

Sermon

Genesis 22: 1-19; Roman 6: 12-14

I don't think it is a good idea to start a sermon with a joke. If the preacher catches the congregation's attention with a joke then more likely than not what people go away remembering is not the sermon but the joke. Also, if you are going to tell a joke what you should never do, whether in the course of sermon or in any other setting, is to tell people that you are going to tell a joke. You just know that when someone commences with "I know this really funny story" then it is not going to turn out that way when they get to what they mistakenly thought was the punch line. Also, as well as not starting with a joke and not alerting people in advance that a joke is coming, if you are going to start a sermon with a joke then it should be one that everyone has an equally good chance of getting; not one where people need to be a certain age or come from a specific cultural background.

All of this is a roundabout way of informing you that I am going to start the sermon with a joke. It is joke that I have always found really funny.

As I look about me I'm hopeful that at least this gathering has a chance of getting the joke, whether you find it funny or not, so here goes ...

What's the definition of an intellectual?

*An intellectual is someone who can listen to the William Tell Overture and **not** think of the Lone Ranger!*

But what have William Tell and the Lone Ranger got to do with Genesis?

Well, as I re-read this story in preparation for this sermon, the story of Abraham, Isaac and a proposed sacrifice I kept getting Lone Ranger moments. Like a listener who is invited to hear one story (about a Swiss freedom fighter forced to shoot a crossbow bolt in the direction of his son) but instead finds themselves thinking about a masked stranger who rides in to town to bring salvation to people in the midst of great difficulty, I was being invited to listen to one biblical story but instead found myself thinking about another one.

Abraham is commanded by God to take his son, his one and only son whom he loves, as we are told in v. 2, and bring him to a hill where he will suffer a sacrificial death. At this point, first time around in reading the story nothing special struck me but then we arrived at verse six:

“Abraham took the wood for the sacrifice and put it on his son Isaac’s shoulder” and the two of them travelled on to the appointed location for the sacrifice to take place. It was the image of Isaac, the beloved son, carrying upon his shoulder the wood that would be the instrument his death that catapulted me, a Christian, from the biblical Old Testament into the New Testament. Now, instead of just reading the Abraham/Isaac story I was pondering another beloved son, wood upon his shoulder, on his way to the place of his death, a death often interpreted by use of the image of sacrifice.

On the journey to the place of sacrifice son and father are in conversation. The son wants to know “where is the sheep for the sacrifice?” (v. 7), not knowing that he, the son is to be the sacrificial lamb. Abraham’s answer is that God rather than human beings will provide himself with the sheep for the sacrifice. God’s provision of the sheep, this lamb of God as one might put it, then brings release to the prisoner and freedom from death. This is true directly of Isaac and also indirectly for Abraham who now has the promise and possibility of a future with descendants restored to him.

By now you are probably aware of the two stories that are in my mind. One is the OT story of Abraham and Isaac and the other is the NT story of Jesus. In both stories a beloved son is to die, carrying the wood that brings death on their shoulders; both deaths having a sacrificial element and in both deaths it is God who provides the sacrificial creature that brings life. So what is going on here? Is it simply that I am no OT intellectual; that **I’m** uniquely incapable of hearing the older story without thinking of the newer one? I don’t think so, for if we are honest we have to say that all Christians read the OT stories through the lenses of New Testament faith. So when the author or authors Genesis sat down to pen the definitive, final version of the book did they think to themselves, “we’ll have to pepper the plot with mentions of the Christ;

make sure to throw in few allusions to the Jesus story so that when the Christians come to read the story then they'll be able to make the connection”?

Well, I suppose anything is possible for God. God **could** choose to let the ancient writers in on the secret of what is to come or perhaps mechanically guide their unsuspecting writing hands to come up with the appropriate wording. It's **possible** but I've got to say that it doesn't sound very likely to me. If that's not the case then what is going on here? Why is it that these two stories come together in ways more detailed and profound than a mere musical connection between a Swiss version of Robin Hood and the masked man of an American television Western?

The answer, I think, is that both stories are responding to the same situation. They have touched upon something that runs deep in the universal setting, something that transcends even the human situation. Both are speaking of the reality that God and God's creation have become estranged and of the need for them to be reconciled. Both stories, the Isaac story and the Jesus story, tell us that if God and we are to be reconciled then sacrifice is the road to be taken to bring that reconciliation about. In both stories the sacrifice is costly, as costly as the sacrifice of a beloved son would be to a loving father.

Now ‘sacrifice’ is a word that it is not universally popular in church circles today. A few weeks ago I was at a meeting for worship leaders where we discussed theories of the atonement i.e. understandings of how Jesus’ death enables us to be at one with God. Some were happy with talk of Jesus’ death as being a sacrifice. Others were not so keen, questioning who sacrifices Jesus to whom and for what purpose and also questioning whether sacrifice language makes sense in our modern society. Yet we know about sacrifice – allowing or bringing about the death of one creature in order to bring life to others. After all, as individuals many of us are prepared to sacrifice the lives of other animals in order that we humans might eat and live. As a people we are prepared to sacrifice the lives of our own young men and women in places as far away as Afghanistan in order to ensure the continued life of our society here in the United Kingdom. Sacrifice is not as alien to our experience as we may think (or perhaps wish to think).

The OT story and the NT story **are** connected by a deep concern with the difficulties of human existence – life and death, bondage and freedom, violence and killing – asking how we are to be delivered from such difficulties and dilemmas. Note, however, that the stories are not the same. In one the beloved son is released, in another the beloved son ends up on the cross. Where the son is released, however, the human predicament is not resolved, as the unfolding biblical story and the history

books amply testify. In the later story, the story of Jesus, however, if once again God is to provide the sacrifice, if God is prepared to do what Abraham was ready to do (to sacrifice his own son) then no substitute sacrifice is on offer.

Neither biblical story is intended to be some academic theological tome, explaining in carefully worked out, consistent detail what is meant by every phrase and image employed in the argument. It really does not help to try to take this image, this metaphor of sacrifice as though it tells the whole story of what God does on our behalf through Jesus' death. What the stories **do** tell us is that for God to bring life instead of death to the human story is a **costly** process: it involves sacrifice. Holding on to this insight, to this truth, let's not spend **too** much time in hair-splitting debates about the detail of how God does something. Instead let's respond with love to the love that God shows in providing a sacrifice that brings us life. As St Paul would put it, "think of yourselves as raised from death to life, and yield your bodies to God as implements for doing right. Sin shall no longer be your master, for you are no longer under law, but under grace." (6: 13, 14)