

# Preaching the Atonement

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**WJK** WESTMINSTER  
JOHN KNOX PRESS  
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

# Contents

Preface	vii
Acknowledgements and Abbreviations	ix
Introduction	xi
Chapter 1: The cost of a father's commitment: Genesis 22.1–19	1
Chapter 2: Taking away their iniquities: Leviticus 16.15–22	19
Chapter 3: The suffering of a servant: Isaiah 52.13–53.12	35
Chapter 4: The crucified God: Mark 15.25–39	55
Chapter 5: Forgiveness from the cross: Luke 23.32–43	71
Chapter 6: The Word became flesh: John 1.1–14	89
Chapter 7: The achievement of God's justice: Romans 3.21–26	105
Chapter 8: The reconciliation of the world: 2 Corinthians 5.11–6.2	121
Chapter 9: The decisive victory: Colossians 2.8–15	137
Chapter 10: The final sacrifice: Hebrews 9.11–14	157

<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>173</b>
<b>Notes</b>	<b>181</b>
<b>Index of Names</b>	<b>199</b>
<b>Index of Subjects</b>	<b>201</b>
<b>Index of Biblical References</b>	<b>203</b>

# Preface

The idea for this book emerged from our shared experience teaching homiletics at Spurgeon's College, London. Both of us are ordained ministers who preach regularly (Peter a Baptist, Stephen an Anglican). We have each come to homiletics via another theological discipline (Peter systematic theology, Stephen New Testament studies). We felt it could be creative and helpful to bring these various areas of experience together in an exploration of preaching the central Christian doctrine of atonement.

Peter has taken overall responsibility for Chapters 2, 4, 6, 9 and 10; Stephen for Chapters 1, 3, 5, 7 and 8. We are glad to have four 'guest preachers' contributing sermons in Chapters 1, 3, 7 and 8. It was not originally planned that these would all come in Stephen's chapters, but Stephen has partly made up for having contributed only one sermon himself by writing the commentaries for Peter's sermons in Chapters 6 and 9 in addition to those in his 'own' chapters.

We have not attempted a rigid consistency of format or approach. In particular, it seemed best in some chapters to write a commentary on the sermon that was interwoven with the sermon itself, allowing attention to be drawn to features of specific sections, but in other chapters to present the sermon as a whole before the commentary, highlighting its overall flow.

We are glad to put our joint signature to the whole.

Peter Stevenson  
Stephen Wright

# Introduction

This book explores a variety of ways in which the Christian doctrine of the atonement, God's act of making humanity one with himself in Christ, may be presented in preaching today. It issues from three basic convictions.

First, *Scripture remains the primary source and resource for preaching*. Each chapter in this book is based on a passage of Scripture which points, directly or indirectly, to the truth of the atonement. Both Testaments provide us with a range of stories and images that represent the truth, in partial but complementary ways.

Attention in theology and homiletics has increasingly focused on the *form* in which the biblical revelation comes to us. This, by and large, is a *narrative* form, and that fact has considerable implications for preaching. Briefly stated, it means that to treat Scripture as if it were a systematic handbook of doctrine is to mistreat it. This is not only the case with the obviously 'narrative' books such as the Gospels. It is becoming more apparent that even those parts of the Bible traditionally thought of as summaries of particular doctrines, notably the Pauline epistles, depend on a rich narrative substructure and indeed possess some of the overt characteristics of narrative too. To preach the atonement in a scriptural way – like preaching any other aspect of Christian truth – entails telling a story.

More basic even than narrative form is the evident reality that biblical truth comes to us in words which carry metaphorical as well as literal freight. If all our language is bound, in some way, to be metaphorical, nowhere is this more true than in our language about God. That is why to insist on the 'literal truth' of Scripture can be a contradiction in terms, if much of its truth is mediated to us through metaphor. A metaphor may be a single image – such as the familiar terms related to the atonement, 'redemption', 'justification'

and so on – or it may be an entire narrative: a story such as the testing of Abraham in Genesis 22 is metaphorical when it is taken, as it frequently has been, as pointing somehow to the sacrifice of Christ. Thus special attention is paid in the following chapters to the metaphorical resonance of texts, both within their own historical and literary contexts and within Scripture as a whole.

