

Each first reading in Lent in this Year B of the three year cycle relates to a Covenant, a solemn agreement God made in the history of his people, with his people. Last week we had part of the story of Noah and the flood. With Noah and his family restored to dry land, God made a covenant with Noah and the world that he would never destroy it again. The rainbow, seen after the rain, was the abiding sign of God's commitment to God's creation.

Later, as the Bible passes from the pre-historic stories of the ancient ancestors to a figure more imaginable in history, God makes a covenant with Abram Its sign is circumcision; recognised by many of the Semitic peoples as a health insurance. Today we hear the story of Abraham keeping his side of the covenantal bargain. God has promised to be faithful to his people and so Abraham must keep faith with God and that means doing whatever God commands. Even when God asks the unreasonable. Even when God appears monstrous in his demands.

In fairness the sacred author at the outset of the story alerts us to this being a test for Abraham. We can therefore be assured that God does not intend the death of Isaac. But we are tested too, in maintaining faith in a God who can allow his faithful servant to go through such an ordeal.

The Rabbis, in the belief that we share, that these words are the inspired Word of God, which communicate to us God's sacred purpose, poured over the text to ask questions of it, and seek for it to reveal further secrets of God's inscrutable purpose. Few texts can have been examined so minutely, so repeatedly as this text; known to Jews as the *Acceda*, the Binding of Isaac.

God asks politely. "Please", he says, "Take, your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac." But Abraham has two sons. When Abraham is introduced to us we also meet Sarai /Sarah, his wife and we immediately learn that she is barren. This sets up the question: who will inherit the promise of God made to Abraham that he will have as many descendants as the stars in the heavens and the grains of sand on the sea-shore. A promise made when the covenant is established. Much of Abraham's story concerns the answer to this question. Finally, when Abram is one hundred and Sarah ninety, Isaac is born to them. But in desperation Sarah had given her servant girl Hagar to Abraham to have a child by her for Sarah. Hagar had duly given birth to Ishmael. But both mother and son were driven away when Sarah felt jealous for her son Isaac. Abraham clearly loves both his sons.

This fact, that Abraham is twice a father, led to a *Midrash*, an interpretation of the text, which imagined a conversation between God and Abraham, highlighting the difficulty of what Abraham was being asked to do:

"Please take you son", says God. "I have two sons", replies Abraham.

"Your only one," continues God. "This one is an only son to his mother," Abraham

replied, "And this one is an only son to his mother."

"Whom you love," says God. "I love both of them," replies Abraham.

"Isaac!" says God.

"Go where I shall tell you." God's command echoes his earlier instruction for Abraham to leave his father's house and homeland to go, who knows where. Then the prospect was full of hope. Now the future is dark with dread.

The Rabbis poured over the text, seeking every morsel of meaning; and asked questions on matters about which the text is silent. How old is Isaac? Did he comply with his father or resist? Some of these questions we will pick up when we next hear the *Acceda* at the Easter Vigil. But let us ponder one question which only our imaginations can resolve; but upon which the text itself by its silence invites reflection.

Where is Sarah? She plays no part in the story. Has she not got an interest in what is going on? She has waited unfulfilled, disgraced until she was ninety, before the joy and fulfilment of motherhood was her's. She is not asked about God's command. She is not consulted about her husband's response. And we can easily imagine her reaction if her opinion had been sought.

Tellingly, when Abraham returns from the ordeal we are told he dwelt in Beersheba. The next we hear of Sarah is her death in Kiriatharba, Hebron. It seems that that Abraham and Sarah never met, never spoke again. Could he not face his wife? Did she reject him and have nothing to do with him henceforth? The Bible invites the questions but gives no answers.

Sarah is, in a way, the victim of this episode. Isaac survives. Sarah does not. The next time we hear of her she is dead and Abraham is arranging to buy, expensively, a cave which will be the family mausoleum. It is at Mamre, a place of happy memories for the first matriarch – it was at Mamre that God promised her a child within the year; it was there that great promises of land and descendants were promised.

History, and salvation history has many victims who pass unnoticed, in silence. Sarah speaks hardly at all in the story. And many times the silent, unnoticed victims are women.

Bit what of God? This episode may have been an attack on the practice of infant sacrifice, insisting this is not what God wants. But it still leaves questions to be asked which are impossible to answer. So many times we have to trust in God when, to all appearances, God is capricious or cruel. We have to keep in mind Paul's words, "God did not spare his own son".