

When we read the Bible we find some stories which embody insights that cannot be amplified or improved upon; and we find other stories which embody a massive proportion of merely human thinking, which need heavy critical comment before we can accept them.

The image of God which is presented to us in the first reading today is a case in point. God is represented as operating a kind of thunderbolt morality, where the people of a particular town have become too horrid to be allowed to live, and God is sitting on his heavenly throne plotting their destruction. This is actually a monstrous picture of God, and it is so like the image of a Canaanite god that we have to protest against it, and refuse it. Canaanite gods are entirely like human beings, and are represented as greedy, lustful, angry, untrustworthy beings who are petulantly at war with each other most of the time, which accounts for the untrustworthy and unjust state of affairs in the world, where people can be wiped out indiscriminately at the drop of a hat. This is a basically despairing view of reality, which leads to a desperate image of god, and a willingness to accept evil as part of the recipe we have to work with.

God in this story is being wheedled into mercy by a human being; Abraham seems to be teaching God how to be loving. This is also a monstrous view of man, and a monstrous view of what prayer is; we seem to be instructing God, who does not know our condition or hasn't appreciated how much pain we are in. So we are in danger of believing in a God who is inferior to us in many ways, and we have to bring him up to speed and persuade him to be a better kind of God. Even to read out such a story may seem to be blasphemous. That is why we need to listen to a homily when it's been read out!

The real truth about the story is that it isn't God who is being instructed. It is Abraham. He is advancing into knowledge of God by prayer; and it is his faith that is being refined; of course God will not destroy the just and the unjust indiscriminately; if he did, he would indeed not be God. So by following his prayer through to the end, Abraham secures - not the mercy of God for good people: but *his belief that God is just and faithful, and not destructive and ignorant.*

The journey of prayer into the heart of God is never finished. But everyone who prays is making further progress. Israel's religion is a long story of small steps into the mystery of good and evil. It will be for a later generation to reflect that the mystery is even deeper: that God does not deal in thunderbolts, even for the worst of us: even when we decide to crucify his only-begotten Son.