Second, *preaching takes place as a part of the ongoing dialogue between Christian tradition and Scripture*. We are deluding ourselves if we think that we can read Scripture without the mediation of centuries of interpretation. This fact does not preclude fresh insights into biblical truth arising in each generation. But it does call for gratitude for the real insights of the past, honesty about the spectacles which we ourselves are wearing, and a readiness to submit the particular stream of Christian tradition in which we ourselves stand to scrutiny. If we believe in the providence of God, then we must not only see Scripture as his gift for the Church in every age, but also see the potential of every age to achieve faithful and fruitful interpretations of it.

The atonement in fact provides an especially clear case both of the need for the Church's interpretative role in respect of Scripture, and of the influence of particular traditions on the way that Scripture is read. From earliest times the narratives and metaphors of Scripture were reflected upon and wrestled with in an attempt to grasp the enormity of what had happened in Christ. Different models appealed to different groups and eras.<sup>1</sup> Each model in different ways naturally, and inevitably, reflected not only the content of Scripture but also the factors in the culture of the interpreters concerned that made a particular way of expressing the doctrine comprehensible and potentially insightful for their time.

Those who (like the present authors) stand broadly in the Reformation tradition, which has exalted both Scripture and the doctrine of the atonement, need particularly to be aware of how that particular tradition has shaped our understanding of this doctrine. For instance, there has been lively debate in recent years about the extent to which the notion of 'imputed righteousness' really owes as much to Luther as it does to Paul. Whatever tradition we stand in, there is a perpetual temptation to equate 'our' way of seeing a particular doctrine with 'the biblical' way. Hence the necessity of listening to biblical scholarship (which may or may not be shaped by any particular Christian tradition) as a constant check on interpretations which may be ultimately misleading and prohibitive of fresh insight.

Thus we shall refer in these chapters to various formulations of the doctrine of the atonement, but not in order to offer any definitive

adjudication or ranking between them. Rather, we want to bring these expressions of doctrine into creative tension with the Scriptural texts which originally gave rise to them, so that Scripture may be allowed to speak with a fresh voice and that what is of lasting usefulness in that particular understanding of the atonement may emerge.

Third, *preaching is a communicative act which is rightly addressed to a specific congregation against a specific cultural backcloth*. This does not imply that the core content of a sermon should never under any circumstances be repeated, or that ‘cultural backcloths’ are monochrome. It is, rather, a way of stressing the ‘occasional’ nature of the sermon.

Preaching represents living theology. Drawing on Scripture and the tradition of its interpretation, we seek to bring ‘the grace and truth of Christ to this generation’.<sup>2</sup> That suggests that we use language, including narratives and metaphors, which is fresh and appropriate to our hearers, as well as faithful to the gospel. This freshness is more than a matter of finding suitable up-to-date ‘illustrations’ of ‘timeless truths’. It means discerning the contemporary applicability of particular doctrines, seeing the points at which *these* people at *this* time especially need to hear the message of (say) the atonement, and embodying that message in words which truly touch those points.

Not only the language, but also the structure of preaching is ‘occasional’. The *form* of the sermon has been a major theme in recent homiletics, and a variety of forms of preaching is represented in this book. The significance of this is that the ways in which the atonement may be preached are in principle as numerous as those who preach it, multiplied by the occasions on which it is preached. The existence of revealed truth should not lead us to think that narrow limits are set on the ways in which it is set forth. Indeed, the awesome nature of the subject matter should call forth all the imaginative capacities of the preacher, and inspire us to shape its presentation in such a way that the particular congregation will be able to receive it.

This means, of course, that guidance on preaching from beyond the immediate situation can only take the preacher thus far, and no further: the really crucial moments in the forging and delivery of sermons, those moments in which something living comes to birth, happen always and only in the specific context of the occasion itself and preparation for it. It means, too, that printed sermons in books can only ever be pointers beyond themselves, saying ‘this is how it was done once, or might be done – but you will have to do it a fresh way yourself’. The example may inspire; it enters, indeed, into the Christian tradition with which, as we have seen, each preacher

is called to wrestle. But a printed sermon cannot dictate others' preaching, still less substitute for it. We hope, at least, it will be clear in the sermons presented towards the end of each chapter with the comments upon them that they constitute genuine attempts to relate atonement teaching to the twenty-first century, in a range of settings that are quite diverse both ecclesiastically and socially.

