

Genesis 22:1-18 Families can be murder Elton Chapel

I was watching an election broadcast the other night – Nick Clegg was striding across the length and breadth of Britain surrounded all the while by a swirling snowstorm of paper. They were there for dramatic effect, each sheet was supposed to represent a promise which had been made and then broken by either the labour party or the conservatives. Nick Clegg claimed he was offering something new – honesty, dependability, truthfulness.

Whether or not it's true, it's a compelling image and an attractive argument because none of us like broken promises - fundamentally we believe that someone's word should be their bond and we rightly feel let down if any individual, organisation, company or even government breaks its promises to us.

But what about God? Have you ever felt that God has broken his promise to you? Perhaps you believe that God promised you so much, but then didn't deliver; perhaps your health, your children, your marriage or your job did not turn out to be all that you had expected it to be – and here you were, all the time attending church, praying, giving, perhaps even reading your Bible daily and doing something for your church. You had done your bit, you had given God your vote, but in return God had broken his promise to you.

Well, if you read the first few verses of Genesis chapter 22 then I think you will agree that Abraham would have had every right to feel exactly like that. Do you remember how God had promised him a son? But as the years rolled by nothing seemed to happen, Abraham grew older and his wife aged with him.

Things began to look hopeless and she began to doubt God's promise so she attempted to jumpstart proceedings by offering her servant girl to her husband.

To a degree it worked; through the maid servant a son, Ishmael, was born, but he was not the son God had promised. In the end all their meddling achieved was heartache and frustration which still tears apart the Middle East today.

But then, at last, God kept his word because in Genesis 21 we read, “Now the LORD was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah what he had promised. Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him.”

Did you see that? God has kept his promise and at the very time God had promised - or so it seemed because by the next chapter God asks Abraham to do the very thing which is hardest for him and which, in fact, appears to break God’s original promise that all nations on earth would be blessed through Abraham’s offspring.

That’s because in chapter 22, as we heard, God says to Abraham, “Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.”

Now, perhaps you have read this passage, or heard it read many times before and you have wondered what it is all about – why on earth would God ask Abraham to kill his son as a sacrifice? Even fairly recently I saw this story used as the basis for a sketch on the comedy show “That Mitchell and Web look” where they poked fun at God’s outrageous indecision.

And you yourself might have thought, “I just don’t get this, asking Abraham to this must have broken his heart, he must have been so angry with God – surely Abraham must have asked himself ‘What sort of God is this! Is he a monster?’”

But actually if you carry on reading this chapter, you see something quite different.

Let's unpack things. Now, for starters, we might assume that once God had made his request to Abraham and Abraham had agreed, the most obvious next step would have been for this patriarch to skulk away under cover of darkness to carry out his dreadful deed.

But no, quite the opposite; early the next morning he saddles up the donkey calls Isaac and then he even takes two servants – two witnesses with him and together they set off.

You see, what I want us to grasp first of all is Abraham's total confidence in God – his full confidence in God. On the face of it this is a terrible day for Abraham – it seems that everything God has promised him has been a lie; if God wants him to sacrifice Isaac then it just can't be true that Abraham has been given a son through whom all nations will be blessed.

And to add insult to injury God had even instructed Abraham to send away Ishmael too. By the end of the day Abraham would be as good as childless with no hope for the future and yet here he is calmly taking his precious son Isaac into the wildness, with servants in tow in total obedience to God's instruction to slay him.

But that is because Abraham is totally confident in God's goodness, look at what Abraham says. After three days travel he stops, turns to the servants and says, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you." Now, did you notice that? Abraham's use of the word "we", "We will worship and then we will come back to you."

Abraham could have fudged that statement, or he could have simply told his servants to stay where they were and yet he deliberately chooses to tell them that both he and Isaac will worship and then he and Isaac will return – Abraham has confidence in God that God will behave as God.

You see, with the benefit of hindsight we have written evidence of God's nature when we read in Deuteronomy of his condemnation of child sacrifice. Speaking to the Hebrew nation ahead of their settlement in the Promised Land Moses warns them by saying of the current inhabitants "You must not worship the LORD your God in their way, because in worshipping their gods, they do all kinds of detestable things the LORD hates. They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods."

This is the very thing that God has instructed Abraham to do, but although Abraham doesn't have the book of Deuteronomy to read, because he has spent time with God, he knows God and he trusts God.

