

3 Bible Studies delivered to the Diocesan Leaders' Conference (Anglican Diocese of Newcastle) between 4-6th May 2010.

Tuesday - Genesis 22:1-18

Thank you for your vote of confidence and trust in asking me to lead three Bible Studies. I'm always chary of these activities since a colleague described them as times when "we meet, pool our ignorance and then blame it on the Holy Spirit". He was principally referring to those occasions when, to break into computer language, we resort to default settings (often learned in confirmation classes or Sunday school), jettison our learned skills and then pontificate. I will endeavour to avoid this tendency.

The three studies share a format: they are based essentially each on a difficult or neglected passage. They are not restricted to these passages or examined in isolation, because it is in exploring further these passages, through the lenses of other Scriptural traditions that we gain insight and find that even those passages that we are tempted to jump over have something of significance to say. None of the passages are unfamiliar: they all surface in the lectionary. Nonetheless, our attention varies and at times, we do not read with the detail that we should and our behaviour echoes the monk in Monty Python's "Holy Grail" who exhorts the reader from the Book of Armaments (sadly missing even from my copy of the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha) to "skip a bit, brother".

It's also worth pointing out that each study ends with a number of questions.

I must confess my own cheerful nature tends to mean a focus on the more depressing questions, or the shadow side. I once managed to finish off an Ultreya of happy Cursillistas by suggesting that we might spend our time more profitably exploring the times when we felt furthest from God than those when we felt closest. It was not a suggestion that was appropriate for the occasion...

Yet, I find that the business of preparing bible studies often makes me face up to aspects of my own behaviour or temptations which are uncomfortable to

admit. Nonetheless, I hold that any true pilgrim needs to confront their inner demons as well as noting them in the Scriptural stories. Bible study which provokes a response of "Oh, that's interesting...." fails to do justice to the Bible as a text for transformation. I have found doing the preparation for these studies transforming and troubling. The questions that finish each study are those which I find the Spirit (see, pooling my ignorance and blaming it on the Spirit already) prompts me to explore as part of my inner pilgrimage. It may be that these are questions which are helpful for you, I hope so. If not, you can use the time constructively to find your own questions. However, in all this there is one key thing to remember: the questions are there for each one of us to ask of ourselves, as Anthony de Mello once wrote, not to apply to anyone else.....

Genesis 22:1-18

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' He said, 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt-offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.' So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt-offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. Then Abraham said to his young men, 'Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you.' Abraham took the wood of the burnt-offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. Isaac said to his father Abraham, 'Father!' And he said, 'Here I am, my son.' He said, 'The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt-offering?' Abraham said, 'God himself

will provide the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son.' So the two of them walked on together.

When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, 'Abraham, Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' He said, 'Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.' And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt-offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place 'The Lord will provide'; as it is said to this day, 'On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.'

The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, 'By myself I have sworn, says the Lord: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.' So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beer-sheba; and Abraham lived at Beer-sheba. (NRSV)

This is the most familiar of the three texts which we will look at. As I get older, and as paternity has become more a part of my life, it has appeared more and more bizarre. What parent will be ready to sacrifice their own child? And what amateur biologist, even from ancient Israel, will think that he can

guarantee a succession for generations to come by slaughtering the first one?
It just doesn't make sense....Of course, the story gets even grimmer if we take
Leonard Cohen's approach and look at the whole bizarre event through the
eyes of Isaac.....

The door it opened slowly,
My father he came in,
I was nine years old.
And he stood so tall above me,
His blue eyes they were shining
And his voice was very cold.
He said, I've had a vision
And you know I'm strong and holy,
I must do what I've been told.
So he started up the mountain,
I was running, he was walking,
And his axe was made of gold.

Well, the trees they got much smaller,
The lake a lady's mirror,
We stopped to drink some wine.
Then he threw the bottle over.
Broke a minute later
And he put his hand on mine.
Thought I saw an eagle
But it might have been a vulture,
I never could decide.
Then my father built an altar,
He looked once behind his shoulder,
He knew I would not hide.

You who build these altars now
To sacrifice these children,
You must not do it anymore.
A scheme is not a vision
And you never have been tempted
By a demon or a god.
You who stand above them now,
Your hatchets blunt and bloody,
You were not there before,
When I lay upon a mountain
And my father's hand was trembling
With the beauty of the word.

And if you call me brother now,
Forgive me if I inquire,
Just according to whose plan?
When it all comes down to dust
I will kill you if I must,
I will help you if I can.
When it all comes down to dust
I will help you if I must,
I will kill you if I can.
And mercy on our uniform,
Man of peace or man of war,
The peacock spreads his fan.

Here the story becomes a plea for one generation not to exploit another at best, and at worst a grim prediction of intergenerational abuse and conflict. Yet something tells me that there must be something more positive going on here. To cast Abraham, the patriarch of three major faiths, as having nothing more to offer than an example of dysfunctional parenting simply will not wash. Experience suggests that humanity would not have stuck with what is

on offer here if that was all it was. Maybe this is a failure on my part to be a Marxist revisionist, but this role model would only be opium for a mass of masochists). Maybe it's a sign of my belief in a hermeneutics of trust rather than one of suspicion. So, can I find something more upbeat and edifying in this story for us?

Many have, through a typological reading of this story, indeed found something more here. For then the story of a Father and a Son becomes an antitype of God's giving of His own Son for the good of others. Its one of those *ab minore ad maiorem* arguments so beloved of the writers or interpreters of Scripture: what God does not ask of Abraham and Isaac, he does himself. God does more than he asks of us...This may even be further sweetened by reflections of this as the activity of a Triune God, but I will swiftly gloss over that observation as there is, I believe, something more fundamental at issue here.