The occasional character of preaching should be stressed in another way too. Every sermon is incomplete, an act of partial interpretation of Scripture and tradition cut off at an essentially arbitrary point (the moment of delivery), constrained and hemmed in by countless human contingencies: not least the background of the preacher, their state of mind, the extent and limitation of their reading, their spiritual integrity, their knowledge of the congregation whom they address. It is with such raw material that, marvellously, God works. But it is vital to disabuse ourselves of any notion that preaching is simply about the offloading of complete, neatly packaged exegeses of texts, or 'correct' formulations of doctrine. The biblical commentaries and handbooks of doctrine which are precious resources for us as preachers should themselves remind us, constantly, of the vastness of the subject-matter with which we deal, the huge areas of uncertainty surrounding the historical contingencies of revelation, and the ludicrousness of any idea that we could adequately *comprehend* the truth it is nonetheless our business to proclaim.

For the one who preaches the atonement, this means that each time we do it we shall be taking soundings in different parts of the doctrine, and finding fresh ways to bring it home to our hearers. We shall be sharing our discoveries with them, not pontificating from on high. The implications for the contents of this book are that we make no claim or attempt to provide a complete, 'state-of-the-art' summary of scholarship concerning the relevant texts or the relevant doctrines. It is not our aim to replicate the plentiful commentaries on the biblical books concerned or the considerable literature on the atonement, still less to trump them with another offering claiming to be the last word. We wish, rather, to explore ways in which Scripture, doctrine and particular preaching occasions may be fused to yield fertile and faithful interpretations of the atonement today. We hope that through the following discussions of individual texts and doctrinal formulations, the printed sermons and comments upon them, readers may be encouraged to lay this book aside and preach the atonement themselves with renewed commitment and joy.

# 1

## The cost of a father's commitment: Genesis 22.1–19

### 1. The story

The disturbing story of God's test of Abraham, known in Jewish tradition as the *Akedah*,<sup>1</sup> prompts reflection on a wide range of themes, not all immediately connected with that of atonement: for instance the nature of God's 'testing' of human beings, the meaning of faith, and ancient (or modern) attitudes to child sacrifice. Yet with its motifs of costly offering, obedience and the father-son relationship, it has resonated especially deeply with Christians through the ages as they have meditated on the meaning of the Cross.<sup>2</sup> Following the example of great interpreters such as Augustine, however, before we turn to this 'spiritual' or 'sacramental' import of the story, we will trace the contours of its 'plain' or surface meaning.<sup>3</sup>

The narrator tells us the inner meaning of the event at the outset: God is testing Abraham (v. 1). There is therefore a similarity with the story of Job (though in Job the word 'test' is not used).<sup>4</sup> Another difference from Job's story is that there is no 'Satan' here in Genesis. Job 1 and 2 probably reflect a later worldview in which there was greater reluctance to ascribe 'testing' or evil occurrences to God. The problem a modern reader has with Genesis 22 derives precisely from the strong conviction, evident through most of the Old Testament, that God's sovereignty implies his direct responsibility for all that happens;<sup>5</sup> the story is one of the sharpest and (for us) most uncomfortable evidences of this conviction.

Thus God, starkly and without intermediary, tests Abraham by telling him to go and offer his son as a burnt offering. Abraham is offered no reason (like Job, he is not privy to the information possessed by the reader about the test). God allows himself no alibi, no disguise. Indeed Abraham learns at the end that it is his simple obedience to the 'voice' of God which has won him the fresh assurance of God's

blessing on him, his descendants, and the nations through them (vv. 17, 18). It is a shame to flatten ‘my voice’ into ‘me’ as in the NIV translation of v. 18: the NIV reflects the fact that reference simply to the person (of God or of a human) is often represented in Hebrew by a locution involving a part of the body, but that should not imply that nothing is ever lost by removing the idiom in translation. In this case, ‘my voice’ reminds us of Abraham’s extraordinary risk of faith. All he had to go on was a voice that had spoken to him in the past and that, he believed, was speaking to him again now. Similarly, it is simply the voice of the LORD’s messenger (nothing is said of his appearance) which addresses him when he is about to kill Isaac (v. 11) and subsequently reiterates the promise (v. 16). It was this readiness to stake all on the call of a voice, in violation of universal ethical principle, which Søren Kierkegaard saw as the very epitome of the difficulty and paradox of faith.<sup>6</sup>

