

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT-FEBRUARY 28, 2021

**READINGS: Genesis 22:1-2, 9-13, 15-18;
Responsorial Psalm-Psalm 116;
Romans 8:31b-35, 37;
Gospel of Mark 9:2-10**

Lent: Renewing the heart of our community

During this COVID-19 pandemic, we might have heard or read some inspiring stories from around the world about how people have offered themselves to care for others. These stories include: some health workers who decided to pay out of their own pockets to stay in hotels away from their homes and family members as precautions to avoid infecting their family members; and a teacher who converted his kitchen and some of the space in his small apartment into a science laboratory so that he could continue to teach his students during the lockdown. In Canada, there was the story of Marge Miller, a retired nurse from Dalhousie, Nova Scotia who came out of retirement. She returned to work as the Head Nurse at the Villa Renaissance Nursing Home in Nova Scotia to care for seniors. We can describe the actions of these individuals as extraordinary: their actions went beyond what is normally expected of us in our society. We can refer to the actions of these individuals as sacrifices they have made for the sake of others.

On this second Sunday of Lent, the Scripture readings invite us to reflect on the spiritual significance of sacrifices in the life of every Christian. We begin with the first reading from the Book of Genesis. Today's passage is about the story usually referred to as "The Binding of Isaac". The story is considered to be one of the most popular and yet shocking stories in the Bible. The passage begins, "God tested

Abraham. He said to him, 'Abraham!' And Abraham said, 'Here I am'". The test was that God asked Abraham to go and offer his only son Isaac "whom he loves" as a burnt offering on a certain mountain. In Genesis, Chapter 8, we read that God had entered into a covenant with Abraham. God had promised Abraham, "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing" (Genesis 12:2). However, Abraham and his wife Sarah were unable to have a baby because Sarah was barren. God blessed Abraham and Sarah with their own baby, Isaac. God had told Abraham that he would establish his covenant with Isaac "as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him" (Genesis 17:19). It would be through Isaac that all nations would find blessing. And so we can see that God's test for Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice was a painful test.

Even though we certainly find the idea of God asking Abraham to kill Isaac as shocking, in primitive times, humans were routinely sacrificed in tribute to various gods. This practice was common. As the story continues, we learn that Abraham didn't ask any questions about God's shocking demand. He obeyed God completely. The story ended in a dramatic fashion when God himself provided a ram in place of the bound Isaac for the sacrifice.

The story about the test of Abraham forms the backdrop to the second reading from the Letter of Paul to the Romans. In chapter 8 of Paul's Letter to the Romans, from which today's passage is taken, Paul wrote about the Christian life in the Spirit. Paul exhorted the early Christians to live according to the Spirit of God-- the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead. By virtue of their baptism in Christ, God's Spirit dwelled in the baptized and made them his adopted children. We are children of God: "if

children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ” (Romans 8:17). According to Paul, God’s gift of the Spirit to the early Christians showed the depth of God’s love for them. It was from the perspective of God’s love that made Paul begin today’s passage with a question: “Brothers and sisters: if God is for us, who is against us”? In answer to this question, Paul reminded the Romans that God’s love in Jesus was manifested fully when God delivered His only Son Jesus up to death for our salvation.

The teaching of Paul in the second reading leads us to today’s Gospel reading from Mark. Today’s passage is Mark’s narrative of the event of the Transfiguration of Jesus. The word “transfiguration” means more than a merely external change of appearance. The nature of Jesus became luminous and transparent to the gaze of the disciples. His clothes became dazzling white, “such as no one on earth could bleach them”. In the Scriptures, final glory is seen in terms of white garments (Rev. 4:4; 7:9). Jesus’ transfiguration revealed Jesus’ glory of the final age. The appearance of Moses, the Lawgiver symbolized the Law of God is fulfilled in Jesus. The appearance of Elijah the preeminent prophet of God signified that Jesus is the fulfillment of all the prophets.

The high point in today’s Gospel story is the cloud that symbolized the presence of God. God’s voice came out of the cloud to identify the transfigured Jesus when God said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him”. We may remember that God’s voice was also heard at the baptism of the Lord identifying Jesus as his “ Beloved Son”. The transfiguration event is also reported in the other two Synoptic Gospels of Matthew (17:1-13) and Luke (9:28-36). However, the Evangelist Mark has used today’s story

to continue to portray Jesus as the “Son of God”-- an expression he used at the beginning of his Gospel. The Evangelist also used the story to focus on the mission of the “Son of God”: Jesus’ mission was to offer himself for our salvation.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, perhaps we might be wondering why the Church has chosen today’s Gospel passage for Lent. After all, every year, the Church celebrates the Feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord on August 6. So, in what ways do the readings reflect the Season of Lent? What do the three readings tell us about our Lenten journey? We can see parallels between the story of Abraham and his only beloved son in the first reading to the story of the transfiguration of the only Beloved Son of God. The beloved son of Isaac was the only hope of the fulfillment of the promise that God had made to Abraham. We learn from the first reading that God rejected the human sacrifice of Isaac by providing Abraham with a ram for the sacrifice. We also learn that God gave his only Beloved Son for our salvation.

When we read the three readings in the light of each other, we can learn that the readings paint a picture of God as generous, good and that God has great love for his people. Lent is the time for us to reflect on the meaning of God’s sacrifice of his Son for us. As we continue our Lenten journey, we might choose to reflect on these questions. How do we live to reflect in our lives the power of God’s love in the sacrifice of his only Son Jesus? During this Lent, what sacrifices are we making in our lives for the sake of others? The stories that I shared with you earlier are examples of people who have made sacrifices in their lives during this pandemic. Their actions are brilliant examples of generosity, goodness and love. Miller for example told reporters that she set aside her own fears of contracting COVID-19.

The actions of the people in the stories are life-giving and full of hope to others. As Christians, Lent offers us the opportunity for self-reflection so that we can discern how to live as people redeemed by the blood of Christ. During this Lent, let us ask God to give each of us a renewed heart full of love. Let us ask God to teach us how to express our renewed love, shining in our hearts, in service to others in our believing communities.

Fr. Yaw Acheampong

Please note that this homily has been prepared for a congregation at a distance.