To deal with this entails a shift from typological approach or a *sensus plenior* reading, to narrative interpretation.

I say this with a somewhat heavy heart, because narrative criticism is a mixed blessing. You will be familiar with that famous Anglican, Samuel Johnson and his dictum that "patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel". This can be the case with narrative criticism. It is easy to engage in narrative criticism because it is quick, fast and yields results which resonate with our own circumstance, especially when narrative criticism slips away into reader-response criticism which is often unconsciously adopted in our reading of a text (what is in it for me/us?). But Richard Horsley let rip at "easy" narrative criticism when he said firstly that narrative criticism has a tendency to sever the text from its "historical social context", read it in a vacuum, and finally, in reader-response criticism,:

historical knowledge of the biblical world is unnecessary for reading New Testament texts and the reading pre-supposes no previous knowledge of the stories or teachings (which fits the acute biblical illiteracy of students in our classrooms).

There may well be clues in the text. But the reader is now the hero/ine who adventures into uncharted territory of the story where s/he wrestles with confusions and wrests intelligible meaning from the enigmas of plot and subplots. The fact that this approach to literature...so quickly became popular in the United States might make one suspicious that it has an “elected affinity” (Weber) with American educated middle-class culture.

In short, criticism which does not recognise the historical setting of a text is liable to end up merely seeing its own reflection in any text which is read. Such critical theory runs the risk of providing a dangerous and spurious justification for the bad practice which has infected the NT quest for the historical Jesus: of effectively looking down a well and seeing not Jesus, but only one's own reflection (Tyrrell).

I will try to avoid the pitfalls identified by suggesting that we look first at the context of our text which is, of course, different from its historical placing in the patriarchal period. What is the date of the text? Historical criticism has vacillated between an early date (source critics and the Elohist tradition) and a post-exilic date. However, much of the evidence for a post-exilic date is contentious, and a pre-exilic date remains a possibility. After debating the pros and cons of a late date, E. Noort proposes the following scenario for the Abraham story:

- 1) The story is dated in the late 8th or 7th centuries BC
- 2) It is an era of history which would see the story bracketed with northern prophets like Hosea.
- 3) it is an era in which there is a struggle for the future of Israel in which the role of God in the midst of assaults by the Assyrians must be re-assessed.
- 4) It is an era which sees the question raised as never before: will Judah survive? This differs from post-exilic datings which would see the text as essentially about how to reconstruct the nation. Nothing less than the future is at stake.

So, this is a story which speaks to a people in crisis. As Noort writes:

The story about Abraham and his child of promise, who at the last moment is not sacrificed, is a tale about a deadly threat and a rescue from it. It is the deeply reflective story of a God who threatens to draw back everything he has promised, who threatens to destroy the future. Isaac is not only the son, he is the embodied promise. All the stories of the Abraham cycle deal with the problems of future and progeny. At this zero hour, every future seems to be stopped suddenly. It is a story showing the dark face of God. At the same time it is the tale of Abraham, who starts his travel to a land of no return. But this land proves to be the mountain where he not only gets his son back, but the land also proves to be a **מקום** which he gives a name, demonstrating the beneficial act of YHWH. (Noort 2002, 19)

The people in crisis also know the story in a way which Abraham does not, and so it is ambivalent for them. The reader knows this is a test from God (flagged in the opening verses); the reader also knows that the sacrifice implied by the test will never, in fact, be demanded. None of Abraham, Isaac or Judah will fall into the hands of anyone but the God who gives life in the future. Abraham abandons trust in everything, even his physical progeny, as a means of hope for the future. In trusting in God alone, he finds the future. He abandons hope for the future in anything earthly, even the child of promise, and trusts solely to the living God. In so doing, he receives the promises of God. Similar sentiments are found in Hosea 11:8-9:

How can I give you up, Ephraim?
 How can I hand you over, O Israel?
 How can I make you like Admah?
 How can I treat you like Zeboiim?
 My heart recoils within me;
 my compassion grows warm and tender.
 I will not execute my fierce anger;
 I will not again destroy Ephraim;

**for I am God and no mortal,
the Holy One in your midst,
and I will not come in wrath.**

So, this becomes a story which is not ultimately about child-sacrifice, or inter-generational strife, but about God. It is a picture of shadows and light, for do we not need a mixture of shadow and light to see and discern? It takes a horrifying theme, child sacrifice, which shows apparent desertion and death, yet from that scenario of despair brings out a message of trust in the faithfulness of God. That which appeared to offer only destruction will in fact see God's people given his promises. It is a theme on which we do well to dwell as leaders with confidence and trust in the one who called us, when all the future seems to offer is destruction and uncertainty.