The special pathos of the story lies, of course, in the fact that the son Abraham was being asked to sacrifice was the long-awaited son whom God had promised (Gen. 17.19), through whom God’s pledges of blessing would be fulfilled. The pathos is felt with mounting intensity as the story proceeds.<sup>7</sup> The motif of the journey allows us to feel the anticipation of the dread event, though nothing is said explicitly about Abraham’s psychological state. This sickening anticipation is heightened when the point comes for the servants to be left behind with the donkey and Abraham and Isaac to go on alone (v. 5).

This final stage of the journey is recounted with methodical slowness. Nothing is said of the thoughts of either father or son, but when Isaac speaks up in v. 7 it seems natural to assume that he is breaking a long silence. He says ‘Father’ and waits for Abraham’s reply before asking the question which the reader has known all along is inevitable: ‘The fire and wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?’ (v. 7). Abraham’s laconic, tortured answer reveals a faith that is not shaken, and simultaneously a dread of telling the whole truth: ‘God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son’ (v. 8).<sup>8</sup>

The suspense continues to the very end. Even when they reach the place for the sacrifice, the narrator gets us to watch Abraham building the altar, arranging the wood, binding Isaac and laying him on the wood before we come to the terrible moment where he reaches out his hand and takes the knife to kill him (vv. 9, 10). At this last moment the LORD’s angel calls out from heaven to prevent the sacrifice from taking place (vv. 11, 12).

Verses 13 and 14 are interesting from the point of view of the mindset they reveal in the narrator and in Abraham. The response

to this wonderful reprieve is not to sing, dance and set off for home. A profound sense remains that a sacrifice must still be offered. The ram in the thicket is seen as God's provision for this purpose. After the angel's reassurance to Abraham of God's purpose for him and his descendants, the story ends in the same terse manner in which it has proceeded, laden with unexpressed emotion: 'Then Abraham returned to his servants, and they set off together for Beersheba' (v. 19). What might possibly have been said by father, son and servants? Can we even begin to imagine it? But even as we ask the question, we are confronted with the almost brutal restraint of human emotion that the narrator seeks to impose upon the reader: the sense that however profound and full of pathos the human feeling involved, the real issue at stake here is infinitely deeper and more majestic.<sup>9</sup>

The story raises the fundamental question: what kind of God is this who puts a person through such a test? Can the fact that, apparently, he never intended Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, but led him through this torment as a 'test', really exonerate him from the charge of inflicting profound emotional damage on his two protégés?<sup>10</sup>

From a Christian perspective, it is natural to ask if the God of whom this passage in its 'plain sense' speaks can be reconciled at all with the God who was to be revealed as the Father of Jesus Christ, and if there is therefore not an intolerable disjunction between the 'plain sense' and a 'spiritual' interpretation of the story as somehow referring to the atonement. A God who directly commands a man, already the object of his favour, to sacrifice his beloved son, only to relent at the last moment because the test of obedience has been passed, may seem shockingly capricious and cruel. By contrast, the New Testament picture of God's action is not of incomprehensible commands to be met by blind obedience, but of Father and Son working together in close intimacy and mutual knowledge (Jn 5.19–20), and of the Son sharing all this with his friends (Jn 15.15). Is this not, in other words, a classic case of 'progressive revelation', in which the experience of God recounted in Genesis 22 is of a very limited and partial kind by comparison with the experience of God recounted in the New Testament? On the other side of this argument, it has been pointed out that the climax of the story shows conclusively that God does *not* require child sacrifice; indeed, the story has sometimes been read precisely as a polemic against the practice. Yet this does not deal with the apparently perverse cruelty of the test itself. Why should Abraham be put through this in order to learn this lesson, and bequeath it to future generations? And is the consequence of this perversity that Genesis 22 should be consigned to the archives, rather than used to preach any gospel of atonement?

