

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Abraham

The Roman Canon calls him “our father in faith”. He is truly the father of all Jews, and so of all Christians (the brothers and sisters of Jesus, who is “son of David, son of Abraham”). “Abraham” means “father of a multitude”. Through Ishmael he is also father of all Muslims, because the Arabs claim him in that way.

Abraham Received God’s Command

We should be aware of the way in which he responded to God. At first he shows every sign of thinking (as do we) that all his battles must be won by his own power. In order to reach his end, Abraham lied, plotted, and manipulated (yes - it’s all in Genesis!): all of which ended in disaster. At last comes the story we read in today’s first reading, where Abraham finds that God is going to subject him to the most excruciating test: he must sacrifice his beloved Isaac to God. How could this be? God had asked him to trust that Sara might conceive and give him a son. After many false starts, he trusted, and the boy came. Now he is asked to make this dearest gift of God a burnt offering - a holocaust. It is a frightful prospect. God will direct him to the mountain where the deed must be done.

Abraham’s Pilgrimage

Nevertheless he sets out with the boy. They come within sight of the mountain. Then a curious happening takes place. Abraham tells the servants to wait behind, to accompany him no more. *The boy and I will go further, to pray.* Obediently they stay, and Abraham and his son go on together. We can imagine the emotion that suddenly grips the father now that he is alone with the boy. Then comes a moment of sheerest agony, as the son, soon to be killed, turns and says: *Father.* It is a moment of electric significance between them. Abraham rises to it: *Yes, my son.* Then comes the innocent question: *Here is the wood, and the fire, and the knife: but where is the lamb for the burnt-offering?* This question demands the truth: but Abraham defers the moment - they have further to walk. Yet in the answer he devises there is terrible irony:

My son, God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering. Did not God “provide” Isaac? Then the two of them went on together. In what sense, together? Did Abraham not suffer a fearsome aloneness, burdened with his unspeakable duty, that he could not put into words? Not according to the Rabbis.

What The Rabbis Said About Isaac

This story is obviously a very hot potato. Many feel it is the height of ugliness - religion at its worst. Others, more thoughtful, realise that Abraham is treading the marches between God and us. There’s a deliberate echo of this story in the Gospel, as Jesus *leaves his disciples behind, and goes forward to pray alone* in the Garden. His first word is *Father.* Is this where the carolling angels over Bethlehem were looking, as they sang of *peace on earth, and goodwill to men?* Poor Isaac, obediently carrying his wood up the hill, is being used in his own funeral procession, and the grim intent of his father is still a secret. It is here that the Rabbis broke ranks. They elaborated a story to amplify the Bible. In their story Abraham stops and explains what is going to happen. Isaac thinks hard. Then he says: *Be sure to tie me up very tight, so that I don’t struggle and defile the sacrifice.* In this way Isaac becomes a sharer in his father’s terrible obedience. Can you see how this story of the Rabbis illuminates the Agony in the Garden? Jesus too becomes the collaborator with the Father, and carries his cross up the hill of Calvary, in order to build a bridge between the love of God and the jagged history of earth.

Do We Trust God?

Lent is a similar time of testing for us. We need to give our lives to the plan of God, not to our plans for fun, pleasure, fulfilment, in whatever ways we’ve been pursuing them. This will be a much bigger and more mysterious life than the one we envisaged. But it might also cost us some frightening sacrifices. Perhaps we might find it easier to stay at the bottom of the mountain. But we’ll miss all the glory if we do. *Fr Philip*