

A Podcast for North Coventry Group – June 28 2020 ('Fourth after Pentecost')

Hello and welcome to a podcast for and from the North Coventry Group of United Reformed Churches. This has been prepared for the 28 June, the fourth Sunday after Pentecost, 2020.

Details of music and sources are in the online transcript, and I would like to thank Erica and Janet, Margaret and Olive for joining in the preparation of this week's edition, also Elliot and Louise for acting as assistant sound engineers.

Music¹ – *Cavatina* by Stanley Myers
played by John Williams,
from the album *Classic Williams - Romance of the Guitar*

Call to Worship: Words from Psalm 118.24 and 29, Psalm 19.14

*This is the day that the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.*

*It is good to give thanks to the Lord
for his love endures forever.*

*May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of my heart
be acceptable to you, God my strength and my Redeemer.*

Amen

*[May the words, a setting of Psalm 19.14 to music by John L Bell
Is sung by the Wild Goose Worship Group, Iona Community
from the album, *Psalms of Patience, Penitence and Praise*]*

Prayers

Lord God, your ancient people rejoiced when they were able to go together into the house of the Lord. Your Son came to interpret and fulfil the Law. He told us to love one another as he loved us. He told us the most important law was to love our neighbours in the same way, to the same extent, that we love ourselves. These are the rules we try to live by as followers of Jesus.

Now we come to you in worship, confused and frustrated that the best way to love each other is **not** to gather. **Not** to go together into the house of the Lord.

Lord, help us to grasp what is important in our response to your overwhelming, infinite love. Help us always to separate the essential from the optional, the eternal from the transitory.

In our hearts we know that we could worship you in a field, at the roadside, in our homes, in any space, whether two or three are gathered, or dozens or hundreds. Or one. There is no single way to worship.

But we have a sense of the **right** way, and some of that is crafted around what worship we believe you deserve. Some of that is based on traditions we will not willingly or easily lay down. Some is from a feeling we should take ourselves away from the world to concentrate on you. Some is to give us the comfort of the familiar. Sounds and sights we have been accustomed to use as the foundations of our faith.

As we negotiate our way towards a safe way, may we worship authentically as we journey on. Just as all your people have looked to you from where they are since the early days of the Church, and offered you themselves **and** their situations.

We thank you for the lessening and loosening of restrictions. We thank you for hope, for the promise of yet better times.

Out of the depth, from what is still a low place, we offer our lives, our time, our attention – our worship to you once more. Take the best of what we can do and make it better. Forgive us when we don't try hard enough and show us the Way once again.

In the name of Jesus the Way, we bring you our prayers. In his words we join in the family prayer of the Church:

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in Heaven. Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Scriptureⁱⁱ: Genesis 22.1-14

Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, 'Abraham!' 'Here I am,' he replied.

² Then God said, 'Take your son, your only son, whom you love – Isaac – and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain that I will show you.'

³ Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. ⁴ On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. ⁵ He said to his servants, 'Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.'

⁶ Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife.

As the two of them went on together, ⁷ Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, 'Father?'

'Yes, my son?' Abraham replied.

'The fire and wood are here,' Isaac said, 'but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?'

⁸ Abraham answered, 'God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.' And the two of them went on together.

⁹ When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰ Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. ¹¹ But the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, 'Abraham! Abraham!' 'Here I am,' he replied.

¹² 'Do not lay a hand on the boy,' he said. 'Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.'

¹³ Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴ So Abraham called that place The Lord Will Provide. And to this day it is said, 'On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided.'

Reflection (1)

When we complete the three-year journey through the Bible that the lectionary represents, we have not read all of the Bible together. Far from it. We don't pick up on all of the passages that are nominated each week. If we did we would have touched on a wide selection of books and all of the Gospels, allowing us to experience the breadth of the material in our scriptures and especially all of the key themes in the teaching of Jesus. And in his life, which you might say was the same thing.

Among the options week by week is a chance not just to gain life-lessons or faith-bolstering examples from Bible stories but also to follow the biographical detail of the ancient characters written about in the Old Testament. Sometimes it is hard to derive much that you could call 'instruction' from these stories, and some of the exploits of Jewish Kings or their actions against indigenous people can be downright shocking.

