

Family service, 18th May 2025, North Marston and Granborough

By Peter Evans

Fifth Sunday of Easter

A new world order

Readings

Genesis 22: 1 - 18

Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!"

"Here I am," he replied.

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 I will show you."

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. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. 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."

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, 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?"

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

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. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!"

"Here I am," he replied.

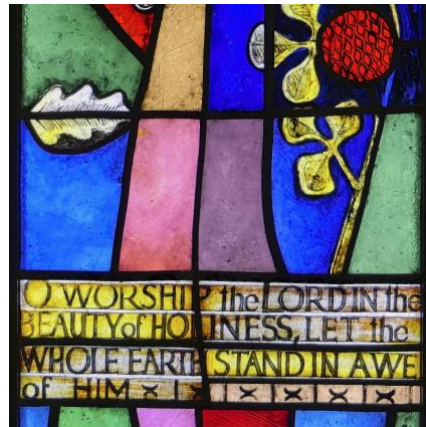
"Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son."

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. 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."

The angel of the Lord called to Abraham from heaven a second time and said, "I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, 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, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me."

Acts 11: 1 – 18

The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him and said, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them."



Starting from the beginning, Peter told them the whole story: "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was. I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles and birds. Then I heard a voice telling me, 'Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.'

"I replied, 'Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.'

"The voice spoke from heaven a second time, 'Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.' This happened three times, and then it was all pulled up to heaven again.

"Right then three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying. The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered the man's house. He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.'

"As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. Then I remembered what the Lord had said: 'John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.' So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?"

When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life."

The Talk

When I was a little boy, maybe three or four, my grandparents had an embroidery on their wall depicting the sacrifice of Isaac. It was antique, maybe late 18th century, and do you know what – it scared me witless. I really didn't like it. I couldn't understand why grownups would have this picture on their wall. It wasn't that I thought that my dad would do something like this to me – far from it – and that thought never even crossed my mind.

It was just the pure abhorrence to what could be seen in the picture – it was just horrible.

So I come to this story with some real personal baggage as a traumatized three year old. After my grandparents died, the picture went to my aunt. However, when she died, it went to her son, my cousin, who definitely didn't want it, and about 25 years ago it came to Granborough and got hung on the wall. I was unsure about doing this, but aside from the childhood trauma, it reminded me of my grandparents, who were lovely.

For better or worse, and you can read into this whatever you like, about twenty years ago, the picture fell from the wall and met its end on the floor some ten feet below. After maybe 250 years, its next stop was the dustbin.

So if this story of Abraham and Isaac disturbs you, then you are not alone. Regarding its meaning, the internet is awash with speculation and counter speculation. There is no real consensus on how to interpret this passage, and in my view, much of it is speculative theology.

With that in mind, hopefully, we will be able to shed some light on this story and why it gets paired with the reading we heard from Acts chapter 11.

So what do we know about Abraham. Firstly, he was originally called Abram, and God changed his name. His wife was called Sarah, and she could not have children. Abraham has a

son, Ishmael, through his Egyptian servant girl, Hagar. But for complex reasons, Ishmael could not be considered a true heir.

Through God's promise, very late in life, Sarah gives birth to Isaac.

We think of Abraham as holy and indeed he is described in the bible as a prophet. We often talk about God's covenant with Abraham, but God actually makes three covenants with Abraham.

Genesis 12 – the promise of blessings to be the father of a great nation

Genesis 15 – the covenant of the land given to his descendants

Genesis 17 – the covenant of circumcision - the creation of God's chosen people

They are not talking about the same thing. For example, God eventually agrees to bring Ishmael under His blessing, and so the first two apply to more than the Jewish people.

And Abraham is rich, a very successful nomadic trader. And powerful. He has a small private army, for security, but which also gets used to rescue Lot from capture – Genesis says that he used 318 men in that raid.

But is he holy? Well God certainly calls him to be blameless. But we don't actually know that much about him in this context.

We know that he's prone to lying – twice he claims that Sarah is his sister and seriously upsets both Pharaoh and a local king with his deceit. And even more interestingly, he deceives by telling the truth – and as always with such things, it's what doesn't get said that completes the deception.

He does build a couple of altars to the Lord God as he makes his nomadic journeys, and calls upon the name of the Lord from these places.

As we read about God's contacts with Abraham, we get a varied picture. Sometimes, Abraham hears God in a dream, sometimes he hears His voice, and at other times, God seems to be physically present, like they have just bumped into each other at the garden centre, quite casually.

