



## Service for Personal or Private Use 28<sup>th</sup> June 2020

I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.  
I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me. Psalm 13:5, 6

*Before continuing with the service, think of one or two particular examples of how the Lord has dealt bountifully with you recently – and thank him.*

*Remind yourself that his unchanging love has brought you salvation: rejoice!*

**Hymn:** *When all thy mercies, O my God* (H&P 573, StF 97, MP 751)

### **Prayer:**

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, we bring to you a joyful song of praise. The glory of your creation may have caught our attention much more during these times of restriction – the beauty, the sounds, the acts of kindness; for everything that has reminded us of your goodness, your love and your care for us, we give you thanks.

As we think on these signs of your continuing love and care, so we also look back through the years. We value the fellowship of your church, its friendships, its love, its teaching, its encouragement, its prayerful support, and the example of those we looked up to and who commended the faith to us; especially we are thankful that through it we have come to know the love and grace revealed in Jesus Christ. There is forgiveness of our sins because he suffered and died. There is life in all its fullness because of his resurrection. There is power to live a holy life because of the gift of his Holy Spirit.

God of mercy, forgive us when we fail to notice the signs of your presence; when we fail to pay attention to your call; when we fail to draw on all the resources that you offer. Renew our hearts; refresh our spirits; restore to us the joy of your salvation; and all for the sake of Jesus Christ, your Son and our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

### **Bible Reading – Genesis 22 verses 1 to 14**

We will come back to this reading in a few minutes, but as you read it try to imagine the emotions of Abraham, then Isaac, and also the servants. Unlike you, they don't know how the story will end.

**Hymn:** *Master, speak! Thy servant heareth* (H&P 535 StF666, MP 459)

### **Bible Reading – Matthew 10 verses 40 to 42**

*“Whoever receives you receives me,” said Jesus. Do you find it disturbing or threatening that you bring the presence of Christ into every time you meet anybody? Or do you find it a privilege to be able to bring the presence of Christ to them? Pray that there shall be the touch of Christ each time you meet anyone – verse 42 promises a reward for them!*

**Reflection:** The story of Abraham being asked by God to sacrifice his son Isaac rightly makes us feel very uncomfortable. Every instinct reacts against the suggestion. It is no surprise that every generation has struggled with this story, because it bristles with problems. What was going on? Why did Abraham and Isaac set out like this? What purpose could there possibly be in including this story in our Bibles? *What do you think?*

Some people dismiss the story as legend. Others suggest that Abraham knew the customs of child-sacrifice, and felt that he should do the same. The suggestions are well-intentioned, but I think that

they miss the point of the story; I think they are trying to 'let God off the hook.' It's too easy to censor our Bible and leave out the bits that are difficult. (Mark Twain said, "It's not the bits of the Bible I don't understand that trouble me; it's the bits I do understand." He was right!) And the bits that one person finds difficult or even threatening someone else may have no difficulty with.

Another suggestion is that the Hebrew mind sees God as the ultimate agent of everything that happens. So in 1<sup>st</sup> Chronicles 21 God commands David to take a census, but in 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel 24 it is Satan who tempts him – and David is punished for his sin. That explanation is a convenient way of letting God go scot-free and shifting the blame onto Satan, but fails to take seriously God's clear call in verse 1.

One of the evidences of the wickedness of the people surrounding Israel was that they sacrificed their children to their gods. Israel was absolutely forbidden to copy them. There is a note of horror and disgust every time it is mentioned. So how could God command Abraham to do what he later forbids? Micah asks: "Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" He had understood correctly.

For Abraham there were extra considerations. His only son (see verse 2, which rubs it in) was so precious a gift from God. Long years he and Sarah had waited, until all hope was extinguished. "When hope seemed hopeless" is how the NEB describes them, in Romans 4:17. Yet this child had been promised decades back. Not only had God promised a son, and given him a name; he had promised that future generations of the world would be blessed through his descendants. Surely this would be impossible if Isaac was killed? There was another son, Ishmael. He was the son of Hagar, Sarah's Egyptian maid. Desperation over God's promise led them to this mistaken attempt to secure God's intention but not by God's ways. More than 3500 years of misery and conflict have settled on the Middle East because of that sin. Ishmael had been banished in the previous chapter: Isaac was the way God was going to bless – and now God is asking for him to be sacrificed! We must not overlook this extra factor in the problem.

Neither was Isaac naïve. He was old enough and strong enough to carry on his shoulders the wood on which the sacrifice would be burnt, and surely strong enough to resist his elderly father. He knew that sacrifice normally involved a lamb (verse 7). Although we are not told, it would be astonishing if he had not been brought up with the story of his birth and the covenant promises connected with him. He must have been puzzled about this too.

You and I are not tempted this way, at least, not on this scale. But parents have been known to push their children into all sorts of unsuitable careers to further the parents' ambitions rather than fulfil the child's potential. How many children have had their lives ruined by parental example of drug-addiction or crime? Listen at school gates and you will no longer be surprised at the obscenities their children come out with. King George V almost destroyed Prince Albert (George VI) by trying to 'cure' his left-handedness. Yes: child-sacrifice happens here today. We cannot evade this story by saying it happened long ago and far away.

**A Test of Obedience:** Doing what God commands is not always comfortable, not always convenient. We say it each year in our Covenant Service.