One last feature of the story is worth considering. Abraham is praised for "fearing God". But what exactly does this phrase mean? Many of us, at some point in our spiritual journeys, become afraid: of breaking commandments, of breaking with tradition, afraid of God and afraid of his judgment. This passage seems to endorse fear as a solid basis for a relationship with God. But does it? Again, it is useful to consider the passage in its historical context rather than as some a-historical guide to the psychology of belief. Critics who have placed the book at a late date have pointed out that "fear of God" (the object is crucial) has a particular frame of meaning in the later Deuteronomic and Wisdom literature: "fear of God" is synonymous with keeping God's commandments and walking in the ways of righteousness (Prov 14:2). It is the result of hearing and learning God's word (Deut 4:10). The important thing for those of a fearful disposition is that "fear of God" has nothing to do with a visceral emotion. That fearful emotion is the result of sin and a lack of obedience. In the chronological biblical narrative, fear is the result of Adam and Eve's disobedience. They hid because they were afraid (Gen 3:10). But, you may say, what if Genesis 22 comes from that pre-exilic and pre-

Deuteronomic period? Might this claim be an anachronism? Might not “fear of God” be a visceral emotion in an earlier period? There’s one little verse tucked away which suggests otherwise. At the beginning of Exodus the Hebrew women who save the lives of Hebrew boys are described as “God-fearing” women (Exodus 1:17). They take a deadly risk on behalf of God: “God-fearing” is not about fear, but courage based on faith in God. So when Abraham is praised for “fearing God”, it is not perversely, fear that the writer and the audience will be prompted to adopt, but courage. And, it is so with us. In times of crisis, we are not called to become fearful, but courageous and full of trust. If we look further afield we will see this motif played out time and time again in the book of revelation, where scenes of apocalyptic horror and destruction invariably contain a reference to the way in which, no matter how grim it gets, God will preserve and rescue his faithful people.

So, let us reflect briefly, just in case the imminent hope of the tea-trolley has just roused us from what the Kantians call “dogmatic slumber” on this story of the sacrifice, or rather non-sacrifice of Isaac. It is not primarily about intergenerational strife. Leonard Cohen is guilty, I’m afraid, of that reader-response criticism so decried by Richard Horsley, which quickly cuts the text to find a meaning that resonates solely with the reader’s context. It’s not a psychological myth for us to tear apart either (which is how some might take Cohen’s reading). A better contextual approach hears the text set in history and then reflects on what that means for us. And what do we find? A story written to the people of God, which casts long dark shadows and admits as real their fear of loss and death; a story which, like the Northern prophets, takes that sense of dread and says, “It will not come to pass. Look at the record in history: we are here still as God’s people, because in those dread times, God was faithful. We are here as proof of that”. All seemed loss, but God turned that loss into new life.

It is not enough for us to stop with that historical meaning: the renaissance in biblical studies being demanded by biblical scholars particularly from the

global south (to use a term which actually makes little sense when uttered on one of the most southerly continents) demands that each one of us remember this text for our own times of crisis and apply it accordingly.

Here I stop: I can point this out to you, but cannot and must not do it for you. I can ask any of you to identify what you might be trusting in: people, things, institutions, church, money, power, or whatever has become your talisman of hope, your Isaac, but I cannot tell you what it is. But I can, like our writer of Genesis, say to you, "Times may be dark, the end may seem nigh, but God has made promises to us- and he will not break them". That's what this episode is for. For that crisis point when, like Abraham, or the people of Judah, we see only the shadows around us and feel that the darkness, of the soul, of society, of loss, of whatever, will swallow us up. And then this text rings out a message of courage and confidence, of faith in God alone.

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Wednesday - 1 Samuel 15

When I first started to contemplate a vocation to ordained ministry, I thought it would be a good idea to test out how I might cope with the promise to say the Daily Office. I got a copy of the old Scottish 1929 Prayer Book and used the lectionary in it. Some of you will remember the old lectionary which made sure you read the whole of both Testaments (give or take some of the juicier bits of Ezekiel and the more ritual bits of the Torah) in a year. Every summer, in the dog days after trinity, the historical books would make an appearance. I struggled with these at first, ploughing through (as I thought of it) the succession of kings, getting hopelessly lost between kings of Israel and kings of Judah, failing completely to see who was where and when, and so on. I often wondered what the point of it all was. Partly this was because I approached Scripture looking for something edifying- and often there wasn't much edification to be had. As years went on, I began to see things in a more positive light.

First, the idea of salvation history was helpful, so that one could sit back from the details and get a bit of a warm glow from the thought that somehow it would all come good in the end.

Then, a more cynical yet helpful insight, that perhaps, some of these stories were there to tell us what NOT to do got me back into the details of the story again. The pattern of Deuteronomic history began to emerge, with its insistent refrains, illustrated by the imploding kings of Israel and Judah, that one always had to be ready to choose life or death, and that those choices have consequences. But, when all is said and done, these historical books tend to be secondary texts. It's very rare to find someone, when asked, which passages of Scripture are of prime significance to them, who reels off chapter and verse from the historical literature of the Old Testament.

Despite all this, I have found myself drawn to reconsider the significance of 1 Samuel 15. The prime reason for this goes back to that theme of fear which I touched on at the end of yesterday's study. 1 Samuel 15 seems to me to have much to say about fear. Yet this is not immediately obvious, the modern eye is liable to have been repelled by the violence of the text, which demands the slaughter of Amalek, and, as a result, the valuable material which follows, has been hidden, or at least partially concealed, from view.

1 Samuel 15:1-31

Samuel said to Saul, 'The Lord sent me to anoint you king over his people Israel; now therefore listen to the words of the Lord. Thus says the Lord of hosts, "I will punish the Amalekites for what they did in opposing the Israelites when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey."'