So you see, when Isaac asks where the lamb for the burnt offering is, what is Abraham's confident answer? "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." Not "you are the lamb", not even "God has provided", again, no fudge, but "God will provide the lamb" because at heart Abraham knows God and is confident in God.

Are we that confident in God? The writer of Hebrews uses this incident to demonstrate Abraham's faith in God and Paul uses Abraham as an example of someone who was justified – made right with God, not by his works, but through faith alone.

This appears to be a great test of faith, but actually, if like Abraham, we really know God, then it is no test at all!

All through this incident Abraham demonstrates his total conviction that he and Isaac will return because God would provide the sacrificial lamb. And because Abraham knew God, he trusted God, he was faithful to God.

Now, do we have that understanding, that trust, that faith? Have we spent serious one to one time with God, immersing ourselves in his living word, allowing his Holy Spirit to speak to us through it, or do we base our knowledge of God on assumption or hearsay; the ideas of people or the rumours we have heard?

You see, the danger is that if we base our knowledge of God any anything or anyone other than God then of course we are going to be disappointed by him, because instead of knowing God as God, we will view him as some sort of god that we have created, who serves us and lives by our standards.

But what sort of God is God really? Well, here in this incident involving Abraham and Isaac he shows us; no dithering, no indecisiveness, no cruelty, rather, right at the beginning of his special nation of Israel God declares his justice and his grace, his righteousness and his mercy as he demonstrates how the blessing for all nations will be achieved. Look with me at these verses afresh.

Back in verse 2 God instructs Abraham to take his son, his only son whom he loves to the region of Moriah, unknown then, but you and I are very familiar with it, for that region was to be the site where the holy city of Jerusalem would be built. And Jerusalem was the very city to which God sent his son, his only son whom he loved - to be a sacrifice.

Abraham and Isaac rode to the region of Moriah on their donkey and likewise, Jesus entered Jerusalem on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

At Moriah Isaac's father placed the wood for the sacrifice on the shoulders of his son and God the Father placed the wooden cross of Jesus' sacrifice on the shoulders of his son too.

But Isaac only bore the wood, Abraham carried the fire and the knife, the tools of judgement and death and Jesus was not able to crucify himself, it was sinful humanity who carried the nails and hammered them home and Jesus' father God whose consuming wrath against sin was poured out upon Jesus, God's judgement against sin which in Hebrews is described as "a raging fire".

At Moriah, Abraham confidently told his child that God would provide the lamb for the sacrifice and 2000 years later, on that very spot God did – Jesus; the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world died to do just that. Just as Abraham was prepared to give up his son, God the Father did not withhold his Son from the ultimate sacrifice for our sin.

That day, as Abraham and Isaac went up the mountain God provided a ram to die in the place of Isaac, so Abraham named the place "The LORD will provide" and on that mountain the LORD did indeed provide a substitute for you and I, the lamb whose blood paid for our sins and who died in our place.

Last week Trevor emailed me and said (I'm sure that he won't mind me sharing with you), "It will...be a privilege to be able to celebrate the Lord's Supper together."

And as Christians there is no greater privilege than to come together and share the Lord's Supper; the bread and the wine as we remember Jesus' the sacrifice provided on our behalf – his body broken for us and his blood shed for us so that through faith in him we can all be made right with God.

And it is this sharing in God's love which was so powerfully and conclusively demonstrated in Jesus' sacrifice on the cross which should lead us to love one another as Jesus instructed us to in our Gospel reading.

We love one another simply because God so loved us that he provided his Son to be the sacrifice for our sin in our place.

Once we understand that every single one of us deserves to be on that cross, but that Jesus died in our place, we can never look at ourselves in the same way – or for that matter one another; our pride, our selfish ambition and our sectarianism can only be swept away in praise and adoration for God and love and joy for and with one another. You see, we love one another because we know that Jesus died for us all and if God loves you so much, if you are that important to him then should I not love you too?

Truly through Abraham's offspring we have been blessed because Jesus was born as one of that family and by dying in our place he drew us to one another in love by reconciling us first and foremost to our Father God.

The wonderful reality is that unlike our politicians (whichever party they represent,) God always keeps his promises. And the most wonderful thing which we see time and again in the Bible is that, as Paul put it to the Colossians, "For no matter how many promises God has made, they are Yes in Christ." (2 Cor 1:20)

Amen.