‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’
Alternative Reflection for Session 3: Abraham and Isaac
Offered at St Martin-in-the-Fields on Sunday, 18 March 2018

Text: **Genesis 22:1-12**

Image: **‘Abraham and Isaac’ Johann Heinrich Ferdinand Olivier, 1817, NG6541**

A note on the artist:

Johann Heinrich Ferdinand Olivier was born in Dessau where he received his first artistic training. In 1804 he moved to Dresden where he became acquainted with the painters Philipp Otto Runge and Caspar David Friedrich. Friedrich combined landscape motifs with religious symbolism, and pictures like his ‘Winter Landscape’ in the National Gallery represent the hope for salvation through the Christian faith. From 1807 to 1810 Olivier was in Paris, and in 1811 he settled in Vienna.

In 1817 he became a member of the Brotherhood of Saint Luke, an artistic brotherhood (later known as the Nazarenes) founded in Vienna in 1809 by Friedrich Overbeck and Franz Pforr. The Brotherhood was committed to regenerating German religious art in imitation of the works of Durer, Perugino and Raphael. Olivier shared the Nazarenes' enthusiasm for northern medieval and Renaissance art and their interest in the revival of religious painting. The Nazarenes were particularly admired by the Pre-Raphaelites.

Reflection:

In this painting, Abraham and his son Isaac make their way to the place of sacrifice as recounted in the Old Testament, in Genesis 22. Isaac carries wood for the altar fire and Abraham holds a lighted torch. They appear to be focused primarily on their journey and don’t appear to be involved in debate or argument about the coming sacrifice – although it’s also possible to read their faces and postures as expressing some tension between the two of them.

The style of the painting is deliberately archaic, with precise outlines and odd disparities in scale, while the figures of Abraham and Isaac recall the simplified forms of a medieval woodcut. The landscape background is drawn with meticulous care. It is loosely based on Olivier's studies of the countryside around Salzburg, which he first visited in 1815. The distant mountain peak may perhaps be identified as the Watzmann, to the south of the city.

The story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac is not an easy one to handle for most people. There appears to be so much that is wrong, even barbaric, about the tale. How can a man, elsewhere called a hero of the faith, be prepared to kill his child? And how can a God, whom we talk about as loving, ask anyone to do such a thing? What kind of God would ask Abraham to kill his own son as a sacrifice? Should blind loyalty to God lead us to commit evil, inhuman acts? It's a story that seems like an easy target for people who say that religion is the cause of violence and conflict.

The key to understanding this story is the realisation that child sacrifice was the norm in the religious practices of Abraham's day – some two to three thousand years before Christ. And thus the reason that Abraham obeys God so unquestioningly may have been because –horrific and distasteful as it seems to us – at that time there was nothing unusual about the idea that the gods required human sacrifices in order to be appeased. It may be that we see this pictured in the calm and determined manner with which Abraham and Isaac ascend the mountain to the place of sacrifice.

The stories about Abraham in Genesis are foundational stories for the People of Israel. Imagine for a moment that you want to create a foundational story for a nation that will change their understanding of sacrifice from the one which they've grown up with, to one which is completely different from the practices of all the peoples that surround them. What kind of story would you tell? One approach is tell a story in which the person founding this new nation is taken to the very brink of child sacrifice and then dramatically and suddenly pulled back from taking such a step.

The philosopher and anthropologist René Girard has suggested that the legacy of the story of the sacrifice of Isaac is that Israel developed an alternative system of animal sacrifice that continued until shortly after the crucifixion of Jesus. And Jesus' crucifixion, Girard suggests, has two meanings. First, it's about God identifying himself with all the victims – the scapegoats – who've been sacrificed down through the centuries. And second, because in Jesus God himself was scapegoated and sacrificed, it's also the ultimate demonstration of the reality that what God requires is mercy, not sacrifice, as Hosea first stated and Jesus later repeated.

In Jewish tradition, the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem is located where Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac took place. At our partner church of St Stephen Walbrook there is a visible reminder of this in the central Henry Moore altar. By carving a round altar table with organic forms cut into the circular sides, Moore suggested that the centre of the church reflected the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem and thus commemorates the sacrifice of Abraham and Isaac as a prefiguring of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. Hence the altar table is the place for the offering of the Eucharist, at the heart of Christian worship. In the Eucharist we remember and re-enact these stories of the almost-sacrifice of Isaac and the real sacrifice of Jesus because we need to remember and act on the realisation that God desires mercy, and neither sacrifice nor scapegoats.

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St Martin in the Fields

THE NATIONAL GALLERY

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A closing prayer (for the end of the session):

Grieving God, in your Son you experienced the agony of the pointless, savage, premature sacrifice of life.

Hold the hand of those whose loved ones have become scapegoats; calm the fears of all whose identity makes them subject to the perverse hatred and grotesque violence of others; and hasten a world where all are celebrated for who they are as your children, where difference is a sign of your diverse abundance.

Praying through the wounded yet ascended Christ, your personification of solidarity and your embodiment of hope.

Amen.