So Saul summoned the people, and numbered them in Telaim, two hundred thousand foot-soldiers, and ten

thousand soldiers of Judah. Saul came to the city of the Amalekites and lay in wait in the valley. Saul said to the Kenites, 'Go! Leave! Withdraw from among the Amalekites, or I will destroy you with them; for you showed kindness to all the people of Israel when they came up out of Egypt.' So the Kenites withdrew from the Amalekites. Saul defeated the Amalekites, from Havilah as far as Shur, which is east of Egypt. He took King Agag of the Amalekites alive, but utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword. Saul and the people spared Agag, and the best of the sheep and of the cattle and of the fatlings, and the lambs, and all that was valuable, and would not utterly destroy them; all that was despised and worthless they utterly destroyed.

The word of the Lord came to Samuel: 'I regret that I made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me, and has not carried out my commands.' Samuel was angry; and he cried out to the Lord all night. Samuel rose early in the morning to meet Saul, and Samuel was told, 'Saul went to Carmel, where he set up a monument for himself, and on returning he passed on down to Gilgal.' When Samuel came to Saul, Saul said to him, 'May you be blessed by the Lord; I have carried out the command of the Lord.' But Samuel said, 'What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears, and the lowing of cattle that I hear?' Saul said, 'They have brought them from the Amalekites; for the people spared the best of the sheep and the cattle, to sacrifice to the Lord your God; but the rest we have utterly destroyed.' Then Samuel said to Saul, 'Stop! I will tell you what the Lord said to me last night.' He replied, 'Speak.'

Samuel said, 'Though you are little in your own eyes, are you not the head of the tribes of Israel? The Lord anointed you king over Israel. And the Lord sent you on a mission, and said, "Go, utterly destroy the sinners, the Amalekites, and

fight against them until they are consumed.” Why then did you not obey the voice of the Lord? Why did you swoop down on the spoil, and do what was evil in the sight of the Lord?’ Saul said to Samuel, ‘I have obeyed the voice of the Lord, I have gone on the mission on which the Lord sent me, I have brought Agag the king of Amalek, and I have utterly destroyed the Amalekites. But from the spoil the people took sheep and cattle, the best of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the Lord your God in Gilgal.’ And Samuel said, ‘Has the Lord as great delight in burnt-offerings and sacrifices, as in obedience to the voice of the Lord? Surely, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams. For rebellion is no less a sin than divination, and stubbornness is like iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has also rejected you from being king.’

Saul said to Samuel, ‘I have sinned; for I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord and your words, because I feared the people and obeyed their voice. Now therefore, I pray, pardon my sin, and return with me, so that I may worship the Lord.’ Samuel said to Saul, ‘I will not return with you; for you have rejected the word of the Lord, and the Lord has rejected you from being king over Israel.’ As Samuel turned to go away, Saul caught hold of the hem of his robe, and it tore. And Samuel said to him, ‘The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this very day, and has given it to a neighbour of yours, who is better than you. Moreover, the Glory of Israel will not recant or change his mind; for he is not a mortal, that he should change his mind.’ Then Saul said, ‘I have sinned; yet honour me now before the elders of my people and before Israel, and return with me, so that I may worship the Lord your God.’ So Samuel turned back after Saul; and Saul worshipped the Lord. (NRSV)

It is obvious that this is a passage which has significance for a gathering like this. Saul is the anointed king, the leader of Israel. We are anointed leaders for the people whom we serve. What can we learn from Saul?

The first point is that we should be chary of taking our anointing for granted. The passage follows on from the traditions in which Samuel, the prophet who acts on behalf of God, has made clear this role to Saul, and all Israel has agreed to it. Yet, in the course of this narrative, God removes his (literal) seal of approval from Saul. The point? We have to be careful of hubris, of pride, of thinking that once anointed, chosen, set aside, by God we then are permanently set upon a pedestal, above criticism. God has the power to raise up, he has the power to cast down. If we were to phrase this in the language of today..., it is about accountability. Saul reaches a point where he thinks he can do what he wishes, and ignore the advice of Samuel. He pays the price for his arrogance. He falls out of favour with God, and will, in his own lifetime, see his own family disinherited and have to cope the myriad of issues (anger, jealousy, wrath) which flow from his replacement by David. We may safely say that Saul is revealed as one who cannot cope with such change, and it is tempting to suggest that he has these problems because he has made the mistake of confusing his own legacy with the Kingdom of God. Human beings are forever doing this.

Aldous Huxley's *Grey Eminence* tells the story of Fr Joseph, a Capuchin monk of great spiritual acuity and incredible asceticism who was also Cardinal Richelieu's aide and inspirer of foreign policy. For all his spiritual gifts, he made one fatal mistake, that of confusing the Kingdom of God with the inheritance of the Bourbon dynasty. As a result, the Thirty Years War was greatly prolonged, Middle Europe endured years of brutality, and the stage was set of a historical pattern which would roll out to include the French Revolution and, if Huxley is correct, the ascent of Prussia and the horrors of two World Wars. Saul simply cannot cope with change and the loss of his own place and status- and, in so doing, provides us with a lesson in remembering

our own importance, and maintaining a due sense of proportion. Examples are not confined to political rulers. Its all a bit like one of those depressing nature programmes in which the old leader of the pack fails to see his own increasing impotence, until finally he loses alpha male status to one of the younger animals of the pride and retires to the rather rundown equivalent of a lions' geriatric home at the less fashionable end of the Serengeti.

However, to return to the immediate context. Saul, faced with his own shortcomings, does what we so often do best. He dissembles. He finds reasons to excuse what he has done and justify his failure to obey. If you're not familiar with this process and it's all new, and you've never even entertained it, congratulations: for the rest of us, it has all the inevitability of a car crash, and seems to happen in slow motion. He offers two excuses for what he has done. I find it helpful to examine these against the background of shame and guilt, which are not synonymous.