We must let this looming question stay in the background for the moment, while we move on to consider in more detail a New Testament perspective on the narrative.

## 2. Genesis 22 in New Testament perspective

Comparatively little use is made of Genesis 22 in the New Testament. Abraham is clearly an important figure in Paul's thinking, but in the key passages (Rom. 4.1–25; Gal. 3.6–18) it is God's promises and Abraham's faith (as the background for the Christian gospel and faith) that are the issue, not the meaning of the near-sacrifice. The incident in Genesis 22 is not even used, explicitly, to illustrate the strength of Abraham's faith in Rom. 4.16–25. We may certainly see an echo of Genesis 22 in Paul's words about Abraham believing in 'the God who gives life to the dead' (v. 17), but it is Abraham's faith that he would have a child at all, despite his and Sarah's age, which Paul uses for his explicit example (vv. 18–21). Heb. 11.17–19. sees Abraham's action as an example of faith in God's power to raise the dead.<sup>11</sup> Jas 2.21 cites Genesis 22 to illustrate the need for faith to be expressed in works.

The one place where the New Testament appears to draw a clear link between Genesis 22 and the atonement is Rom. 8.32: 'He who did not spare his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not also with him freely give us all things?' Douglas A. Campbell has recently mounted a strong argument, on the basis of this verse, for seeing the story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac as the key narrative underlying the whole 'story' Paul tells in Romans 8 of God's sending and giving of his Son.<sup>12</sup> But while it is plausible to see a direct allusion here – not only because of the Father-Son motif, but also because of the use of the same verb 'spare' in both Rom. 8.32 and the LXX of Gen. 22.12<sup>13</sup> – this does not take us very far in trying to answer the question of how to use *the story itself* to speak of the atonement, for Paul's allusion (in Campbell's persuasive account) entails a radical re-reading of the story, transferring Abraham's readiness to give up his son to God himself.<sup>14</sup> This raises the fundamental issue of how far Christian preaching should be dependent on the sometimes radically revisionist readings of the Old Testament in the New Testament. To anticipate my main argument, I suggest that while we will clearly wish to respect such New Testament usages as canonical Scripture, we should not take them as exhausting – or being intended to exhaust – the allusive potential of the Old Testament narratives.

Furthermore, Paul's allusion to Genesis 22 in this verse may be seen as *heightening* the theological difficulty of the original narrative: instead of overcoming its moral ambiguities, it raises them to a new plane of seriousness. Whereas Abraham *did* spare his son, in the end – by the express will of God – God '*did not spare*' his. As Anthony Clarke has recently pointed out, Rom. 8.32 is one of a number of key New Testament texts in which direct responsibility for the death of Jesus is ascribed to God.<sup>15</sup> For a contemporary reader this prompts the question whether the gospel entails the announcement of a God who is violent – violent, moreover, in a way from which our culture recoils in peculiar horror: the torture and killing of one's own child.<sup>16</sup> Clarke suggests helpfully that the way through this difficulty is to note that this language of divine responsibility in no way diminishes, for the New Testament, human responsibility (including that of Jesus himself) for the death of Jesus. The point is focused in the observation that the verb *παράδιδωμι*, 'give up', 'hand over', used with God as subject in Rom. 8.32, is used of Jesus' own self-giving in Gal. 2.20 and Eph. 5.2, 25 (suggesting that Jesus was no mere *victim*, but a willing agent) and frequently in the gospels for the 'handing-over' of Jesus by the Jewish authorities, Pilate and especially Judas Iscariot (suggesting that insofar as he *is* a victim, he is a victim of human beings).<sup>17</sup> But as soon as we return from these texts to Genesis 22, our difficulty returns, for what is highlighted here is precisely the emphasis of Rom. 8.32: *God* was behind the plan to sacrifice Isaac; Isaac does indeed appear as a victim, remaining utterly submissive throughout the narrative, but nowhere expressly joining his own will to the project; and the human being whose victim he is appears not in the guise of the 'wicked men' who conspired to do away with Jesus (Acts 2.23), but that of his own loving father obeying the voice of his God.

