

The Second Sunday of Lent (year B)

The theme of this week's liturgy is set in the area of the redemption: and I would like to ask of you the question: *What is the relationship between the will of God and the death of Jesus?*

There's a good deal of shorthand in the religious world, but I think it is far from helpful. We can't enclose the meaning of the Cross and the mystery of salvation in short phrases, like the ones selected to go on posters in front of nonconformist chapels. Some examples:

Christ died for you
Jesus died for my sins
Jesus died so that we might live

These phrases annoy me as a priest. What possible meaning could they convey to someone going past on a bus? They *seem* to be short and concise, which is welcome: they make an instant appeal to the reader to be involved ("for you"... "for my sins"... "so that we might live") but they don't make the least attempt to explain why a first-century execution has any bearing on me or us at all. In this way, they leave the passing stranger cold, or worse: he feels he's being inveigled into religion, by a form of language he doesn't understand, and thus invaded; the accusations of sin and of responsibility for a violent death do nothing at all to commend this approach. What is such a church inviting people to share? A guilt-trip? A creepy dwelling on horrid scenes from long ago?

If you get past this unpromising beginning, and listen to what people say to explain the meaning of the Cross, you hit a great deal more shoals and icebergs. People get the central questions all round their necks, and end up saying the most dubious things. Some examples:

God the Father wanted Jesus' death.
God the Father demanded a sacrifice because he was angry with people's sins.
Jesus offered himself to take our punishment so that God would not be angry with us.

You can hear people saying these things: they are a *little* bit like some of the things great theologians said in the past, but without the mystical or deeply theological context they present God as a sulky old tyrant, a bloodthirsty and hateful old man who has forgotten how to love his children or even his Son, and whose heart can only be diverted from revenge by appalling violence. And around this bloodbath you are invited to gather on April 14th. By the way, don't have anything to eat that day. Because don't assume *you're* safe either!

The Agony in the Garden then becomes an experience of Jesus pleading with a silent God who refuses to listen to a call that would melt any human heart, proving that God the Father is not only pitiless but intransigent and impervious to persuasion (which is a real incentive to prayer). How Christians shoot their cause in the foot!

We have our own uncertainties about the Cross to confront. Although we try our best to hang the blame for the Cross on the various members of the cast - Pontius Pilate, High Priest Caiaphas, treacherous Judas Iscariot, the fickle crowd that bays for his blood (this approach gives the world that splendid Christian story of anti-Semitism) - behind and above all of these attempts is the appalling knowledge that the Crucifixion is the Will of God; so how could anyone stop it anyway? And then we are back in our original quandary: what sort of God wants Crucifixion with such an unswerving will? And should we worship such a God?

The question is vitally important, because everybody who has suffering to put up with - or to say it simply, *everybody* - is being invited to worship a God who thinks it's fine for us to suffer horribly and to die in agony: and the nearer and dearer you are, the more likely you are to end in such horror. St Teresa, praying before the crucifix, is said to have heard God say: "This is what happens to my friends," and to have replied "This is why you have so few friends."

What's clear in all of this is that we have a crying need for some proper theology, and it simply won't do to say that "simple faith" is enough to guide us through what is obviously far from simple, in fact an absolute minefield. The Sunday Mass on which we're here to meditate will help us to approach this dangerous area.

I'd like to propose that we read the whole of the Genesis story of Abraham, because it is obviously bang on the mark of what we're asking to understand. Human sacrifice is unspeakable to us, the height of irreligion. But it happens in the Bible, in the terrible story of Jephthah's vow (Jg 10) where a man accidentally promises to kill his daughter in exchange for a military victory. (The fact that his own daughter is the one to die leaves us with a nasty suspicion that if it had been a passing servant or slave it would have been less poignant.)

In general, human sacrifice was regarded with abhorrence in Israel; it was a practice associated with those professional sinners, the Gentiles; King Ahaz committed the massive crime of sacrificing the Davidic heir to a pagan god: this was the height of his own apostasy.

Yet in Genesis 22 we find the unspeakable demanded of Abraham by God himself, and despite his many previous signs of disobedience and failure to trust God, Abraham sets about doing as he is told. If human sacrifice is completely off the religious menu for Jews or for Christians, the very survival of this story is pretty remarkable. It always provokes vast revulsion in the average British parishioner, who is far too ready to assume that it is a piece of primitive folklore, which we can safely ignore, and which might with justification be edited out of the Bible. I'd like to propose a rethink about that. One of the clear indications is that the Gospel itself has found strategic relevance in the story when it comes to describing the Passion, particularly in the area of *obedience to the will of God*; and that is what makes it important for our understanding and for our meditation tonight.

