

Today is the fifth Sunday in Lent. We're drawing closer to commemorating the great work of our Lord Jesus upon the cross, where He, the Lamb of God, was sacrificed for the sins of the world. That day that we are looking to was the day that Abraham had looked forward to seeing, as Jesus says. And as Jesus also says, to the chagrin of the Jews, Abraham did see it and was glad.

There are several different ways in which Abraham may have seen the day, perhaps watching from heaven, perhaps in a vision granted to him. But Abraham would have seen it prefigured, a glimpse of what was to come, in the events of our Old Testament reading. In the binding of Isaac, we, like Abraham, are given a picture of just what happened on that great Day of the Lord.

As our reading begins, Abraham is called by the Lord. And this call bears several similarities back to when the Lord first called Abram to follow Him. Back then, God called Abram to leave behind his extended family, his homeland, everything he knew. He was to give it all up and follow the Lord. Now, Abraham is called to give up his son, his only son Isaac, whom he loves, at the word of the Lord. This is certainly the harder test.

And note that, unlike the first call, where the call to sacrifice was countered with the promise of many blessings, here, the Lord promises nothing. In fact, it seems that the Lord's command here goes against the very promises that the Lord had previously given. Isaac was the child of promise, the one through whom the Lord would begin to fulfill His word to Abraham to make of him a great nation, as numerous as the stars of heaven. No, here Abraham has only his faith to fall back on, his faith that the Lord will keep His promises, even when it seems impossible for Him to do so.

Here we can clearly see the sacrifice that God the Father has to make. Jesus is His Son, the only-begotten Son of God. And as the Father has affirmed several times, this is His beloved Son. You wonder if there was any hint of pain or sorrow as the Lord tells Abraham to sacrifice his son, as He knows that this is precisely what He will be doing many centuries after. And while Abraham certainly loved his son Isaac a lot, the Father loves the Son perfectly. The love and unity they share in the Trinity goes beyond our understanding.

Further, the Son is the only-begotten Son. There is no other. There can be no other. If Abraham had been asked to sacrifice a sheep or a goat, he had plenty to choose from, and could always get another. If the Father was sacrificing anything else, He as the all-powerful Creator could have made it from nothing, as He did with the rest of the universe. But that wouldn't have been sufficient. It had to be the Son, the uncreated, eternal Word, who would have to give up His life as a sacrifice.

As with the commanded sacrifice of Isaac, the sacrifice of Jesus would go against human reason, against the promises of God. How can the author of life be put to death? How would handing the Messiah over to sinners, letting Him be betrayed even to death, accomplish the victory over sin and death? How could He bring in the Kingdom of God if earthly kingdoms would be allowed to execute Him?

What's more, it would seem at first that the promises of God had come up short, or been misunderstood, when Jesus laid in the tomb, apparently overcome by death. Yes, the prophets had declared centuries before that it was necessary for the Messiah to die and rise again, and yes, Jesus had Himself foretold this several times. But it would require faith to believe those words, just as Abraham had to have faith that God would keep His promises even if his promised son was sacrificed.

In those elements of Isaac's sacrifice, we get a further picture of the day of Christ. On the journey to the appointed mountain, what is placed upon Isaac? The wood! Isaac carries the wood upon which he will be offered up. On the way to the appointed place of Calvary, what does Christ carry? His cross of wood! He too is made to carry the wood upon which He will be offered.

Further, Isaac carries the wood in innocence: not in the sense of sinlessness, but in the innocent, childlike trust in his father. You can hear it in his question, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Jesus too carries His wooden cross in innocence. He knows why; He knows what's coming. But He truly is sinless, innocent of any transgression. He cries out to His Father, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Both questions point us to what the Father holds. In Abraham's hands are the fire and the knife. One is the instrument of death: the knife to slay his son. The other is the fire that will burn his son. And, per the Lord's command, it is Abraham who must do this. He can't give his son to another to sacrifice. The fire and the knife are in his hands.

So it is with God the Father. Though others will serve as instruments, it is ultimately the Father who will offer up His beloved Son. The verdict may come from the mouths of the Sanhedrin, and the Roman soldiers may physically hold the hammer and nails and spear, but it is the Father who wields them, though they do not know it.

And worse than these instruments – the knife, so to speak – is the fire that the Father holds in His hand. The atoning sacrifice of Jesus will not just be put to death, but He will also be made to endure the fire: the wrath of God against sin, the invisible flames of hell. Whereas earthly fire gives light, when the Son feels this fire, the entire world will go dark for three hours.