Christ has many services to be done:

some are easy, others are difficult;

some bring honour, others bring reproach;

some are suitable to our natural inclinations and material interests,

others are contrary to both;

in some we may please Christ and please ourselves;

in others we cannot please Christ except by denying ourselves.

We are not free to re-write the Maker's instructions, any more than actors can improve Shakespeare or musicians Beethoven. Because God knows the end from the beginning he will direct us along ways which may feel uncomfortable, but will ultimately bring us to the right destination.

How God spoke to Abraham we are not told, but Abraham was familiar enough with God to know who was speaking. It may have been in a dream, or as he was praying. Abraham was sufficiently sure that he knew he must obey.

In the gospels we read of a night when the disciples found themselves in a storm on Lake Galilee with the boat about to sink. They were only in that peril because they had followed Jesus's instructions. At that moment he was praying for them – just like he's praying for you and me now! (Hebrews 7:25) – and so he came directly to rescue them. Abraham did not know *how* God would solve the problem, but he obeyed.

*Think of some occasion when doing the right thing, obeying God, has proved costly. How did you react to that?*

**A Test of Trust:** One extra factor in the problem which I left till now is the commendation Abraham had received earlier, in chapter 15. "Abraham believed (trusted) God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." His trust, when everything seemed so improbable, had put him into the right sort of relationship with God. Could he, in these changed circumstances, still continue to trust God? Would God prove to be faithful, in the way that the Bible repeatedly says he is?

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century George Muller felt a strong call from God to rely entirely on God to answer prayer for material needs. At one time over 2000 orphans were housed, clothed, fed and educated in answer to prayer. In 1875 Muller was crossing the Atlantic to address a meeting in Quebec. The ship was becalmed in fog. He asked the captain about their progress, since in three days' time he was due in Quebec. The captain told him it was impossible. Muller replied that to God it was not impossible, and asked the captain to kneel why he prayed a simple prayer. The captain felt he ought to pray, but Muller stopped him, "First because you don't believe it, and second because God has already answered my prayer." He invited the captain to go on deck, and they saw the fog had cleared. Muller got to his meeting on time; and the captain, who told the story, became a believer.

Trust? There is a story of someone who was driving round the car park trying to find a space. He asked God to lead him to one, and a few moments later said to God, 'Don't worry, I've found one!'

When Abraham told his servants "we will come again to you," did he believe that God was going to create a solution? In Hebrews 11:19 we read that he believed God could raise the dead. Perhaps that's where he found faith. *Where has your faith come from?*

God provided a substitute, a ram that died in place of Isaac. No wonder that some Christian writers have seen a parallel with "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the earth."

**"Now I know that you fear God":** We knew the story would end with God intervening. He would not let Abraham do the deed. Surely, we ask, God knew all along the quality of Abraham's faith. His trust had been proven long before. But this was the moment when *Abraham* discovered for himself that God knew.

Did you notice in the gospel reading that Jesus assured us that the smallest deed would be noticed and it would find its reward? Did it remind you of the parable Jesus told of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25?

In the middle of his trials Job protested, “When God has tried me I shall come out as gold.” The fires may test us, but they will also refine us. (You can find it in Job 23:10, and in the New Testament in 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 1:6, 7)

*Would God say that to me?*

It’s all very well, you may say; God did act to stop Abraham. But it doesn’t always work out like that. Why does he not stop the Corona virus, especially when it takes a doctor or nurse, a carer or a needed parent? Where is he when abused children or battered wives scream out for help, or a black man gasps “I can’t breathe”? Did God promise us an easy journey, a life free from trouble? No. Did he promise a safe arrival? Yes.

And perhaps he turns the question back on us, to ask what we are willing to do about these issues, if we really trust his goodness, his love and his justice.

**Hymn:** *Trust and obey* (H&P 687, MP 760)

### **Prayer**

When I am puzzled about your ways, help me to trust.

When things don’t work out as I had expected, help me to trust.

When my plans are in conflict with your will, help me to trust.

When the call of Christ to some act of service makes great demands, help me to trust.

Lord, I don’t find it easy to recognize how you are calling, or where you are leading. I like to see the whole plan before I take the first step. I want to know the reasons behind your call. I call it wanting to be secure, and you tell me that the only security is in trusting you. I say I will trust where I see the way, but you tell me to put my hand in yours first of all.

I bring before you now some of those things that puzzle me, where I struggle to see how you are at work: the deaths and suffering caused by the Covid epidemic; the strains on personnel in the health service; the families denied the opportunity to grieve properly, or to find support; the disruption to children’s education; the injustices highlighted by the Black Lives Matter movement; the slavery that persists today as workers are exploited and women and children are trafficked.

If there had not been severe restrictions, today would have been the day of ordinations to the ministry. We pray for those who have answered the call to this form of service. May they, in spite of the absence of the usual recognition, still know the enabling power of the Holy Spirit as they seek to serve Christ and bear witness to his gospel of saving grace; for his name’s sake, Amen.

### **The Lord’s Prayer**

**Hymn:** *Lord of creation, to you be all praise!* (H&P 699, StF 449, MP 440)

*While our churches remain closed there are still bills to pay, and the Circuit Assessment to be met. We cannot take a collection, but your church treasurer will be pleased to receive a cheque (if you are able to send one) or to help you arrange a regular standing order payment.*

**The Grace** of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
the love of God,  
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,  
be with us all evermore.

Amen.