Jesus and Isaac

Let's first find the evidence for the linkage between the two stories. First, consider the victim. In Genesis Isaac is a providential child, promised by God along with his destiny to be the first of a countless progeny of descendants for Abraham: in other words, he carries the hope for the fulfilment of God's Covenant with Abraham: the Old Testament. The begetting of this precious child has occasioned one of Abraham's principal failures in trust - the affair with Sara's maid which resulted in Ishmael, and which all ended in tears. Now that Isaac is here, he is demanded as a burnt-offering; a fate which sometimes attends the first-fruits in the sacrificial system. There are echoes of the Paschal Lamb, not properly a sacrifice, but a strategic symbolic element in the Passover story of salvation. When Isaac asks *where is the lamb for the burnt-offering?* we are meant to advert to the Passover lamb, just as we do when John the Baptist calls Jesus *the lamb of God*.

Now compare Isaac with Jesus. He too is a providential child - the Messiah - on whom the future New Covenant depends: he too is known as "the only-begotten Son"; now he too is threatened with becoming a sacrifice. The horror we feel for Abraham is the horror of Peter when he first hears the prediction of the Passion: *Heaven preserve you, this must not happen to you*. The details of the narrative follow through the theme: for the trustful Isaac, who

travels with his father to find the hill of sacrifice, read the trustful Jesus who goes inexorably to Calvary. For the wood of the fire loaded on Isaac, see the wood of the Cross loaded on Jesus. We mustn't think these are accidental echoes. And there are more.

When we reflect on the details of the story, we note that when Abraham has the mountain in his sights, he divests himself of the servants who have accompanied them:

Then Abraham said to his servants: *Stay here with the donkey. The boy and I are going over there: we shall worship and then come back to you.* Abraham took the wood for the burnt-offering, loaded it on Isaac, and carried in his own hands the fire and the knife.

Compare the Gospel of Matthew at Gethsemane:

Then Jesus comes to a place called Gethsemane, and says to his disciples: *Sit here, while I go over there to pray.* And he took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be sorrowful and very troubled. Then he says to them, *My soul is very sorrowful, even to the point of death. Stay here, and watch.* Then he went forward a little, and fell on his face and prayed

We have surely here a deliberate literary echoing in the evangelist of the huge crisis which arrives for Abraham at this moment.

Isaac spoke to his father. *Father*, he said. *Yes, my son*, he replied.

This in itself is agonising: they are still talking to each other, but what the Father has in mind for the Son is not being mentioned; what is between them is a pure form of trust on Isaac's side, and an overriding obedience to God's will on the part of his father Abraham.

Look, he said, *here are the fire, and the wood; but where is the lamb for the burnt-offering?* Abraham replied, *My son, God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt-offering.* And the two of them went on together.

- the word *together* being something of a debatable term in these circumstances.

Back in Gethsemane, we find that there is not a human dialogue; yet there is an approach from the Son to his Father on the subject of the sacrifice to come and its victim. If we compare the Abraham/Isaac dialogue with the words of Jesus, we find an extraordinary chiming of themes.

Jesus prayed saying: *O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass away from me: nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will*

Looking carefully at these words, you will recognise the Lord's Prayer (*Our Father, do not put us to the test, deliver us from evil, thy will be done*); but you will surely hear the echo of that lone word *Father* on the lips of Isaac, which must have closed on Abraham's heart like a vice. The point is this: that the Gospel is invoking the agony of Abraham - *the father* - in the context of the fate of Jesus. Is God the Father sharing his Son's agony in the garden? Not at all: it is only as a human being that Jesus can be wrenched in this way. But the Scripture, I believe, is suggesting that we ask ourselves at this very moment what the response of the Father might be to his Son's agonising prayer: what sort of Father is this God?

The echoing of Abraham's "testing" is confirmed in Jesus' words to the disciples, *Pray not to be put to the test.* There can be no doubt that the Gospel wants to recall Abraham.

Jesus' prayer in Mark and Matthew seems to be unanswered. Luke cannot bear this silence, and he gives Jesus *an angel from heaven strengthening him*. But the prayer was a prayer for deliverance; whereas the angelic gift of strength comes, not to deliver him, but to help him to endure. What conclusions can we draw about our question: what is the attitude of the Father to the death of Jesus, and to this prayer that he makes to be released?