Thus far, therefore, it might appear safer simply to let Genesis 22 stand behind Rom. 8.32 as the story from which Paul quarried his language, rather than to use the story itself as a vehicle for preaching the truth of the atonement. Paul's words could then be set in the context of the other New Testament usages of *παράδιδωμι* with the aim of giving a balanced picture of the divine and human agencies involved in the death of Jesus.

Moreover, we should underline the point that Genesis 22 in its plain sense does not directly concern the estrangement of the human race from God and his remedy for it. Certainly it reinforces the sense that God takes the initiative in dealing with human beings; and in the restatement of God's promise it points to his great plan for

humanity. But the heart of Christian atonement teaching, in which God and humanity are reconciled through the removal of a barrier or the overcoming of an enemy, is not present here. Notwithstanding later Jewish interpretations,<sup>18</sup> it is nowhere stated that the anticipated sacrifice of Isaac, or the actual sacrifice of the ram, is a sacrifice of atonement. Indeed the meaning of the sacrifices is not stated at all. They appear to be seen as simple responses to God of obedience and worship.

This means that any 'atonement' meaning must be found via a symbolic, metaphorical or allegorical reading of some kind. But another obstacle in our way here is precisely that the story cannot be neatly turned into an allegory of salvation. Paul's apparent use in Rom. 8.32 of Abraham's readiness to sacrifice Isaac as a picture of God the Father's readiness to 'sacrifice' God the Son – entailing, of course, the potent contrast between the readiness in the first case and the actual deed in the second – screens out the fact that God himself is a key player in the story of Genesis 22, as well as Abraham. The story simply does not fit into a tidy trinitarian or soteriological shape.<sup>19</sup> We may see this clearly by asking 'where is Jesus?' in the story. We might find *traces* of Jesus in several places. We can see something of him in Abraham, in his faithful obedience to God's call and his readiness to make the most painful and paradoxical of sacrifices. We can see something of him in Isaac, in his obedient accompaniment of his father and his becoming at the end a helpless victim. And we can, of course, see something of him in the ram provided by God for the offering. If we wish, we can see traces of him in all three figures simultaneously. But what we cannot do is read off the story a clear pattern in which Jesus as Son is related to God as Father, or fulfils the Father's purpose of atonement as Christian teaching proclaims it.

These are weighty considerations. They should give us pause before using this chapter in preaching,<sup>20</sup> and they act as boundary markers, reminding us of danger zones beyond. Yet despite all this, I believe that the Christian instinct to connect this story with the atonement has been profoundly authentic. For undoubtedly, there are powerful *resonances* between the *Akedah* and the story of Christ. It is these resonances that we will explore now, and it is the mode of 'resonance' which, I believe, gives us the clue to a fitting way of preaching the atonement from this chapter.

### 3. The power of resonance

To speak of 'resonance' or 'echo' in the study of literature is to speak of the way in which one text may evoke another. Without explicit quotation – maybe even without direct verbal parallels – themes, phrases, moods can suddenly or gradually strike a reader or hearer as uncannily similar, in a way that can set off potent lines of interpretation.<sup>21</sup> The power of such connections often lies precisely in their obliqueness and understated quality. Further, such echoes may heighten a sense of contrast between texts or stories, as much as a sense of similarity. The study of 'intertextuality' may be extremely fruitful for Christians wrestling with the issue of the Old Testament's relationship to the New.

It is neither wise nor profitable to build great edifices of doctrine upon resonances or to make strong claims that the connections were 'intended' by human authors. Thus in drawing attention to resonances between Genesis 22 and the New Testament I am not claiming that the author(s) of Genesis had extraordinary insight, or that the New Testament authors were fully aware of these resonances. I am simply suggesting that within this diverse body of literature that we call Scripture there are links between different parts which can be pursued for our insight and instruction, which may be channels of God's revelation and give depth to our preaching. Here I will trace four points at which this small story of Abraham and Isaac seems to evoke and foreshadow, in a haunting fashion, the larger story of Christ which looms above and ahead.

