Genesis 22.1-14, Matthew 10.40-end

“That’s not my dog- its coat is too fluffy.”

What is this story? Centuries ago people knew what it meant because Abraham was a great hero of the Old Testament, his faithfulness and trust in God were held out as an example because God rewarded him for it and here, in this story, we see Abraham’s faith in its full depth and perhaps horror.

We need to ask, as every Sunday, and every time we read the Bible, what is God saying to us?

Two things today- a warning against being too certain, and a reminder of love.

A reading about what we and you and I often do with God, a perversion of religion, a warning against thinking that what we see of God is the whole picture. Warning against fundamentalism is clear here, about being too definite and certain.

And also the clearest place we see God in this story is in Abraham’s confidence and in the presence of the ram in the thicket, that God will provide more and better and more wonderfully than we dream, as he does in Jesus.

“That’s not my God- his orders are too scary.”

Story matters very much to us. A story where we need to pause to take in the horror of it before we know the ending. The headline summary is perhaps not that unsettling, but when you dig into the story and its context I think it is a dark story which should lead us feeling somewhat unsettled at the end and uncomfortable with the idea that this is a story about faith in God which is ultimately rewarded the ram provided, the promise confirmed, the inheritance secured, all is well. And yet it leaves us uneasy, uncomfortable, both with the story and how unquestioningly we have understood it for centuries.

That said, I am pleased to be engaging with this story because it is a reminder that we have to work at our relationship with God, and bring all of us too it, that it is not always simple or easy to be a disciple but it sometimes demands our full engagement and attention and brain, that there are uncertainties and questions- and that, however hard we and the writers of the Bible try to capture something of the experience of belonging to God and relating to God they are never able and we are never able to actually capture or encompass God. If you take nothing else away from the reading today please take that!

Three initial questions…

**What or who is missing from the story?**

Sarah

Ishmael- context of Hagar and Ishmael going into the desert where God saves them as well, and Hagar looks away and can’t watch her son die.

And Abraham himself is a shadow- before he has bargained for Sodom and Gomorrah- this time he is too shocked and horrified to say anything, perhaps, or too tired.

**What happens afterwards?** is important- Sarah dies in ch 23. Rabbinic tradition that neither S nor I ever talk to Abraham again.

Isaac a shadow of himself forever. Messed up by Abraham who sees him as the fulfilment of a promise and a hope and not an individual in his own right. Surrounded by strong love- Sarah, Rebekah, Ishmael- but let down by everyone- Abraham, Jacob who stole the blessing through Rebekah’s plan. He has no life but is dying for 2- years- his two great scenes are lying on the altar and lying on his deathbed. Afterthought in the story today, never stops being shadowy and unformed, all of the stories are taken from his father or son. Passes on the blessing. That’s his whole life.

**Does God really test us like this?** Like Job. We are better able to understand that we are neither good nor bad but that there is the capacity to do harm and do the wrong thing in all of us. With the great heroes of the OT, when challenge comes, because they are almost mythical figures, it can’t come from within them. They are playing on a different scale than us- and the writers are making a very strong point about faithfulness in the face of adversity, especially when the adversity just hits us from nowhere, as it often does. This story, like that of Job, reads more to more like a moral fable with a key message to convey, rather than it being that God literally tested Job and Abraham. It is not about why things happen, for me, as much as how we respond when tragedy and illness come. That Job and Abraham trust God is what matters, the what now, rather than wasting time on the why.

**Conclusion/ ending**

“That’s not my God- God wouldn’t ask us to do that”

It seems so much the opposite of God and Jesus that we must wrestle with it and then, perhaps, lay it down and say we have got as much out of this as we can, and come to the altar where Jesus offers himself.

God himself is the ram in the story, and he is the sacrifice laid on the altar. Mt Moriah is Jerusalem, so it does prefigure the cross, only God will offer himself in the end.

This story aligns with the face God presents to us in Jesus Christ only when we identify Jesus as the ram, God’s provision and answer for our mistakes, our certainty, our sin- and surely sacrificing Isaac would have been sinful by every civilised moral law.

And we experience and know that in this feast- I will provide. This is how much I love you.

Amos says: I despise, I abhor your sacrifices- I will not accept them. The sacrifice I desire is that you care for the poor and the needy, the orphan and the widow.” “Now go and live as people who are loved this much.”