The Abraham story has an outcome of release: the ultimate sacrifice is not asked of Abraham. This may leave us in dismay, because it makes something of a charade of the whole proceeding. We know that God has no need of testing to know what is in us; and it seems to us a superior and unworthy thing that God should propose so inhuman a command to a man who is being invited to trust even if - or especially if - God had never any intention of letting Isaac die. Yet we see in Abraham a man whose obedience flies in the face of all his human motives and dreams, and surely that is the aim of the whole story. *Abraham put his trust in God, and this was found to make him just.*

In the New Testament, things are different. Here the sacrifice is *not* called off at the last moment. Instead it is followed through to its gruesome terminus in the death of the Son: he becomes, in his own flesh, *the Lamb God provides for the sacrifice.*

This Sunday we aren't left alone with these worrying questions. We have two more readings. Paul tells us firmly that God is on our side, and that we are therefore victorious. He also uses the most impressive words about the involvement of God the Father in the death of Jesus:

God did not spare his own Son, but gave him up to do us all good

I am quite sure that Paul too was at this moment remembering the Abraham story. Now we need our theology.

First, this "giving up" of the Son is of one piece with the whole gift of God throughout the story of salvation; the pluriform variety of God's gifts is only visible to us on our earthly timescale: in eternity the *one* gift is that which passes between the Father and the Son (called "generation" in the Creed) and is returned in the form of obedience from the Son to the Father; we call this gift the Holy Spirit, who is what keeps the Father paternal and the Son filial and both of them totally self-giving to each other. If Adam and Eve received the gift of life or the use of the garden of Eden, this was only a refraction, so to speak, out of the heart of the Trinity. It means that God is what Paul says, *on our side*. All such gifts, however, are really included in the one gift of Christ: which is why John says

Through him all things came into being....not one thing came into being except through him....

and why Ephesians says

He chose us in Christ before the world was made

The revelation of the life of the Father and the Son is the aim of the redemption, and governs everything that happens in the Bible, most especially the life death and resurrection of Jesus. There are three modes in which this revelation takes place there:

- The life and work of Jesus in (our) time, his history as a human being
- The same story seen as the work of the Son of God within the lifespan of Jesus
- The same story as it is proclaimed in the Church as the revelation of the exalted Christ

We are never going to understand any part of the life of Jesus without experiencing these three levels of interpretation. We can draw the signs out by which Jesus came to understand his oncoming death. He wasn't humanly stupid; simply by using his eyes and ears he knew the authorities were growing less and less happy with him, he knew they were near to

desperation in their anxiety for the survival of their religion and their nationhood, and that they would stop at nothing in eliminating any threat to its future.

But how about the attitude of the Son of God as he comes into the world, filled with the spirit of obedience to the Father's will? (Even as we say these words, we know that our human understanding is inadequate to these realities in Jesus; but we have to use our words - we have no others.) Christ knows perfectly that his saving of the world requires a total fidelity to the Father even in the face of what we would call disastrous earthly rejection. As Son, he does not enter the world on his own initiative or act alone, but in perfect accord with the Father, and in collaboration with the Father. So when the Scripture says that the Father *did not spare his Son*, we don't think of the Father unilaterally cutting him off, but of a totally co-operative act involving Father and Son. That's our second perspective on the life of Jesus.

Looking back from after Easter, we take up our third viewpoint: all that is done by the Son of God is done in the expectation of the Easter event, in which the human nature that is the theatre of the ministry of Jesus, and above all of the Passion, is raised to the right hand of the Father. This is supremely represented in the Fourth Gospel.

When we use our first viewpoint, that taken from the place Jesus of Nazareth takes up in our history, the other two dimensions are at a distance, because of what Paul calls *kenosis*, the emptying-out of glory by Christ, so that he could become what we are. It is in this divinely-appointed task (we could just as easily say "divinely-agreed" between Father and Son) that Jesus must accept and endure a certain absence of his Father, which is the condition of our life on earth and the choices we are free to make in it. This divine absence reaches its fulness in the experience of the Cross. It is here that God "gives up" his Son; and at this moment Jesus experiences life as the absence of God *because we do*. For Christ to become what we are, it would never have been enough for him to have *assumed the outer form* of a man, whilst somehow containing within the form and limbs of a human being the Beatific Vision of the Father. That is why the understanding of Jesus that constantly predicates the fulness of divinity to his consciousness is so lacking.