But we know nothing of how Abraham thought he was supposed to live his life. And this is because this is an awfully long time ago. There are no ten commandments. There are no teachings of Jesus. There is no chosen people of God. This is all right at the very beginning.

In Genesis, before Abraham, we have the story of creation, Adam and Eve and the fall of humanity, Cain and Abel, Noah and the flood, and then the Tower of Babel. And that's it.

So when God chooses Abraham, this is right at the beginning of God's restoration plan for humanity, to rebuild that relationship that was destroyed in the Garden of Eden.

Abraham lived around 3800 years ago. Some civilisations had emerged by this time – the Egyptians had got it sussed, but ancient Greece was a long way off, and the peak of the Roman empire is nearer in time to us than it was to Abraham.

And to understand this passage, we need to understand a little about the culture of the time.

So just imagine that God asks the same question of you. I don't even need to do a show of hands to see how many of you would say yes. Because the answer would be 100% no, and we would all choose our first born sons in front of obeying a God, whom by the very act of asking, has shown himself to be mean and capricious. Not much of the loving God on display. In fact, with what we do know of God, we would assume we were smoking dope or hallucinating. None of it adds up and we would all say no. Without hesitation. And as we know that God is not mean and capricious, then there has to be another explanation.

So why did Abraham say yes, without asking for a reason from God, and without hesitating? It's not like Abraham was afraid to argue with God. In Genesis 18 he negotiates with God repeatedly to spare Sodom and Gomorrah from destruction. But here, Abraham says nothing. Just gets on and does it.

This says a couple of things about Abraham. Firstly, that he did not really understand the character of God. And secondly, that he lived in a culture where child sacrifice happened. It was not common, but it happened. There was a belief that children were sacrificed to return power to the gods. So a part of Abraham might well have been expecting this. He doesn't really know God, and other gods "demanded" the same.

That's not to say that Abraham would have done this willingly and with a happy heart, not at all. The closest analogy I can think of today is we get a summons for a large tax bill. We don't want to do it, but we know that we have got to pay up.

God wants to know about Abraham's priorities in life, whether He, the Lord God is really the most important thing for Abraham. And so God asks Abraham to do something where the cost is high, but the request is not unexpected. Most likely, it would have always been there at the back of Abraham's mind. It would have been there in neighbouring cultures, and at this stage, Abraham would most likely not know that the Lord God Almighty was any different.

Of course, God had no intention of letting Abraham go through with it. And as the story tells us, an angel intervenes and a ram is found for the sacrifice.

But the real question is this – why do we have this story and what can we learn from it?

Simplistically, we can see that God provides to meet our needs. And indeed, Abraham names the place "The Lord will provide". And with a bit of retrofitting, some commentators take it as reference to Jesus's sacrifice for us. But I think there is a far more important one.

This is God making it clear that human sacrifice, child sacrifice, has no place in his worship. He takes an accepted cultural norm and shuts it down. From this time forward, only animal sacrifice will have any place, as an offering and an atonement for sins.

This is a new world order. I think, this is one of the very first interventions by God into human society where he tells us what is right and wrong. That is really significant.

Before this, we see some of God's character in the creation story. And we also know what God does not like – murder, wickedness, arrogance. But this is the start of where God begins to lay out his principles. And it happens at a time where God has laid the foundations for His chosen people.

In one very real sense, it is the beginning of a new world order. God is starting to re-engage with His creation.

So, what on earth does this have to do with the second reading that we had from Acts 11. Well, this too, is the beginning of another new world order.

Peter and Paul, the apostles, have been engaged in a long running argument about whether the gospel of salvation is for just the Jews, ie God's chosen people, coming from the third covenant with Abraham, or for everyone – the Gentiles. Peter was very much of the traditional conservative view – Jesus was just for the Jews – and he was not a lone outlier in this – there would have been thousands of early Christians at this time who had the same point of view. Afterall, they had spent their entire lives being told what was right and what was wrong, what was clean and what was unclean, what they could and could not eat.

And then Peter has his vision in Acts chapter 10, which he recounts again in our reading.

Firstly, to put this in context, he is staying with Simon the tanner. For avoidance of doubt – being a tanner was an unclean job. Very, very unclean. And very, very smelly. Really. Not just a whiffy pong. But an absolute stink. And so when Simon got home from work, he would have had to ritually cleanse himself, as well as physically clean himself up.

To be honest, Peter was taking a bit of a risk staying at a place like this. He could easily have tripped up and become unclean by association.