Henri Nouwen, in *The Wounded Healer*, argues that modern Western humanity has different priorities to previous generations with a shift towards a shame culture. He distinguishes shame and guilt thus:

But the tyranny of fathers is not the same as the tyranny of one's peers. Not following fathers is quite different from not living up to the expectations of one's peers. The first means disobedience; the second, non-conformity. The first creates guilt feelings; the second, feelings of shame. In this respect there is an obvious shift from a guilt culture to a shame culture.¹

Mollie Creighton provides a more detailed examination of the two, drawing on psychoanalytic theory and cognitive developmental theory². Here, shame involves:

1 Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer*, NY: Image, 1979, 33.

2 Creighton, 1990, 285.

the awareness of inadequacy or failure to achieve a wished-for self-image which is accompanied by, or originally arises from, the fear of separation and abandonment.³

Guilt, on the other hand, initially:

is associated with the fear that committing a negative act will result in punishment being meted out by the parent. Later this fear is internalized, so that guilt feelings arise whether there is a threat of punishment or not.⁴

Shame arouses fears that the difference between one's reality and dream (i.e. who you really are as opposed to what you would ideally be) will be revealed to others, whereas guilt is concerned rather with consequences like punishment.

Ancient Mediterranean societies are often considered shame cultures. What is interesting here is that Saul uses both guilt and shame to try to justify his actions. The shame bit comes in when Saul says that he does this because he was afraid of the people. We need to remember that war, in the ancient world as now, is always a nice little earner for someone. By the custom of the ancient world, those who were victorious would expect to gain from the booty gained from the defeated. They might expect to gain food, money, slaves, and livestock. The call to destroy everything that was Amalek's would not be viewed positively: the people would feel that they were missing out on their entitlements. From our point of view, Saul appears weak, giving into the fear of the people, pure and simple. I'm prepared to bet that many sermons have been preached by people laying claim to be strong leaders, citing Saul as a prime example of the failure to be such a leader. But from his point of view, this may well not be about such a weakness. Being unable to provide for his people would be a loss of face and source of shame for Saul, so here he may

3 Creighton 1990, 285.

4 Creighton 1990, 286.

well be giving in, not out of fear as we see it, but out of the fear of losing face and being perceived as weak because his people have seen no benefit from war.

In a second layer of justification, we see the language of guilt at work. Saul defends himself by arguing that he is not guilty because he has offered sacrifices, in place of a complete ban. His rationale is something like this: "I have been asked to destroy everything, but if I do this I will lose face. How can I not offend the people and not offend God?" His answer is ingenious, and we really should credit him for his shrewdness. Saul proposes offering a sacrifice instead of a ban (I will spare you my mealy-mouthed Hebrew). In so doing, he can both give tribute to God, and please the people. For in a sacrifice, the people would expect to share a portion of what had been sacrificed. Saul sees an opportunity to have his sacrificial cake and eat it (literally). The fact that it is not what he was actually asked to do is beside the point.

But this is the beginning of a slippery slope which will take Saul into Fr Joseph territory, for he is beginning to confuse the things of God with his own. This is perhaps also indicated in the fact that he puts up a monument for his victory, forgetful of the fact that the defeat of the Amalekites has come from the hand of God. This is surely a sign of Saul confusing his own ends with those of God, and using good reasons try and justify his actions.

So, Saul's performance raises a number of questions for us to ponder.

The first is to remember that we exercise leadership by God's gift, and we do not have it without restriction. God is free to strip us of our leadership if we fail to exercise it in accordance with his purposes.

The second, is that it is all too possible for us to begin to confuse our own ends with those of God, to compromise our service of God with our service of self, and even to be more concerned with the monuments we leave behind to our own glory than with the glory of God. The inscription on the tomb of Christopher Wren in St Paul's Cathedral exemplifies the ambiguities. It says, "If you seek his monument, look around you." If the "his" refers to God, I

have no problem, but if it refers to Wren it seems an almighty act of arrogance to have that as his inscription in what should be a house dedicated to the glory of God.

The third is that we are very clever at finding justifications for what we do, justifications which like Saul we may pawn off as necessary out of a sense of shame or of guilt. By which of course I mean that we try to say our “justified actions” free us from shame and guilt, as we have let down neither God, parents or contemporaries, and even, if we say so ourselves, done not too badly for ourselves...

The fourth is that we eventually like Saul really put the emphasis on ourselves and the survival of our legacies, images or whatever, at which point the God whom we profess to serve and from whom we receive our authority has become the vaguest dot on the horizon of our subconscious. For really, at this point it has become all about us.

The fifth is that Saul uses “fear” as a key motive to justify his actions, but the story makes clear that fear really is not producing anything constructive, but is an excuse for self-indulgence, and merely is a false apology for piety.

So what we end up with is a picture of an anointed leader whose “fear” (be it of the people or loss of face) combined with a supposed fear of God in which an act of worship becomes a means to his own ends. We have learned what not to be.

As I have reflected on the effects and instances of fear, I am drawn to make comparisons. Highly unhistorical I know, so I will briefly pretend to be a canonical critic.