Yet we do not say that Jesus *is not the Son of God*, or that *he is not yet the Son of God*. We say that the Son of God has moved out of the life of the Trinity in which he is affirmed as equal to the Father. But in doing this, he affirms the Father as God and himself as the obedient Son; and that is precisely what the Son does in eternity. So instead of saying that his *kenosis* is a temporary, practical, and limited thing which he takes on, as it were, out of character, in order to cater for our limitations and needs: we say rather that it is in perfect accord with his eternal rôle in the Trinity. So his self-emptying is not a surrender or denial of his nature as Son of God. Rather it activates it.

That is why his ultimate emptying-out of himself reveals his godhead, and why John has him say in that very moment: *It is accomplished*. It is also exactly why the first two Gospels have him say *My God, my God, why have you given me up?* as the absence of God is about to sever him from his earthly destiny. His fidelity - which reveals him as God - makes God present in the moment of abandonment.

If now we return to our original question: what is the involvement of God the Father in the death of Jesus? The answer is exactly as you would expect: he is engaged on his unique and only deed, that of being the Father of his Son: receiving his obedient self-gift, and responding by generating him anew. To have interfered with the laying-down of Jesus' earthly life with twelve legions of angels would have been suddenly to snatch him back, to revoke the gift of him to the human condition, to make the love of God depend on man's reception of it. But it would have been something much more. It would suspend from Christ the eternal vocation of being God's Son, in favour of a human survival which would have contradicted the life of the Holy Trinity, and would have had no meaning for the redemption. To have responded in the

garden with utter consolation and the assurance of eternity would have been to undo the work of thirty-odd years of fidelity, and to short-circuit *for human reasons* the power of the saving deed which is the Incarnation. Now God does not act on *human* motives, but on divine ones. The sternness of Jesus' insistence on this is to be seen at the first prediction of the Passion, where he tells Peter that he is Satan - the contradictor of God - and that *his way of thinking is human but not divine*.

It is only seven verses after this rebuke that our Gospel of the Transfiguration happens. We haven't been off the subject tonight: note that the same three disciples are named as his companions, that the scene is once again on top of a high mountain, and that what happens reveals Jesus as the heart and fulfilment of the faith of Moses and Elijah, the Law and the Prophets. The obedience of the Son is evoked in the voice from the Cloud: *This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to Him*. If we ask how we should "listen to him", the answer must surely be found in the disciples, and particularly in Satan/Peter, the contradictor of Christ. He *refused* to hear Jesus' prediction of the Passion, because it was a divine word to which his human ears were closed. Now he is told in a divine message: *Listen to Him*.

Now to bring together all the strands of the Scripture next Sunday.

What we are offered in Jesus' life is a glimpse, translated into human words and deeds, into the inner life of God, the Trinity. In this eternal life there is a divine pouring out of love from the Father to his Son (which we call *generation*). That is how the Father is Father. In response there is an exactly equal pouring out of love from the Son to the Father (which we call *obedience*). That is how the Son receives divine life (=is the Son) and offers it back again in its entirety. The giving of divine life by God is therefore total, and is therefore nothing less than God (we call the gift *God the Holy Spirit*).

This language is strange to us, because for most of the time love for us is never total, but very partial indeed; and even of that we make heavy weather. But that is how things are in the real world (the Trinity).

In the earthly life of Jesus we see someone whose earthly life is governed, not by earthly scales and values, but purely by the life of the Trinity. When he loves someone, their sins are forgiven and their leprosy vanishes, because that's what love does in the real world. When Jesus comes to the bitter end of his earthly career of love, he is condemned to death (because that's what we partial lovers do to a total lover). What Jesus does is to continue giving his whole self. That is why he dies. But it is also why the Father - far from stopping him from doing this - is in perfect accord with it, and could not dream of interfering. He has to continue to be God the Father, and the Son has to continue to be God the Son. That is how the world will be saved. Indeed, God has no human pity. He has only divine love, which is the only hope for human pity. The reason why we are Christians and not Jews, is hidden in the difference between the fate of Isaac, and the destiny of Jesus Christ.

Jesus said: Now my soul is troubled. What shall I say: *Father, save me from this hour?*

But it is for this very reason that I have come to this hour. *Father, glorify your name!*

A voice came from heaven: *I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again!*