

SECOND SUNDAY
OF LENT

YEAR B



Prayer

Psalm 116:10, 15-19

I kept my faith, even when I said, "I am greatly afflicted";

Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful ones.

O Lord, I am your servant; I am your servant, the child of your serving girl.

You have loosed my bonds. I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice and call on the name of the Lord.

I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people, in the courts of the house of the Lord, in your midst, O Jerusalem.

Praise the Lord!

Reading the Word

Genesis 22:1-2, 9-13, 15-18

God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you."

When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there

and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.

Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son.

The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, "By myself I have sworn, says the Lord: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice."

FIRST READING

Genesis 22:1-2, 9-13, 15-18

PSALM

Psalm 116:10, 15-19

SECOND READING

Romans 8:31-34

GOSPEL

Mark 9:2-10

Romans 8:31-34

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.

Mark 9:2-10

Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is

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my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead could mean.

Hearing the Word

“Obeying God”

The second Sunday of Lent focuses on the theme of obedience to God’s will. The word “obedience” comes from Latin and means “to listen intently”. Listening intently to God means being attentive to the diverse ways in which God reveals himself through persons and events, and to respond to the invitation to accept and follow God’s will and guidance.

The first reading contains a rather puzzling, and even shocking, story of the sacrifice of Isaac. Having given Abraham a long-awaited son, God makes an incomprehensible demand that this gift be returned to him through human sacrifice when he says, “take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love... and offer him there as a burnt offering”. This demand might shock an unwary reader, as it appears to portray God as a bloodthirsty deity ordering the killing of an innocent child for no apparent reason. However, biblical stories are not intended to be read as literal accounts of words

and events, but as imaginative tales and epics meant to explain, instruct, and inspire. This strange story is not about God but about Abraham and is meant to instruct on the right human response to God and his will, using Abraham as an illustrative example of such a response.

The story’s true meaning comes to light when its historical and cultural context is taken into account. The biblical writer wrote this story in the context of the Canaanite society of his day, where the sacrificial killing of children was a common religious practice designed to please their gods. The Canaanites lived alongside the Israelites for many centuries. Their highly developed culture and religion were always a source of temptation for the Israelites, who were so impressed by their neighbour’s way of life that they often abandoned their own practices and beliefs outlined in God’s law, and adopted foreign and pagan ways. The author of Genesis, through the story of the obedient Abraham, instructs his readers that the God of Israel not only does not require but actually condemns human sacrifices. For this reason, God stops Abraham’s hand from striking Isaac at the last moment. Instead of the sacrifice, in the final part of the reading, God praises Abraham’s unqualified obedience to God’s incomprehensible command.

Through this story, the author of Genesis teaches that true religion does not involve or require human sacrifices,

but consists in faith, trust and obedience to God’s commands. Abraham’s faith in God’s earlier promise, to make him the father of a multitude of nations, was confirmed and affirmed on an even higher level by his willingness to do whatever God required, even at great personal cost. The story affirms that such obedience and trust are the required expressions of true religion. Such understanding set the Israelite religion in stark contrast with that of its pagan neighbours, and revealed a fundamental and unique aspect of the faith as practiced by the Israelites and subsequently by Christians.

In the second reading, Paul, writing to the Romans, concludes his extensive argument on righteousness by faith as a way for people to be brought into an unbreakable union with God. In this conclusion, Paul reassures his readers about God’s love and grace manifested through Christ’s death and resurrection, identifying this love as the reason behind all God’s actions. This love also guarantees the future salvation of believers. His argument takes the form of a series of rhetorical questions – “If God is for us, who is against us? Who will bring any charge? Who is to condemn?” Naturally, the answer to these questions can only be a resounding: “no one!” Paul skilfully leads his readers to recognize that God’s love expresses itself in and through his irrevocable and unbreakable commitment to them and their salvation.

Paul discloses that God manifested his love and commitment through his Son's death on the cross. Paul consistently interprets Jesus' death as an act of obedience, as seen in Philippians 2:8 where he writes that Jesus "humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on the cross". Here, Jesus' obedience is not simply blind submission, but a conscious choice to do what is necessary to make people's salvation possible. For some mysterious reason, known only to God, the defeat of death and the subsequent resurrection meant that someone had to subject himself to death to conquer death by rising from the dead. Jesus willingly accomplished this great act with God's approval; God "gave him up for all of us". Like Abraham in the Genesis story, God also was willing to give up his beloved Son so that, through the Son's willing obedience, death might be defeated, and salvation be offered to all.

The Gospel reading contains the Markan narrative of the Transfiguration. This event also took place on a mountaintop. In the Bible, mountains are the places for encountering God, places of revelation. Accordingly, the Transfiguration story intends to reveal Jesus' identity. The word "transfiguration" comes from the Greek term "metamorphosis", which means "to change". Jesus changed his appearance to demonstrate his true identity as a divine person. This happened before the three disciples, Peter, James, and John,

who would subsequently bear testimony to the event. In its course, God himself confirmed Jesus as his Son in the presence of the disciples and before Moses and Elijah, the two iconic figures of the Old Testament who represent its constitutive parts: the Law and the Prophets. Thus, Jesus' divine identity was publicly confirmed by the greatest authority.

