and needs a new understanding of who we are in Christ.

By a strange paradox it seems that for Paul the more he grew in knowing and sharing God's love in Jesus, the more he preached the good news, founded new churches and taught new Christians, the more he became aware his own sin. The reason was that he was seeing things more and more from God's perspective. Sin was less a matter of wicked things that in his new life God wanted him to avoid – persecuting and conniving in the deaths of Christians for example – , though of course this was true, but in his inability to love God, his neighbour and himself with all his heart, soul, mind and strength as Jesus summary of the 10 Commandments.

So how are we to live as Christians, seeking God's help in the power of the Holy Spirit, to avoid sinning but aware that we continue to do so? Paul will continue to wrestle with this question in the next few chapters of Romans but his answer here is to use slavery as a powerful illustration.

Before the grace of God reveals God's love for us in Jesus we are, he argues, slaves to sin. We are under its power and domination. But when we put our faith in Jesus as the Son of God and our Saviour, that power is broken and we are set free. Slaves could be released if they, or someone acting on their behalf, paid the price they were deemed to be worth to their master in compensation for their loss. Paul sees Jesus as paying the price for us and He did so by giving His life for us when He died on the cross. So if ever we are tempted to believe that we are worthless His death on the cross is the truth which confounds the tempter's lie. Jesus died for you and for me and we are released from the power and the consequences of sin. 'The wages of sin is death.' Paul writes, 'but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus.'

So we are free, no longer slaves and by the grace of God the Holy Spirit lives and works in us, teaching us who we are in Jesus, making us aware when we sin, moving us to repentance and assuring us of God's forgiveness when we confess.

But there is more. The grace of God also leads us to see Jesus as Lord, to recognise at least something of who He is as the Son of God, and to respond to our knowledge in love, discipleship and the desire to serve Him by sharing His love with others as He commands us to. Paul calls this becoming enslaved to God. We seek His will for our lives, as Jesus taught us in the Lord's prayer, 'your will be done'. He gives us His help through the Holy Spirit who leads us into the truth and makes us more like Jesus through His gifts and the fruit which grows in us. Elsewhere Paul will speak of God pouring His love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. God provides all we need to serve Him, including the gift of finding joy in living, not for ourselves and our own interest, but for Him and for others.

We can see ourselves perhaps in the role of Isaac, powerless to save ourselves, waiting for death. But God sets us free. Jesus dies for us. Jesus lives for us and in us. Jesus waits for us with a place prepared in heaven.

In the meantime He sends us out in the power of His Holy Spirit to tell others the good news.

It is for this reason that in the short passage which forms our gospel reading Jesus says that anyone who welcomes His disciples, welcomes Him and will be rewarded for their kindness and generosity, however small that may be. In chapter 25 of his gospel Matthew speaks in similar vein. 'I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me.' Asked when this happened He replies, 'in as much as you did this to these, the least of my brethren, you did it to me.'

So we are free, by the grace of God, but if we would follow where Jesus will lead us, we are slaves by the grace of God empowered by the Holy Spirit, to share the good news of our freedom to those who are still enslaved to sin. This is mission – which only means being sent. Going out – not to tell people to come to Church – but to tell them about who Jesus is and what He has done for them. When they meet Him, coming to Church will happen, naturally.