I find it helpful to compare Saul with Esther. Saul is an example of an anointed leader who eventually becomes so absorbed in his own interests that he ends up losing all that he has worked for. Esther on the other hand is someone who has little or no power, is a subject, not a maker of the law, and is asked to think of herself (and her own survival) or her people. When

Mordecai her uncle points out to her that her own survival and those of her people cannot be separated, she puts aside fear of her own destruction and, “breaking the law of the Medes and Persians”, goes into Xerxes’ presence to plead for the safety of her people. By refusing to put herself on a pedestal, she saves herself and her people. The contrast is neatly summed up in the Gospel saying that he who loses himself will find himself. Mary, in the Annunciation story, shows the same dynamic.

Saul and Esther give us opposite sides of the coin: a leader who loses himself, and a subject who finds herself.

Yet even more helpful is the comparison of Saul with Abraham. Abraham gives up all his dependency on progeny and the earthly things for the future, puts all his trust in God, and is vindicated. Saul, on the other hand, hedges his bets, and tries to secure his own future by concocting an elaborate ruse to try and please both God and humanity (to have his cake and eat it) - and loses all.

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Thursday

For our last bible study I am glad to return to the more familiar ground of the New Testament. A theme connected to fear weaves together these three studies. And this morning’s effort looks at how fear may affect the use of power by leaders.

I’m always interested by people who say that Acts provides a hagiographic, sanitized, or air-brushed (I’ve tried to span the generations) view of the emerging church. It doesn’t square with what I read. A new apostle who immediately vanishes into obscurity (Matthias), a persecutor turned founder (Paul), an almighty fight about what you can eat, Paul having a strop with Barnabas, John Mark legging it out of Cyprus. Its not exactly a catalogue of unmitigated triumph by any sense of the imagination. But the nadir, in my mind, is Acts 5, with the story of Ananias and Sapphira. For here we have a

story about the church and all its worst excesses. Now, I realise that I may have some of you upset with this description, so please bear with me.....

Acts 5:1-12

But a man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property; with his wife's knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet. 'Ananias,' Peter asked, 'why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!' Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it. The young men came and wrapped up his body, then carried him out and buried him.

After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. Peter said to her, 'Tell me whether you and your husband sold the land for such and such a price.' And she said, 'Yes, that was the price.' Then Peter said to her, 'How is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.' Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. When the young men came in they found her dead, so they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things.

Now many signs and wonders were done among the people through the apostles.

Now that we have familiarized ourselves with the passage, let me run my line. It's an insight which stems from when I served my title, and my training rector, in passing, described this passage as an abuse of power. It's a remark which unsettled me when I first heard it. After all, surely Ananias and Sapphira deserved it, and Peter must surely have been right? But I have never been able to put away the niggling doubts, and they have over the years become more incessant. This is part of the effect a training rector can have: we may spend the bulk of our ministry copying them or reacting against their example. If, as I suggested yesterday, the historical books of the Bible may sometimes tell us what NOT to do, might this not be true of Acts as well? Let us consider the story as it stands.

Before that, we need to work out what is actually going on. Few concepts become as open to misinterpretation as the idea that the early church held all things in common. Commentators of all political stripes have a field day here, either playing up or down the economic implications of the concept. It's fair to say that commentators from the left tend to be more literalistic, and those from the right more ingenious in trying to explain how the passage might or might not impinge upon their preferred economic stance. We may further complicate this by looking at it through the lens of Christian monastic tradition. Justo González offers a balanced understanding of what was going on:

What this summary describes is not a regime in which all go at once and sell all they have, put it in a common coffer, and then live off it. Rather it describes a community in which mutual love is such that if someone has need others go and sell their real estate in order to respond to those needs.

The story of Ananias and Sapphira follows hard on the heels of the example of Barnabas, who gains a nickname as a mark of the high respect in which his actions caused him to be held. Perhaps Ananias and Sapphira crave some of this publicity and reputation.

So, as our story starts, they then make a promise, but then decide to renege on it. I don't think this action is right, and not to be condoned. So far, so good. What motivates them? Perhaps our old friend, fear, with the nagging idea that giving everything away will mean risk, starvation, insecurity. Maybe it's nothing more than simply over-committing themselves and having second thoughts. Like Saul, Ananias and Sapphira try to "have their cake and eat it": to please God by their gift, yet ensure their safety net. No doubt, they, like Saul, were able to conjure up all sorts of elaborate justifications to support what they are doing, but we are spared these in the narrative. They take a reduced amount to the church as their donation.

How does Peter know the amount is short? Maybe he is into real estate, and knows the going rate for the job? Maybe he can read the signs of duplicity, even smell their fear. Much great ability to read people's hearts and minds is little more than the ability to note signs of lying, of distress through eye movement, appearance and mannerisms. These things could be intuited: Peter needs no polygraph.

Peter challenges Ananias, finishing with the charge that he has lied to God. Furthermore, he has lied when he has no need to. It is not as if the gifting of such resources was mandatory: Peter tells Ananias that he was under no obligation to sell, and further, even if he did sell, he was not under an obligation to bring everything (5:4). Any obligation to give the whole amount is not forced upon them, but has come from their own choice. The key issue is that Ananias and Sapphira have said one thing, and made a free offer or commitment, and then not followed through on it. In So doing they have lied not to just to Peter, not just to the community, but to God. Cast in this light the passage is worked example of letting your "yes" be "yes", and your "no", "no". This works solely in a situation where there is freedom to make a decision and implement it. All this would be skewed if Ananias and Sapphira were under obligations or duress to act. As González continues, seeing the young church not as a political utopia, but a sign and foretaste of an order yet to come:

This is not a legislated communalism, but rather it is the sort of communalism that is an expression of the love and the new life in the Spirit...