Despite the fathers wielding knives and fire, does either son resist? Incredibly, no! At the time of this event, Isaac is a young man. He's strong enough to carry enough wood for a burnt offering up a mountain, and so he is most certainly capable of resisting his father. At first he doesn't know what's happening, but once the wood is arranged and he's told to get on top of it, it would've been all too clear to Isaac what was going on. But Isaac doesn't fight. He doesn't argue. He doesn't run. No, he lays there, even as his father – no doubt with tears in his eyes – raises the knife to kill him.

Isaac pictures perfectly what the Scriptures foretold of Christ: "Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth." The Lord Jesus was and is fully human, and so there was very much a part of Him that didn't want to suffer and die. He passionately begs His Father, praying in the Garden of Gethsemane that if there was some

other way that the salvation of mankind could be accomplished, then let the cup of suffering pass from Him.

Yet, in perfect love for humanity and perfect obedience to His Father, Jesus prayed, “not my will, but yours, be done.” When the Father had shown that the cross was the only way, Jesus willingly walked the path toward it. When the mob shows up to seize Him, Jesus tells Peter to put away his sword, telling him, “Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?” Those Scriptures that Jesus were to fulfill include the example of Isaac.

Thus Jesus remains silent before the Sanhedrin, answering only when they put Him under oath, and giving words that, while absolutely true, lead to His conviction as a blasphemer. Jesus likewise will not defend Himself before Pontius Pilate, even though Pilate can see the obvious fraud behind the Jewish accusations. After being condemned to death, Jesus carries His own cross – with the help of Simon of Cyrene – and permits the soldiers to nail Him to it. He suffers all this and more, allowing those infinitely weaker than Himself to be used to put Him to death, that He might redeem the world.

That redemption, offered by God, forms the great difference between Isaac and Christ, between the picture of what was to come and the fulfillment of what had been foretold. Though Abraham trusted the Lord, and though Isaac was willing to submit even to death, at the last minute God intervenes. The Angel of the Lord – the Son of God before He was born of Mary – calls out to Abraham and says, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.”

Abraham has shown his faith, loving God above all things – even his own son. And so God provides a sacrifice in place of Isaac. He grants a ram tangled in thorns, and Abraham joyfully offers it up in place of his son Isaac. On the way to the site, Abraham had told Isaac, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son,” and so He had.

Here again we get still further pictures of Christ. This was no little lamb, easily slaughtered by an old man with a knife. This was a ram, likely able to overpower the 100-plus year old man. But this ram was caught in thorns, placed in a position of weakness by the Lord who had provided it.

When the Lord came Himself as a sacrifice, He likewise put Himself in great weakness. Ordinarily, no one could’ve touched Him, or even looked at Him, had He been in His divine power and glory. But instead, He allows Himself to be taken, thorns crushed onto His head, caught by nails upon a cross, that He might be sacrificed by those much weaker than He.

While Abraham had been willing to sacrifice his son, such a sacrifice would’ve paid for no one’s sin, nor won salvation for any person. A man cannot give his life for the sake of another. No one can repay the sin of another, for no one is himself without sin. The great exception is, of course, Jesus Christ. He was and is a real, actual man. Yet He was and is perfect, completely without sin. And He was and is really, actually God. His sacrifice paid for the sins of the whole world.

Though Abraham may not have realized it at that moment, God would provide more than a ram for him and Isaac. Even as Jesus tells Abraham not to touch the boy, He knows that He will be in

Isaac's place, enduring the fire and the knife (so to speak) from His own Father. And unlike the ram, Jesus will be offered up for the sins of all people, for yours and mine and everyone who ever has lived or will live on this earth. His blood will be shed, as the book of Hebrews declares, so that we may receive the promised eternal inheritance, being redeemed from the transgressions we have committed.

Abraham's journey up the mountain was a trial for him, a test from the Lord to see if he truly did fear the Lord. Though his flesh certainly tempted him to refuse, Abraham remained faithful to the Lord's word, trusting Him to keep His promise. When Abraham came down the mountain, he was able to come with joy, rejoicing that he had seen His Lord provide a sacrifice to take the place of his beloved son, Isaac.

As we journey through this life, our Lord will test us as well. There will be times when His word doesn't make sense to us. But we can trust that word completely, because it comes to us from the God who will provide. He provides for all our needs of body and soul, and has even provided eternal life for us in the cross of Jesus. Though we deserve the knife and fire from the hands of the Father, the Son has suffered them for us, securing for all His children an eternal redemption.

In Jesus' holy name, amen.