

## Abraham Assembly

A few weeks ago, in response to the attack on Paris, I spoke to you all about the moral grey area that IS hate and that I encouraged you to cherish. I think I will return to the idea this morning, trying to say a little more about what I mean, using a vitally important figure to each of the significant religions of the Middle East. The founding father of the “Religions of the Book” – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is Abraham. He appears in the first chapters of the Bible, in Genesis. There are two stories about Abraham, which appear just pages away from each other, which seem to me to offer a very powerful and complex view of religion and the relationship between man and God – and offer an insight into ‘the grey area’. The first story concerns the two cities of the plain, Sodom and Gomorrah. They have been judged by God for the bad behaviour of their citizens and are to be destroyed. Abraham, who has followed God unquestioningly up to this point, now does something astonishing. Let us hear the story as it is told in chapter 18 of Genesis:

The men turned away, but Abraham remained standing before the LORD. Then Abraham approached him and said: "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

The LORD said, "If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake."

Then Abraham spoke up again: "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes, what if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city because of five people?"

"If I find forty-five there," he said, "I will not destroy it."

Once again he spoke to him, "What if only forty are found there?"

He said, "For the sake of forty, I will not do it."

Then he said, "May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak. What if only thirty can be found there?"

He answered, "I will not do it if I find thirty there."

Abraham said, "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, what if only twenty can be found there?"

He said, "For the sake of twenty, I will not destroy it."

Then he said, "May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more.

What if only ten can be found there?"

He answered, "For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it."

When the LORD had finished speaking with Abraham, he left, and Abraham returned home.

(Genesis 18:26-33)

I find this interesting for several reasons. The first is Abraham's concern for all humanity. His concern for the innocents of the city is not concern for his friends and neighbours, it is a concern for innocents everywhere. To stand up to God could have cost Abraham his life, yet he is prepared to risk it for people he has not met and does not know.

The second is that Abraham dares to challenge God on what is right. He reminds the King of Kings that He is about to break moral law. It is obvious that Abraham is scared – his words are those of a servant addressing his master. But he is prepared to tell God that he is about to do a bad thing. It is astonishing that the Bible shows that God is prepared to be persuaded about what is right by a human.

The third important point is that Abraham shows us that moral decisions are not decisions made once and for all. They are seldom absolute – distinctions matter. Numbers matter. Gradations matter – the bargaining comes out of the marketplace, but the mind is that of a moralist. Abraham gets God to think about small differences and that changes God's mind.

Finally, Abraham's need to for the right thing to happen – his desire for a moral outcome overrode his desire for self-protection. He was prepared to risk his life so good instead of bad would happen.

The message here is that there is a place for reason, for negotiation and for doubt in religion. This is no absolutist God, demanding total obedience. This is a *relationship* between God and man that – between them - allows the best outcome to emerge.

Of course that is not the whole picture. The Bible is too rich and thoughtful for that. Just a few pages later, we find the story that Abraham is most famously associated with. In this story, Abraham is ordered by God to take his only son, Isaac, and offer him as a sacrifice to God. Here, Abraham did not say a word: he took his son and set off to do the deed. What are we to make of this? This story appears to tell us to submit to God's demands, however outrageous they appear to be. The other urges us to question.

In the first story, Abraham risked his life to give God a lesson in ethics; in the second, he is unhesitatingly prepared to kill his only, much loved son. That second story is far better known and has had an immense impact upon the world.

For Christians, Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son points towards God's willingness to sacrifice his own son, Jesus. For Muslims, the willingness is so fundamental that Ishmael, the forebear of Islam, rather than Isaac, is portrayed as the intended victim. Jews in the Middle Ages, facing murderous crusaders, took courage from the story and slaughtered themselves and their children to escape forced conversion. It is clear that it is Abraham's unquestioning

readiness to sacrifice the thing he most loves when God calls for it that qualifies him to be the father of Judaism, Christianity and Islam – religions followed by 3.7 billion people today.

So what are we to make of this mystery? Should we challenge God, or follow him unquestioningly? Should we rely upon our own reason and moral sense, or should we simply follow what we think are God's commands? Is there room for flexibility in moral decisions or are they absolute?

Well, it seems to me that the message is that both are true for Abraham. The Bible is big enough for both views and both views, although seemingly incompatible, can be held and acted upon by the same man.

And finally, perhaps an answer is in the opening words of the story where Abraham is called to sacrifice Isaac. The Bible, depending on the translation, says that when God asked Abraham to kill his son, he was “tempting” or “testing” him. The words “tempt” and “test” are interesting. Is Abraham being tempted to disobey God or tempted to do something that God would not really want? How is he being tested? After all, God does not allow Abraham to go through with the killing. For the pagans of the time, who practised human sacrifice on a regular basis, the really surprising thing about the story was that God stopped the sacrifice. When I discussed this with Father Bond, his insight was that God did not want Abraham to kill his son – he wanted Abraham to refuse – and when Abraham got the wrong end of the stick and tried to go ahead with the sacrifice, God had to intervene to make the right thing happen. The final command from on high was for mercy. That is a thought that should reassure us, and challenge those who would wish to become killers in the name of God.

And that is the most important message of all to take for the stories associated with Abraham. In both cases – once by negotiation, once by submission, he contrived to work with God for a merciful solution. These stories tell us that mercy can be found from God in any number of different ways, provided we can stay in ‘the grey area’, and provided we are willing to keep talking to him.