This week we are offered a key moment from the life of Abraham. Abraham the origin of the Jewish people, their one common ancestor. It was to Abraham that the Jews looked back, even in the time of Jesus, to establish their identity. Abraham who spoke from heaven to the rich man in a parable of Jesus. He was a real and well-known character to them, and the ultimate example of faithfulness.

...perhaps mainly because of this amazing episode that showed where he put his priorities. If your vision of what God is like is anything like mine, you will find it hard to believe that God ever intended that Isaac should die at his father's hands. Perhaps, even though we shouldn't apply too many 'what if' questions to a tale like this – perhaps there was doublethink going on in Abraham's mind right up to the point when the angel intervened and stopped him killing his son as a sacrifice. But in fact I think we are meant to play this straight and accept it at face value. Abraham's faith in God was such that he trusted his instruction and fully intended to do **whatever** God asked.

This is why Abraham was such a role model. God's response, in the next few verses, is to make one of his Old Testament covenant promises about the future of the Jewish people, repaying faithfulness with faithfulness.

...because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, ¹⁸ and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.

This episode, by our vision of the nature of God, was never going to end in a human sacrifice. But God not obliging Abraham to give his son can be contrasted with God's own sacrifice of his own Son after the sweep of Old Testament history in which time and again the descendants of Abraham had proved **unfaithful**.

And the whole sweep of history continued to be punctuated with episodes of inhumanity, violence, neglected opportunities to make the world a better place.

The World War One poet Wilfred Owen [1893-1918] made use of our story of Abraham in a shocking but effective way when he reflected in verse on the pig-headedness of humanity and the determination of those directing the affairs of nations to maintain their strategies, regardless of cost. His sonnet, ***The Parable of the Old Man and the Young*** (Wilfred Owen 1893-1918):

*So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went,
And took the fire with him, and a knife.*

*And as they sojourned both of them together,
Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father,
Behold the preparations, fire and iron,
But where the lamb for this burnt-offering?*

*Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,
and builded parapets and trenches there,
And stretchèd forth the knife to slay his son.
When lo! an angel called him out of heaven,
Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,
Neither do anything to him. Behold,
A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns;
Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.*

*But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.*

Are we, or our leaders, neglecting chances to do things a better way? Are we or they slavishly holding on to methods and strategies that do more harm than good? Are we forgetting that God has nominated rules for living in community that apply as much to our now world-wide family as they first did to nomads in ancient Palestine?

I am in danger of drawing lessons as much from a War poet as from Genesis. The message from Wilfred Owen is that humankind is capable of ignoring the offer that God makes. The offer, described in Genesis is of care and love greater than we deserve from a God greater than we can ever describe, who in the end will go further than he ever asks us to go to reconcile ourselves to him.

Music: *Lord Jesus, think on me.* Words by Sinesius of Cyrene (c375-430)
translated by A W Chatfield (1808-96)
sung by the choir of the Collegiate Church of St Mary, Warwick
from the album *Complete New English Hymnal Vol. 6*

*Lord Jesus, think on me,
and purge away my sin;
from earth-born passions set me free,
and make me pure within.*

*Lord Jesus, think on me,
with care and woe oppressed,
let me Thy loving servant be,
and taste Thy promised rest.*

*Lord Jesus, think on me,
amid the battle's strife;
in all my pain and misery
be thou my health and life.*

*Lord Jesus, think on me,
nor let me go astray;
through darkness and perplexity
point Thou the heav'nly way.*

*Lord Jesus, think on me,
when flows the tempest high:*

*when on doth rush the enemy,
O Saviour be Thou nigh.*

*Lord Jesus, think on me,
that, when the flood is past,
I may eternal brightness see,
and share Thy joy at last.*

Scripture: Matthew 10.40-42

⁴⁰ 'Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. ⁴¹ Whoever welcomes a prophet as a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and whoever welcomes a righteous person as a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward. ⁴² And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward.'

Reflection (2)

At this point in Matthew's Gospel Jesus has just warned the disciples, in words I reflected on last week, of how families will become divided and all sorts of obstacles await them as they set out on his mission to the world.

This rider in the last few verses of the chapter can be dealt with separately, as it is not so much a message for them as a message for everyone else.

