

At first sight it seems a bit of a puzzle to juxtapose two such different readings as in today's Second Sunday Mass of Lent: we are uplifted by the wonder and promise of the Transfiguration but this is preceded by the harrowing story of Abraham's willingness to kill his own son at God's command. It's alarming in this abbreviated form but even more so if read in its entirety. And that, perhaps, is a clue to what's going on: a sort of creative dissonance only resolvable within a greater picture. Context is everything, as they say, and, of course, the ultimate context is God – and mystery. What is going on is more than we can imagine and, more than that, more than we can *ever* imagine. Somehow, in a command that seems to contradict the goodness of God, lies a clue to the overarching nature of God's goodness; of God who is both all-loving and all-powerful; able, then, to save us, to turn evil, as it were, against itself by sending his only Son in imitation of Abraham, but this time allowing the sacrifice to go ahead. You see how uncomfortable the resonances really are. My predecessor, Dom Gregory, perhaps wisely, would never go anywhere near this story of Abraham and Isaac, perhaps, as a psychoanalyst, deeply aware of the dangers in it for those subject to hearing voices and so on and, of course, for those with a more fundamentalist stance towards scripture. If God commands, I must obey. But at the other extreme, we can vacate these stories of their comforting or discomfoting power by regarding them as stories only: *it didn't really happen like that; it's the meaning that counts; God could never really command someone to kill their son.*

Somehow, we have to let the two stories talk to one another and allow for the possibility of incarnation: that is, that God really does send his own Son, but in the latter story it's not God but humanity itself that is killing his Son. I wonder if God stays Abraham's hand knowing full well that God does not have to order the killing of the innocent – we are well able to do this for ourselves. So Abraham's faith is tested but so is our own. Have we faith enough to believe that God would never do such a thing and that the greater truth lies in the sending of his own Son, which not only reveals that we have the greater malice but that God has the greater love and that, *with God on our side who can be against us; that Christ not only died for us but rose from the dead and now, there, at God's right hand, stands and pleads for us?*

This is Paul speaking after his own experience of transfiguration; of being allowed a glimpse, that is, of resurrection – his own, perhaps, as much as Christ's. And, as in so many words missing from these accounts, the best is yet to come:

Can anything cut us off from the love of Christ – can hardships or distress or persecution, or lack of food or clothing, or threats or violence ...? No, we come through all these things triumphantly victorious, by the power of him who loved us...

Paul is looking back to understand how God has worked miracles in his own tormented life and we have to read these stories, too, in the light of our own experience but, like the disciples, as they descend from the mountain questioning this experience, '*what can rising from the dead mean?*', and with our lectio group also in mind, this questioning, in its turn, demands faith and prayer. After all, who is testing who?

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