And then he has his dream. The dream of sheet being lowered full of unclean things to eat. And God says eat. Peter argues of course, but God wins and Acts chapter 10 is why we can eat bacon.

But there is more. When he wakes up from the dream, foundations rocked, he gets invited to visit Cornelius, the Roman officer. Cornelius is a gentile. And as Peter himself says when he gets there:

“You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean. ²⁹ So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?”

Foundations rocked again. First the food laws and now visiting the house of a gentile!

But uncomfortable as this would have been for Peter, it changes the course of human history. Peter and Paul now agree – the gospel is for everyone, gentiles included.

Chapter 11 is just about managing the fall out. Peter is called to give an account of his actions by other Christians of Jewish heritage.

“You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.” You did what!!!! – they might well have asked. But they are persuaded after he retells his vision of the sheet to them.

Peter's vision and actions change the course of human history.

This is a new world order. The covenant of circumcision which God makes with Abraham in Genesis chapter 17 has run its course and come to an end. God's plan has worked its way through and there is now salvation at hand and it is for the whole of humanity. The gospel can be taken to the gentiles.

In many ways, this is fascinating stuff. The start of God's giving of laws by which to live. The revelation that the gospel is for everyone. It meant a great deal to Abraham and Peter – life changing moments.

But what about for us? If we leave it here, then it's perfectly reasonable to ask "so what". A touch on the academic side maybe. Certainly, it may help us understand our faith a bit better, but there has to be more to it. And of course there is. It wouldn't be a sermon if there wasn't. It would just be a lecture. And where's the fun in that?

These passages, amongst many others, teach us that God has a plan. Not just a big overall plan. But a plan for us too. Because Abraham and Peter were people just like us. God had a plan for them, and God has a plan for us too. Just because ours isn't in the bible doesn't mean it's not just as real.

And God's plan for us is – A new world order – but for us personally – and equally as life changing.

Because His plan for us is to meet Jesus. In a life changing way.

Being a Christian isn't just about following a moral code, a set of rules which happen to be the best way to live life. In fact, I'm not even sure it's about following a moral code at all – that ought to be just a side effect of being a Christian.

Being a Christian is about being forgiven for our sins and being made right with God. And as we come to God, we can get to know Him. We get to know Him as Jesus – God's expression of Himself in human form.

This is life changing. This is a new world order on a very personal scale.

When we come to Jesus, our lives do change. Our lives before and after are different. We cannot be the same after we meet Jesus. Not may not, but cannot. Because meeting God in Jesus changes us.

But I know I cannot leave it there. Because if I do, half us are going to feel like failures and the other half will be wondering what on earth I'm talking about.

It is true, for some people, change happens very quickly. They can look back at a "before and after" life changing event. For others, that too may have happened but it's now lost in the mists of time. But for others, many others, perhaps even most of us, the new world order is harder to see.

But hard to see or not, I am certain that God is slowly but surely, changing us all. Changing us with little nudges to be more like Jesus.

And there is a nice theological word that describes this. It's sanctification. Being made holy.

And this goes right back to Abraham when God starts to roll out his redemption plan for the human race.

In Genesis 17 and verse 1, God says to Abraham "I am God almighty, walk before me and be blameless". That last word in Hebrew can mean either blameless or unblemished. Without fault. Having integrity. Being innocent. Complete. It is far, far more than simply not being at fault. In summary, God is requiring Abraham to be holy.

This is the journey of sanctification. Little by little, God nudges us. Day by day, month by month, year by year. Little nudges that change who we are, that move us a little closer to God. We change.

And this is one of the great blessings of being a Christian. God is working in our lives.

I became a Christian 49 years ago. Scary stuff. For me, it was a step change. A change in the direction of my life. And hard as it may seem to believe, I didn't become perfect overnight. That's still a work in progress.

But seriously, I do think that God has been working in my life, changing me slowly into a more Christ like person. I would not want to go back to being my 16 year old self again. The only thing I would swap with my younger self would be my body. The rest of my current life I would keep.

When we come to Christ, a new world order begins. God starts to work in us – to change us. We meet God as Jesus and start to get to know him.

I know it's a cliché to describe this as a journey, but thank goodness that it is. Because knowing that we are on that journey gives us hope on so many levels.

We know that God is working in us. We know that as He does, we get to know him better and better. We are more blessed as years go by – blessed not as the world measures blessings, but blessed with what really matters.

We have seen how God touched Abraham and started something new. We have seen how God intervened directly in Peter's life and changed the course of history. My hope and prayer is that we let Him do the same with us.

Amen.