In addition to the confirmation of Jesus as God's Son, the Transfiguration also discloses the nature of Jesus' mission as the suffering Messiah. For this reason, Mark places this event at the midpoint of the Gospel, just as Jesus begins to make his way to Jerusalem and towards his death. Furthermore, coming down from the mountain, Jesus instructs the disciples not to disclose what they had seen and learned about him until after the resurrection. This means that he fully understood that his mission as the Messiah and the Son of God involved his self-sacrificial death, which will be followed by the resurrection. Thus, the glorious event of the Transfiguration on the mountaintop can only be fully understood in the light of the events that were about to unfold on another mountaintop, the hill of Calvary. On that second hilltop, Jesus will reveal himself in the most complete manner – as the Son of God and the suffering Messiah willingly fulfilling his role as the Saviour of the world through an act of obedient self-sacrifice. The Transfiguration was, therefore, a prelude to Calvary, bearing testimony that

Jesus, as the obedient servant, listens to God's voice, understands God's purposes, and acts in accordance with God's salvific will.

Moving into the Lenten season, the liturgy of the word highlights obedience as the key factor in the appropriate human response to God's will and purposes. Abraham was asked to make an unthinkable sacrifice. He obeyed, and that led to him emerging as the forefather of all God's people. Paul pointed to God's love that bears its salvific fruit through Jesus' obedient acceptance of his mission, which involved the sacrifice of his life. The Transfiguration story confirms Paul's insight by revealing Jesus as the obedient Son of God willing to make his way to Jerusalem to face death that will ultimately lead to the resurrection. Obedience to God is undoubtedly the key and the necessary response to God for all who are willing to play their part in bringing God's salvation to fruition. Those living in willing obedience to God and God's ways can truthfully exclaim with the Psalmist, "O Lord, I am your servant."

Listening to the Word of God

Obedience implies surrender to somebody else's will and guidance. Such surrender can be fruitful and life-giving only if we trust that the one whom we obey has our best interest at heart. Obedience to parents and family elders has been traditionally understood as the source of blessings and long life, precisely because the intention of these authorities was to provide the best future for their young. The same

applies to our obedience to God, which leads us to two important reflections.

First, our obedience to God must spring from the experience and conviction about God's love. Abraham's story shows that he first experienced God's guidance and love in his life. It was this experience of God's unmerited choice of him and the love from him, that led Abraham to obey God's commands unquestionably. The same applies to us today. Love precedes obedience and grace comes before duty. Contemplating Jesus and his self-sacrifice during Lent may help us to realize just how great God's love for us is. When we appreciate how much we are valued and cherished, then obedience to God's commands, and following his ways will become a natural response of gratitude, rather than a grudging compliance.

Next, Abraham's example teaches us that obedience is built on trust, and that trust is costly. God promised Abraham that he, Abraham, would be the father of a great nation. The old patriarch trusted that promise, and, indeed, it was fulfilled in his only son Isaac. When God demanded that this gift, this son, be given back to God, Abraham's heart must have been broken and he must have been utterly confused. Yet, despite this confusion, he trusted that God knows what God is doing. He overcame his doubts because he trusted God. In the end, his act of obedience did not lead to the loss of his son, but turned into a great blessing. All too often, when asked to make sacrifices,

we pull back and jealously guard what we consider our rightful independence and freedom of action or legitimate rights. During Lent, we are asked to make sacrifices precisely for the sake of training ourselves in trust and obedience to the one from whom all that we have comes – God. Inspired by the example of Abraham we should reflect on our ability to make sacrifices and think of what we need to let go of in order to grow in trustful obedience to our Lord. As we journey through Lent, we are reminded that, like Jesus and Abraham, we are special in God's eyes and that each of us has a mission to complete. We can obediently and successfully carry out this mission when we carefully determine what that mission is, and then trustfully respond to the God who loves us. However, like Jesus and Abraham, we must also be willing to make the necessary sacrifices, and take the difficult decisions that will result in blessing for us, and for others.

Proverb

“A child who does not listen to his parents listens to the vultures.”

Action

Self-examination

What is the mission that God has given me to carry out in this

life? Have I willingly accepted it in trustful obedience?

What sacrifices do I need to make, to bring blessing into my life, and to the lives of the people closest to me?

Response to God

During this week I will begin each day with a prayer of thanksgiving for God's love and ask for the gift of wisdom to discern and respond to God's will.

Response to your World

Obedience demands sacrifice. I will make one concrete act of sacrifice during this week, one that will be in line with the teaching of the Gospel and benefit me or somebody else, spiritually.

As a group, we will identify a service that we should perform to benefit someone (or a group) in spiritual or material need. We resolve to make the necessary sacrifices and carry out what is required as a sign of our obedience to God's will.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we offer you our sacrifice of praise, and we worship your wonderful name.

We ask you, Father, to accompany us as we continue our Lenten journey, so that we may be good listeners and doers of your word, and be obedient to your divine inspiration.

Jesus our Saviour, intercede for us with God, so that, like you, we may be obedient to God's will and fulfill it in our lives.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.