The Church is that community which , by virtue of the gift of the Spirit, lives in the last days even in the midst of this world, which still lives in the old order.

González uses this reading of the story to bewail the way in which the church so frequently comes up short, pointing out that it would much smaller if everyone who lied were to drop dead. Our failure to speak the truth is a vicious circle: once we lose the freedom to speak the truth, it becomes increasingly difficult to do so, and even to break the cycle. González again:

The main reason it is so difficult to speak the truth is that others do not speak it either. Because others do not speak of their doubts, mine seem exceptional. Because no-one speaks of their sins, mine seem enormous. Because no one speaks of their problems, I must have caused mine. In other words, we lie to the Church because within it lies and appearances have taken the place of love and truth. ...

Too often, while we claim to have the Spirit of God, we lie to each other claiming to be holier than we really are, to have more faith than we really have, or to make greater sacrifices than we really make. Or we lie to each other with half-truths, or we manipulate the truth about others with whom we disagree, so that they may not be able to oppose our opinions or positions. According to the biblical text, when we do these things we lie to the very Spirit of God. And the worst consequence of all this is that the lie grows, and because of our own lying others dare not tell the truth.

Taken in this light, González sees the passage as presenting a stern warning about taking God seriously and the nature of the work in which we are engaged, and warns that, whilst the physical death of Ananias and Sapphira may seem drastic, our potential spiritual death is no less serious.

And there's a hard truth behind the story: those most in danger of being like Ananias and Sapphira are the well-off and the prosperous. And like it or not, that is us, no matter how poor we think we are. Yet the story re-inforces a theme common to many passages in Scripture, that those who are rich or well-off are more likely to screw up their relationship with God than the poor, because they are increasingly separated from him by their possessions and the apparent safety which they give. I do not say this, as sometimes has happened, to glamourise or romanticise poverty, and certainly never to diminish the seriousness of the struggle to eradicate poverty or the suffering which follows in its wake. But, it is a wake-up call for us, as the well-off and affluent, to be aware of the danger that our wealth may bring. Whilst it is a hard truth that poverty increases the chances of physical mortality, there is equally good evidence to suggest that prosperity brings spiritual death.

Now it may be that this explanation leaves you satisfied, but I still harbour some misgivings about the way in which justice and love appear in this story. Yes, Ananias and Sapphira both die: but, is this a penalty in keeping with the magnitude of their offence? Is it not help but help feeling that it is still too brutal, even given the seriousness. If I'm honest it's got something to do with the immediacy of the punishment as well. Ananias and Sapphira have been caught out lying, and their punishment is meted out almost immediately. But what concerns me here is that there is no opportunity given for repentance, not opportunity for them to confess, and make good what has gone wrong. In other words, I'm not entirely comfortable with the way in which Peter handles things, particularly in the case of Sapphira. Peter has already talked to Ananias, not been particularly confrontational, according to the text, but simply asked him a series of questions. There's been no cursing or casting out. Yet look at the effect: Ananias has dropped down dead. When Sapphira comes, Peter does exactly the same thing again- and she drops down dead. It has to be said, and I hope you will not think I am being overly flippant, that pastoral care doesn't seem to figure very high up the agenda

here. What Peter does, knowing that the woman's husband is dead, is to cross-examine her in what seems to be as juridical trial.

Nor does the dominical injunction to forgive more than once: in this story, "One strike and you're out". Period. The story allows no possibility for reconciliation, repentance or growth. Now, it might be argued that any blame for the absence of these is down to Ananias and Sapphira's tendency to drop down dead on the spot- as if this is a choice that they could make. But I still can't help feeling that it might have been handled better.

At this point, I move from critical method to something else, the Ignatian practice of imagination of place, in which we are encouraged to explore a scene in scripture as if we were there, either as a spectator or as one of the protagonists. If I put myself in the place of either Ananias or Sapphira, this is very uncomfortable. I also bring other verses of Scripture in to play...

Like the injunction "to treat others as you would wish to be treated".

If I apply this simple litmus to this story, I can say unhesitatingly that I would not wish to be treated as Ananias and Sapphira were, and I would not appreciate being part of a system which viewed spontaneous dropping down dead as a successful conclusion to a disciplinary session. I am glad to say that this has not been my experience- as evidenced by my speaking to you today.

And there's a further question- what is it that causes Ananias and Sapphira to die? The various answers to this are, it seems, all problematic...

Is it that they fear God? - what does this say about the work of a church which proclaims a loving God, and in which perfect love is meant to cast out fear? The church should surely be about the business of love, not fear, especially as we have already seen that fear of God is not the same as visceral emotional fear. Doesn't God come to love, to save and not condemn (John 3:17). I find that a story within a story from Sartre's *Nausea* returns to my mind when fear seems to be viewed positively in a spiritual context:

'In 1787, at an inn near Moulins, an old man was dying, a friend of Diderot, trained by the philosophers. The priests of the neighbourhood were nonplussed: they had tried

everything in vain; the good man would have no last rites, he was a pantheist. M. de Rollebon, who was passing by and believed in nothing, bet the Curé of Moulins that he would need less than two hours to bring the sick man back to Christian sentiments. The Curé took the bet and lost: Rollebon began at three in the morning, the sick man confessed at five and died at seven. "Are you so forceful in argument?" asked the Curé, "You outdo even us." "I did not argue," answered M. de Rollebon, "I made him fear Hell."⁵

There's something deeply unnerving about a church which ends up preaching and practicing fear in place of love.

