

# Christian Foundations

Trinity 3 Year A

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Often I find myself asking the question as to what are the most fundamental foundations of the Christian life? There are of course many different ways in which this question can be answered. It can be answered practically, to say for example that to pray, to attend worship and receive the sacrament, to read the bible and to find ways to love and serve one's neighbours particularly are key foundations. It can also be answered by considering what are the most important things Jesus taught disciples to do and be; to heal, cast out demons, proclaim good news, to suffer little children, to embrace the marginal in hospitality, to lay down one's life for one's friends, to show compassion, to take up the cross and to challenge injustice.

It is also possible to answer the question in terms of spirituality, to consider what spiritual principles lie at the heart of faith. And this morning I think we have some interesting suggestions along these latter lines, for our three readings direct us towards three spiritual orientations/goals/principles.

The first of these is the motif of *obedience to the will of God* in the story of the binding of Isaac. Underlying it is perhaps the most basic of qualities, faith, for Abraham is of course the bible's exemplar of faith. And this episode is originally about the faith of both Abraham and Isaac. Genesis 22 pictures Abraham responding to the command of God to go and sacrifice his son. In compliant obedience Abraham rises early, saddles his donkey, takes two young men and Isaac and sets off to the place God has shown him. After three days of journeying, the place comes into view 'far away' and Abraham leaves the donkey and the two young men behind and journeys on with Isaac. At this stage in the story obedience looks like something quite direct and reactive - God speaks and Abraham acts accordingly. The implication for us as people of faith is that if only one can hear the voice of God and be able to grasp what is being said, then to obey is straightforward. To our sceptical, scientifically and materially –orientated contemporary consciousness, however, the notion of God speaking and us hearing is of course something we have to unpick and re-assemble before we can move on. But notwithstanding the re-interpretation, once the voice or will of God has been discerned, the suggestion here is that the road can then be trodden ..... And yet this is a request – from God to Abraham – that defies both common sense and morality. Who in their right mind would sacrifice their child,

and what sort of God would ask for such a thing to be done? In this connection, commentators suggest that for the tribes that Abraham and his family lived amongst, there was a practice of child sacrifice. It was a cultural norm. And one interpretation is to say, that the initial voice of God is an expression of this existing, deeply flawed, traditional religious outlook. It is the voice of a cruel deity (or a cruel religious establishment) bent on craven obedience; and this is not the voice of Yahweh the God of Israel at all. And yet Abraham obeys – or appears to obey. We also have to bear in mind that in the story God is testing Abraham, so God may already be potentially adopting a counterfeit identity. Abraham is arguably being tested here not only for his faith or obedience in following the divine call, but is being tested over his own appraisal of God – about what kind of God he is in fact in relationship with. There is a textual instability here, which reflects a tension around the authenticity and reliability of this traditional voice of God.

In Jewish interpretation of the blinding of Isaac, the majority view is apparently that Isaac was not a child in the sense of being only of tender years, but was only a child in the sense of being Abraham's son. Rather he was an adult of approximately 37 years. This tells us that he was therefore a willing accomplice in the journey to the land of Moriah, not an innocent victim. This intensifies the sense in which he and his father are walking a path of faith and - because now they are doing it jointly. It also intensifies the question of what kind of God they are following. What we know happens as the story reaches its crescendo is that Abraham is told not to lay his hand on Isaac. The knife is then used instead to kill a ram from a thicket that is sacrificed in Isaac's place. This alternative outcome is achieved through Abraham hearing critically a second voice, the voice of the angel of the Lord. This voice expresses what is arguably the true voice of God, or the voice of the true God. This second voice also reveals that the test of Abraham and Isaac was indeed a test, and that the real measure of obedience or faith is *the capacity to hear this fine voice of God and act upon it*. This voice leads people always and only towards what is for their wellbeing and flourishing. Thus in the case of Abraham and Isaac two voices are in play. The voice of convention associated with corrupted religious custom and practice on the one hand, and the new voice of freedom and humanity that is the basis for a new covenant with God. The story therefore suggests to us, that the drama of attempting to be faithful in our lives is actually not at all simply about hearing what God is saying and being willing to do it. It is much more about learning to discern what are the voices of entreaty that come generally from God, that are indeed for our wellbeing and regeneration. To be faithful according to Genesis 22 is, therefore, among all the voices that clamour for our attention, to be able to wait and listen and discern what is truly being commended for our obedience because there are many voices that beckon. This we know. And we should have some confidence in our capacity to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches, to hear the voice of God, notwithstanding

our modern sensibilities. We are told that Abraham called the place “the Lord will provide”,... “on the mount of the Lord it shall be provided”. If we will be faithful, God is faithful.

The second spiritual principle commended in our readings is that we should be *slaves to righteousness*! In Romans Paul sets out a number of key dichotomies, being in the flesh versus in the Spirit, being under grace or under the law, being dead to sin or alive to God. And in our passage from Romans 6 (verses 12-23) we have a mixture of grace versus law and sin versus life. In this passage we are witnessing Paul talking about sin not as transgressions or misdemeanours, but as a state of being; a state of being which is to be estranged from God and at odds with oneself and ones fellows/neighbours.

