

Homily – 28-06-20 – Pentecost 4 - Bishop Cam Venables

Readings: Genesis 22:1-14 Psalm 13

Romans 6:12-23 Matthew 10:40-42

In a recent leadership discussion the facilitator affirmed that we are living in a VUCA world! This acronym VUCA was first used in 1987 and suggests that we are living in a Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous world. The recent months of COVID disruption would certainly be an example of this but even before the Corona virus we lived with volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity... I think it was just better hidden!

As some church congregations start to meet together again, while complying with the necessary guidelines to reduce the risk of infection, we can helpfully ask how the recent experience of being unable to physically meet together has changed us? What new initiatives in pastoral care, worship, formation, and community service do we want to develop further? And, how can we continue these things while engaging again with some of the activities we used to do?

Because the Western Region is so diverse the well populated urban contexts of Ipswich and Toowoomba may have different responses to these questions compared with the small towns and scattered properties further west. Similarly, our Dinka-speaking congregations may have different responses to our English-speaking congregations.

But whether we are in an urban or rural community; whether we are part of a Dinka or English-speaking congregation... we each have an expectation that God's Spirit will be present, and have something for us, each time we meet. In the prayers offered, and the songs sung; in the teaching, and in the sacrament; even in the friendship shared through hospitality... God's Spirit will be present.

So, what might God's Spirit be saying to us as we reflect upon the Old Testament reading from Genesis set for this weekend? In this we read about the very disturbing account of God telling Moses to take his only son Isaac up a high mountain, and once there... to ritually kill him! I have heard a good number of sermons on this reading which conclude that Abraham's faith was incredible, because he was willing to give up his only son to make God happy!

However, through a Twenty First Century lens I find myself wondering about the impact on Isaac who appears to have been physically abused - when he was tied up and unable to run away; psychologically abused - 'Dad what are you doing!'; ...and spiritually abused - 'It's not my fault son! God asked me to do this!' I imagine the conversation between that father and son being a little strained as Abraham and Isaac headed back down the mountain, and that Isaac may have had some trust issues with his father for many years afterwards!

However, we need to remember in that long-ago context human sacrifice was an accepted way of appeasing deities. Further, that going up a mountain to do this was not unusual because there was an understanding that the higher you climbed the closer you got to the world of the gods. So, the thought of God directing Abraham to go up a mountain to sacrifice Isaac would not have been surprising or abhorrent to those who first heard this story. However, it would have been surprising for them to hear what happened after Isaac was tied up. Just as Abraham was about to kill his son he apparently got further direction from God who explained he had proved himself faithful and

that there was no longer any need to kill Isaac. A sacrifice still had to be made but Abraham was directed to a previously hidden ram caught in a thicket which was good news for Isaac... and bad news for the ram!

It could be argued that this was a turning point in the relationship between Abraham and God, and consequently between God and all who now follow an Abrahamic faith: Jews, Christians and Muslims. For the Jewish community there would from that time on be no human sacrifice needed to maintain relationship with God unlike some of the other religions in that area. However Jewish religion would continue to sacrifice animals until the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70AD.

This is an interesting and important story for Christians to think about because we use sacrificial language about Jesus. Please hear the echo of this week's Abraham-Isaac story in the famous verse from John's Gospel: 'For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.' (John 3:16). A father willing to give his son... just like Abraham had been willing to sacrifice Isaac. Remember also in that Gospel the affirmation from John the Baptist when he first sees Jesus, 'Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world...' (John 1:29). In communion worship we use that language of sacrifice when we pray: 'Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world, have mercy on us...'

I think it's much easier to think of Jesus as teacher and friend; role model and brother; life-giving Lord and King... rather than someone who needed to be brutally killed so that you and I, and indeed all humanity could have relationship with God. In our hymns and teaching we think of Jesus as our Saviour, as well as our teacher; and as our redeemer as well as our friend. So, what do you think of Jesus when you call him 'Lamb of God'?

Psalms 51 suggests that a 'broken and contrite heart' is the real sacrifice that God needs, and a recurring theme in the major and minor prophets is that God doesn't want animal sacrifice, but rather justice and kindness (Micah 6:8). The Jesus we meet in the Gospels seemed to take justice and kindness to new heights when he called people to love their enemies and pray for those who persecuted them (Matthew 5:44); to forgive others as we would want to be forgiven by God (Luke 11:4); and love those we share life with... and not hate them or be indifferent (John 1:17).

I think there's plenty to think and pray about this week, but let me come back to that earlier question: What do you think of Jesus when you call him 'Lamb of God'? And, what does your response to that question tell you about your understanding of God?

Friends, let's pray...

Loving, liberating, and life-giving God, thank you for each breath and heartbeat that makes our lives possible. In the coming week we ask that your Spirit bring challenge, comfort, and hope wherever there is need for these things. We pray in the name of Christ - our saviour and friend. Amen