Has it got something to do with Peter and his role? This is the point that has an impact for us as leaders. If we follow Mikael Parsons reading of this narrative, the key issue is one of power. By making the decisions that they do, Ananias and Sapphira appear to be undermining the authority and leadership of the apostles, most notably Peter. It is possible that what we have here is a battle for power, in which Peter is able to use his authority to devastating effect (though I note that Parsons stops short of this, suggesting merely that Ananias and Sapphira suffer for abrogating to themselves the authority of the apostles). The Gospel mandate is that chosen leaders like Peter have the authority to bind and loose, and surely with that privilege comes responsibility. And where there is responsibility, there is the chance of abuse. In the story of Ananias and Sapphira, Peter may have misused his authority to frighten them both to the point that they literally die of fear. Their perception, and Peter does nothing to disabuse them of it, is that they are guilty to the point of death: they die of shock at this realisation. And Parsons' suggestion that this is about who has the right to exercise authority raises major questions about how we are to handle such disputes within the life of the church. How are we to react when there is a challenge to authority in the

⁵ Sartre, Jean Paul, "The Diary of Antoine Roquentin", translated from the French 'La Nausée' by Lloyd Alexander, London: John Lehmann, 1949, p. 26.

parish council or elsewhere. There is little phonetic difference between the words authoritative and authoritarian, but a world of difference in practice. And, I would suggest, Peter overplays his hand here. Am I reading too much into the text at this point? Let me suggest a couple of points which suggest not.

1) The first is that this pattern is never repeated. In no other encounter do the guilty protagonists die as a result of confrontation with the leaders of the early church. They may receive a punishment, or shock, but they never die. Paul, implicated in the death of Stephen, does not die for his crime (surely as, if not more, serious than that of Ananias and Sapphira), but is blinded and brought to faith in Christ.

2) The second is to note Luke's evaluation of the incident. The first chapters of Luke are full of miraculous events, of healings and rescues. All of these are bracketed with comments which indicate how much they helped the church to grow, or how many became converts. In terms of growth, the Ananias and Sapphira story remains silent. 5:12 which follows it, and talks of church growth, is a summary about the work of all the apostles and bridges into the next section. The only result of the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira is to cause "great fear": there is no increase in either church membership or, indeed, giving.

What's the lesson of this in a bible study on leadership? There are several points:

The first is to acknowledge the realism of the story, and the picture of mixed-up, complicated people involved. This is our reality more often than a church full of saints.

The second is to realise the gravity of the matters with which we deal. We are not simply dealing with some fuzzy concept of "community" or politics. Bill Shankley (Manager of Liverpool) was once reported to have said, "Football isn't a matter of life or death, it's much more important than that." Our problem is that we sometimes forget that our work as church "is more important than that". We are not simply a community or welfare club: we are

the foreshadowing of a new world order (a rather severe phrase, it must be admitted)- and we need to show what that entails.

Third, whether we like it or not, is to remember that people have picked up from experience, from popular understandings and even misconceptions, the idea that church leaders do have a power and authority, and that it is used to condemn judge and dominate. "The Church that likes to say, 'No'". Like it or not, people may view us as authoritarian, and that skews how they react to us, and how they hear us. In some societies, beliefs that leaders have the power to give life or death are still potent. I remember, when I first went to Kenya, splashing out on a book called *Where There is no Doctor*, one of those helpful books that tells you how can you remove your own inflamed appendix when you have access only to a small Swiss Army Knife, a coat-hanger and a frying pan... But it also contained the advice that you could only be cursed if you believed this was a possibility. It is not, I think, too far-fetched, to envision Ananias and Sapphira seeing Peter in this way. Now, we may think were beyond these things, but no matter how civilised we think we are, our civilisation is only a veneer or façade and many are still in the thrall of such thinking. But we need to remember that many still think that they may be subject to a spiritual death if so decreed by an authority figure, even if not a literal physical death. History is littered with damaged souls (we may have even encountered some ourselves) who have been effectively condemned to death by some religious figure, and whose everyday existence has spiraled out of control as a result. Even only a generation ago, those who were divorced were effectively condemned to a spiritual death, and effectively exiled from the church. We may even encounter folk with these scars in our congregations. This kind of thinking is still potent, and we do well to remember that others subscribe to its power and effects even if we do not think that this is so. What they hear may, as a result, differ from what we said or intended, but we need to have the *gnous* (Scots: "wisdom") to know that this may happen. And we need the discernment to separate genuine authority

from authoritarianism, and so exercise leadership which brings growth and not fear.

The story asks: what are our key goals and outcomes? Is it really a good outcome that Ananias and Sapphira drop dead. I think not. Is it right to put the blame exclusively on them? I think not. At some point, when things go wrong, as I believe is the case here, we need to be able to ask whether we might, with hindsight, not have handled things better.

The story also, by my reading, highlights tensions which may exist between justice and pastoral care. We all know that these overlap and sometimes seem to be in conflict. The story of Ananias and Sapphira reminds us of this: justice may have been done, but at what pastoral cost? And more importantly, what has been the longer term effect on the community which is now in the grip of "great fear" and does not experience growth as a result of these actions.

But above all else, the story shows how fear leads to lies, to problems in how leadership is discerned and exercised and, ultimately to death and destruction. It asks us to look afresh at our commitments, our promises, our use of power, and what we gain from their right use and their abuse.

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