It's a message in the same vein as the more famous parable of the sheep and the goats from Matthew chapter 25, where those who are surprised at being counted among the righteous ask the question,

'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

⁴⁰ *"The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'*

As Jesus links the support of the disciples on their mission to support for Jesus himself, he sums up:

... if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward.

If it seems a bit much to be discussing the weighty themes of the story of Abraham and Isaac alongside this verse whose message appears to be 'every little helps', then I will just have to apologise and admit yes, that is exactly what the message is. Not just 'every little helps' but 'no contribution too small', so long as each little push, each action is pushing in the right direction.

This message comes to us at a time when there is lots to do, and yet we doubt our ability to do anything. We are locked down. We are slightly **un**locked and yet church activity remains hedged around with regulations and limitations. As we are given opportunities there will be a temptation to stop and wait and do nothing until we can do everything.

But at the risk of sounding like a government briefing, there are baby steps we can take, and if they are in the right direction so we should. And if enough people are taking those small steps, it constitutes a lot of momentum. Surely what the Church needs.

Prayers of Intercession

[Our prayers are punctuated by a short song by John L Bell, taken from the songbook and album *There is one among us*, sung by the Wild Goose Worship Group of the Iona Community, words reproduced by permission.]

*Lord of life, we come to you.
Lord of all, our Saviour be.
Come to bless and to heal
With the light of your love.*

Lord of life, as we come to you, we ask that you draw near to **us** as we pray.

We pray for those on the fringes of society or those who feel rejected; for those who are overlooked or whom others avoid. And at the present time we pray for those who have been outside society because of shielding and who may be fearful to engage with others again. Let all your people come to you.

Lord of life, we come to you

We pray for those who are lonely or isolated, because loved ones have died, or families have moved away. And at the present time we pray for all suffering because they have been kept away from their workplaces or their social connections for months and their lives lack focus. May those who have been apart come together once again.

Lord of life, we come to you

We pray for all who are sick or frail and in hospital or in residential care, and for those providing care to others. As the spotlight moves away, may those who care not feel forgotten, invisible and unappreciated. And may those in need of care receive the treatment and support they need. May the cooperation and sense of being in this together endure.

Lord of life, we come to you

We pray for those responsible for our church buildings and services, with the great uncertainty that comes with the loosening of restrictions. May we all have the wisdom to know what we continue to refrain from, what it is right to resume, and what we should retain of the new activities and modes of worship and communication we have developed and deployed in recent months.

Lord of life, we come to you

Amen

Hymn *God of the poor (Beauty for brokenness)*
sung by Graham Kendrick
from the album *Graham Kendrick, the Ultimate Collection*

[Unfortunately our licensing arrangements don't permit the reproduction of the words of this song in this transcript, although they can be found online if you are so equipped.]

Blessing

As we respond with wonder to the amazing power and love of God the Creator, as we resolve to follow the example and the teaching of Jesus, God's Son, as we seek again the inspiration and sustenance of God's Spirit...

may the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be with us all today and for ever. Amen

Music: *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op. 43: Variation 18*
by Sergei Rachmaninoff, performed by Vladimir Ashkenazy,
André Previn and the London Symphony Orchestra

Thank you for listening to our podcast. [on <https://revdbill.uk>]

Credits

Cavatina by Stanley Myers was played by John Williams, from the album *Classic Williams - Romance of the Guitar*.

May the words, a setting of Psalm 19.14 to music by John L Bell was sung by the Wild Goose Worship Group of the Iona Community and taken from the album, *Psalms of Patience, Penitence and Praise*.

The hymn, *Lord Jesus, think on me* was sung by the choir of the Collegiate Church of St Mary, Warwick and taken from the album *Complete New English Hymnal Vol. 6*

Lord of life, we come to you by John Bell was taken from the album *There is one among us*, sung by the Wild Goose Worship Group of the Iona Community.

God of the poor (Beauty for brokenness) was written and sung by Graham Kendrick and taken from the album *Graham Kendrick, the Ultimate Collection*.

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op. 43: Variation 18 by Sergei Rachmaninoff, was performed by Vladimir Ashkenazy on piano with the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by André Previn.

ⁱ All music included in this podcast is made available for download under the terms of the PRS for Music Limited Online Music Licence number LE-0019067

ⁱⁱ Bible quotations are all taken from the New International Version, Anglicised Edition