

## Reasoned faith or a dangerous gamble?

May the words of my lips and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer

When I saw the story of Abraham and Isaac in the lectionary, I couldn't resist the challenge to speak on it, because it is one of my least favourite passages in scripture. This story is all about faith, and I witnessed a good example of faith just recently that I'd like to share with you.

My son James is desperate to leave home to go to University in the UK in September. He had an offer that he was excited about, but he needed to get decent grades at the end of the school year. Unfortunately, this meant that he had to do some work. He made the absolute minimum effort necessary, and his grades in the middle of March were good enough.

But when Covid-19 hit Switzerland and his school was closed for an undetermined period of time, he took a leap of faith. At that point he believed that his exams would be cancelled and so he stopped studying completely and instead spent his time doing things he actually enjoyed. As you might imagine, I was having kittens – how could he take such a *dangerous gamble* with his whole future? It felt to me like blind faith.

As you might imagine, I was glued to every press conference from the Conseil Fédéral waiting for news of the exams. He, however, felt like he had followed a reasoned path of logic based on past events and likely future scenarios. Thankfully, he was proved right, his exams were cancelled and he got the grades he needed without lifting a finger for 2 whole months. His *reasoned faith* paid off.

If we turn now to our story of Abraham, we see another example of faith that, at first glance, looks like a *dangerous gamble*, with the life of his son in the balance. But if we understand the back story, it starts to make a little more sense, and dare I say it, perhaps even starts to look like Abraham had a *reasoned faith*?

Having said that, I'm afraid there is no way that I can give you an adequate explanation of this deeply troubling story. I can't imagine what this almost child-sacrifice did to the relationship between Abraham and Isaac, or between Abraham and Sarah for that matter. I have given more than a passing thought to Christine and our wonderful safeguarding team, and there is no doubt that to our 21<sup>st</sup> century ears both God asking Abraham to sacrifice his son and Abraham going along with it are entirely abhorrent.

The fact that it was only a test and that God never meant Abraham to go through with it doesn't make it a whole lot better! But please bear with me as I put these difficult questions to one side in order to try to understand the story from Abraham's perspective.

Abraham is held up to us as a hero of the faith in the New Testament, but what sort of faith are we talking about? Did Abraham act in blind obedience to God, without any kind of moral assessment of his own? Would he use the Nuremberg defense and say that he was just following orders? I don't think so.

His wasn't a blind faith, but rather a reasoned faith that was born out of a relationship with God that had developed over more than 25 years. As Abraham's story unfolds, we see a man struggling and then finally learning to believe.

At the grand old age of 75, God called the childless Abraham (or Abram as he was called then) to move away from where he was living – to leave his father's house and his kindred, and to move to a land that God would show him. He promised to make his descendants into a great nation and to give them the land. But Abraham didn't yet trust God, and since his wife Sarah was barren, instead of leaving his kindred as instructed, he took his nephew Lot with him as a kind of insurance policy.

When the land started to get over-crowded, Abraham and Lot separated. This meant that Abraham lost his insurance policy, but Abraham was not ready to trust God so he replaced him with the son of his slave, Eliezer of Damascus.

On two occasions later on in the story, Abraham asks Sarah to pretend to be his sister when they move to a new place in order to save his own skin. He didn't trust God to keep him safe as he had promised, so he made a contingency plan which ended up hurting a lot of people.

Then there is the famous story of the son, Ishmael, that Abraham conceived with his wife's slave Hagar, which resulted in enormous heartache all round. Abraham even tried to later persuade God to fulfill his promises through Ishmael, but God kept insisting that he and Sarah would have a son of their own. There was no need for a plan B.

All along, God steadfastly repeated his promises – firstly by speaking to Abraham's heart, then by using a visual aid – promising descendants as numerous as the stars in the night sky. When this failed, he ramped things up by showing Abraham a bizarre vision involving a smoking firepot and a blazing torch moving between bisected animal carcasses. But this was still not enough, so he sent three angels to deliver the message in person, at which point Abraham's post-menopausal wife, Sarah, laughed out loud.

The interesting thing about today's story is that, for once, Abraham doesn't have a plan B. He doesn't try to negotiate with God as he has done in the past. He obeys God without question. It seems like the birth of Isaac was a turning point; messengers, visual aids and visions were all very well, but Abraham needed some proof. He finally got it when Isaac was born, the son that he had been promised for a quarter of a century.

We can only speculate about what was going through Abraham's mind. The writer of the book of Hebrews says that Abraham believed God would raise Isaac from the dead.

God had kept his promise about Isaac being born, he had also explicitly promised that he would build a nation through Isaac, so there was no way that this sacrifice was going to end with Isaac's death. Abraham's relationship with God had got to the point that he could entrust God with the most precious thing that he had, and I think that *this* is why he is held up to us as a hero of the faith.

Abraham was able to trust God with everything he had. Can we entrust God's good gifts back to him or do we always make sure that we have a plan B? Perhaps I could have trusted God more with my son's educational future – instead I was working on my own insurance policy by checking application deadlines for courses at EPFL!

But heroes are there not just to be admired, but to inspire and challenge us in our journey of faith. So I wonder what state our faith is in at the moment? What kind of faith do we have to help us through these uncertain times?

One thing that might help is to look back through the whole story of your life so far and notice where you have seen God at work. You might start with some of the turning points in your life. Did you have a hunch or feeling that one way was better than the other and how did that turn out?

Can you see where God nudged you to understand more and ponder life more deeply?

How has God answered your prayers?

Hopefully you will see a pattern of God's action in your life in the past, and then recognizing this will help you to trust him with your present and your future. Moving forward, it might help to intentionally notice where you see God at work in your everyday life, and where you see glimpses of his glory.

I'd like to leave you with a prayer that expresses this Abrahamic faith in terms of abandonment. That state of total trust in God where we are able to leave everything in his hands in utter confidence. This might not be a bad thing for us to aim for during this period of great uncertainty. These are the words of Catholic priest and hermit Charles de Foucauld:

*Let us pray*

Father,

I abandon myself into your hands; do with me what you will.

Whatever you may do, I thank you:

I am ready for all, I accept all.

Let only your will be done in me, and in all your creatures.

I wish no more than this, O Lord.

Into your hands I commend my soul;

I offer it to you

with all the love of my heart,

for I love you, Lord,

and so need to give myself,

to surrender myself into your hands,  
without reserve,  
and with boundless confidence,  
for you are my Father.  
Amen.