

28. February 2021

“Not to fear the tests”

*Gen 22:1-2, 9, 10-13, 15-18*

*It happened some time later that God put Abraham to the test. 'Abraham, Abraham!' he called. 'Here I am,' he replied. God said, 'Take your son, your only son, your beloved Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, where you are to offer him as a burnt offering on one of the mountains which I shall point out to you.' When they arrived at the place which God had indicated to him, Abraham built an altar there, and arranged the wood. Then he bound his son and put him on the altar on top of the wood. Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. But the angel of Yahweh called to him from heaven. 'Abraham, Abraham!' he said. 'Here I am,' he replied. 'Do not raise your hand against the boy,' the angel said. 'Do not harm him, for now I know you fear God. You have not refused me your own beloved son.' Then looking up, Abraham saw a ram caught by its horns in a bush. Abraham took the ram and offered it as a burnt offering in place of his son. The angel of Yahweh called Abraham a second time from heaven. 'I swear by my own self, Yahweh declares, that because you have done this, because you have not refused me your own beloved son, I will shower blessings on you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the grains of sand on the seashore. Your descendants will gain possession of the gates of their enemies. All nations on earth will bless themselves by your descendants, because you have obeyed my command.'*

It was a hard test that Abraham had to undergo. With the sacrifice of his son, God's promise to make him the father of many nations seemed to be called into question. Moreover, to sacrifice one's own son was an atrocity, which may have been committed among other peoples, but not among God's faithful! However, the Lord did not exempt him from the test, and wanted to see if Abraham was obedient and willing to give God what he loved most.

We cannot listen to this story without taking into account the immense task that God had in mind for Abraham. Through this test, he wanted to strengthen him for that mission. Abraham had to be willing to do everything for God's will, without reservation.

In our community Agnus Dei, the so-called “Hymn to the Blessed Trinity” is prayed every morning<sup>1</sup>. In one part of this prayer, we say these words, addressed to God the Father: *“But at the end of time You sent Your Son - our Lord Jesus Christ - and You required of Yourself the sacrifice that Abraham was not made to offer. You gave Your only begotten Son for the life of the whole world, so that Your people and all the peoples of the earth might find their salvation in Him.”*

Thus God has shown us that He was willing to give His Beloved Son, and He invites us also to give Him everything, and to be willing to walk the paths He has planned for us.

When we read this passage in the Bible, about Abraham's test, we may have all kinds of fears about what God might demand of us, especially if we are at the beginning of the way of following the Lord. Perhaps we have read stories of saints, or heard about the great sacrifices of the martyrs or the hard ascetic practices of the Desert Fathers, who fought resolutely and rigorously against the inclinations of their senses.

But that does not mean that Abraham's test will have the same appearance in our lives, nor does it mean that we should be afraid that, if we decide to follow the Lord seriously, a test of the same magnitude awaits us.

What we must conclude from this reading is that God wants our heart and our whole being. Only in loving obedience to the Lord and in surrendering our hearts to Him can the plan that He has for our lives be fully realised. On this path, the Lord will also test us, to fortify us, so that we can demonstrate our love to Him and so that our love can be strengthened. We do not know what kind of trials they will be, but we can be sure that they will never be beyond our strength (*1 Cor 10:13*), and that God will always accompany us with His grace.

We must also bear this in mind when we read the lives of the saints, who have distinguished themselves by particular works, and whose radicalism arouses admiration and, at the same time, a certain amount of fear. Without wishing to detract from their merit, we must remember that they were sustained by the grace of God. The same applies to Abraham! Even our Lord, who carried our sins to the Cross and thus also felt the abandonment of God that results from sin (*cf. Mt 27:46*), was comforted in the dark hours in Gethsemane. While His disciples were not able to watch with Him, an angel came down from heaven and strengthened Him (*cf. Lk 22:43*).

So this story of Abraham should prompt us to ask God not to hold back anything in our way. This also applies, for example, to parents, when their children receive a religious vocation, which makes them “die” to the world, to enter a contemplative cloister. We must offer this sacrifice to the Lord willingly, even if it seems that we have to give him that only son whom we love so much!

Before concluding, let us clarify one last point. The story of Abraham shows us that, in the end, God did not even demand the sacrifice. He only wanted the one who was to become the Father of many nations to show his readiness to give him everything.

On the path of following the Lord, the same thing can happen. Sometimes God only tests our willingness, but then leads the way in a different way than we had feared.

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<sup>i</sup> The full prayer can be downloaded here:

<https://shared-assets.adobe.com/link/b268c842-42fb-4d6d-5659-12cd2908798a>

A sung version of the hymn - in Spanish - from Harpa Dei:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BD9qMTsl0xU>).