In the first place he urges, “do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies”. So there is a possibility that this state of being, ‘sin’, can indeed overwhelm individuals and hold sway. But Paul infers that, for these Roman believers, this should not have to be so, because it is actually the case that they have already “been brought from death to life” – through, of course, their unity with Christ, for they have died with him and been raised with him to newness of life. Because of this, says Paul “sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace”. He then goes on to use the metaphor of slavery or enslavement to further dramatise what the options are – either enslavement to sin which leads to death, he says, or enslavement to obedience which leads to righteousness. He then comes back to his opening point about sin to urge again, that “having been set free from sin, (you) have become slaves to righteousness”. He ends his argument saying, “the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord”. For Paul, in the end there is no choice, if we have been reconciled to God through the death and resurrection of Christ, we are his! And his life lives in us, and we live through him, and so sin can have no dominion. There is no room left for sin to exercise any leverage.

This passage invites us, then, to rejoice in the redeeming, regenerating love of God that sets us free and places us in a disposition of joyful release – not needing to be weighed down by the wages of sin – of all that weighs so heavily upon us – but free to live to serve and to bear witness in the power of the Spirit. This is the good news of the love of God that we have access to grace. And we remind ourselves also here, that when Paul talks of righteousness – (here being slaves to righteousness) – he is not referring to a quality of high morality, but rather this righteousness is a ‘dispensation’ – the dispensation of being in a right, restored relationship with God. It’s about an orientation of living in the world. To be a slave to righteousness, to have

the free gift of God which is eternal life, is the springboard from which we live in the world through grace. It is a wonderful blessing.

The third spiritual reality commended in our readings is a little more difficult to tie down or describe. It is about *welcome and rewards*. Matthew Chapter 10 begins with Jesus summoning the 12 and sending them out on the mission, which we thought a bit about a fortnight ago. And our verses of today are still connected to this theme of mission. It would appear that the point at issue is the welcome received and the gaining of rewards in the context of the mission, as a prophet, a righteous person or a disciple. The passage begins with Jesus' words, "whoever welcomes you (a missionary) welcomes me and whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me". This probably connects to the earlier statements about villages and houses that receive the missionaries and those that don't. Missioners are enjoined to stay in houses that are worthy, but to move on when a house is unworthy. And, "if anyone will not welcome you" says Jesus, "or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town" (10 v.14). So what we may have here, in Ch 10 v.40, is a summary of what happens when the mission is fruitful: where missionaries are welcome, Christ is welcomed and God becomes known! There is what we might call a 'chain of grace' which begins with an openness to the good news – a welcome to the missionaries – and ends in an encounter with grace itself .... Also in this passage there is reference to missionaries being received in the name of a prophet, in the name of a righteous person or in the name of a disciple. But what, we might ask, does this denote? And my sense is that it points us towards the affirmation that comes from a shared identity when the mission is well received. If someone welcomes a prophet missionary in the name of a prophet everyone knows they belong together – in the tradition of prophecy. The host might say to the prophet missionary, "I welcome you in the name of the prophet John the Baptist! – this immediately establishes commonality and trust as a shared outlook is confirmed. Therefore, I think we can say that in this passage, prophecy, righteousness and discipleship are being singled out as key shared motifs. What this all culminates in is that, essentially, the mission is conducted in the name of the Lord. In Matthew 18 and 19, when Jesus is recorded as spending particular time with children, he says, "whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me". The ultimate indicator that the mission is fruitful is that Jesus is being welcomed. This is the ultimate sign that the mission is going forward.

Our third spiritual orientation, then, is a dispensation to receive the good news through welcoming Christ (as missionaries are welcomed). This is its own reward. What this does, of course, is to turn upside down one of our key principles of mission which is that we go out and do mission with and among others. Whilst this is indeed

so, and is enjoined upon us, these verses of today indicate that just as important is the gesture of receiving Christ and welcoming Christ, in the guise of friend and stranger. This way we discover the grace and blessing of good news. This principle of 'receptive welcome', which is really only developed fully in Matthew's gospel, draws of course on what is Matthew's most distinctive and compelling picture of Jesus himself, the one in whom we find true rest. In our Prayer and Share meeting on Thursday Caroline focussed our attention on this same image through reflection using the first verse of hymn 469 – I heard the voice of Jesus say come unto me and rest – this draws of course on Matthew Ch 11 v.28, "Come unto me all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls for my yoke is easy and my burden is light". What a joy it is – a joy above all joys – to welcome Christ and come to him the giver of true rest and the lover of souls.

Let us pray, then, this morning, for the gift of faith that learns to listen patiently for the true voice of God, for the freedom that comes from being set free from sin and enslaved to righteousness, that grace may abound, and for a disposition of receptive welcome through which we may find rest under the yoke that is easy and the burden which is light. Amen.

2399 Words

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