#### a. The obedience of Abraham and Jesus

First, the implicit obedience of Abraham to the command of God, even though what was asked must have seemed up to that point utterly unthinkable, resonates deeply with the implicit obedience of Jesus, even though he understandably shrank from what was asked of *him*.<sup>22</sup> The accounts of his temptation in the wilderness (Mt. 4.1–11; Lk. 4.1–13) and his prayer in the garden of Gethsemane (Mt. 26.36–46; Mk 14.32–42; Lk. 22.39–46) reveal his intense struggle. The writer of Genesis shows us almost nothing of the inner struggles of Abraham, but that is a matter of his restrained style of writing: it does not mean that he is insensitive (or means his readers to be insensitive) to the terrible turmoil that a command like that of 22.2 must have caused. In the case of both Abraham and Jesus, it is a matter on the one hand

of the anticipation of excruciating pain – emotional with the former, emotional and physical with the latter – but on the other hand (surely) of the sheer darkness of perplexity as to why it has to be.

Linking this resonance with the doctrine of the incarnation, we may suggest that, in Jesus, God experienced for himself the utter horror of Abraham's calling in Genesis 22. How are we to expand this in a way that is faithful to classic atonement teaching yet also illuminates it freshly? One might say that God's experience in Jesus is his final and only answer to the torment of those perverse inner compulsions for which humanity has no other explanation but him. One might say, in other words, that this Old Testament story offers the profound problem to which the story of Jesus offers the profound solution: and that for us the Old Testament story is necessary to highlight the nature of the New Testament one. The charge that this implies a historical change in the character of God might be answered by saying that in Jesus, what human beings have experienced as a tension in the very being of God, between fatherly love and dangerous mystery, comes to historical resolution.<sup>23</sup> The sting of the danger is drawn even as the cost of the love is revealed. Having seen God (as it were) put himself through Abraham's test, we have no more reason to doubt his love.

### **b. The unity of father and son**

Second, the closeness of Abraham and Isaac in the story has awakened in Christian readers, from the New Testament writers onwards, the thought of the closeness of Father and Son in the life and mission of God the Holy Trinity. Isaac is Abraham's only son, whom he loves (Gen. 22.2). Jesus is revealed by God at his baptism and transfiguration as 'my son, whom I love' (Mt. 3.17; 17.5 and parallels<sup>24</sup>). He is described in John as 'God the only Son' (1.18) whom the Father loves (5.20). The Johannine picture of Father and Son acting in concert (e.g. 5.17) can be seen as imaged in the repeated portrayal of Abraham and Isaac 'going on together' (Gen. 22.6, 8). In addition, the departure of Abraham and Isaac from the servants while they go to 'worship' (Gen. 22.5) foreshadows the moment in Gethsemane when Jesus goes 'a little farther' than his disciples to pray (Mt. 26.39; Mk 14.35; Lk. 22.41). In those moments of prayer, Jesus calls on the Father, and Luke makes it especially clear that the Father has not departed from him (22.43). The Father and the Son are going together into the heart of darkness. Isaac carries the wood (Gen. 22.6) as Jesus was to do, according to John (19.17), though the

Synoptics describe that burden being borne by Simon of Cyrene (Mt. 27.32; Mk 15.21; Lk. 23.26).

This picture of the close harmony between father and son may help us set the context for Abraham's readiness to 'give' Isaac, and prevents a Christian reading of the story from driving a crude wedge between Father and Son. Here we return to Rom. 8.32, which describes God as not 'sparing' his own Son, but 'giving him up' for us all. Colin Gunton suggests that it is a serious mistake to see such a verse as implying (crudely) a God who indulges in a kind of divine child sacrifice (as if the nightmare the reader fears from the start of Genesis 22 has come true after all!) – whether this idea is (perhaps unwittingly) something advocated, or implied by hymnody, or something recoiled at. This would tear a hole in the New Testament's implicit Trinitarianism. It is precisely through the willing *self-offering of Jesus* that the New Testament sees the '*gift of God*' clearly being given.<sup>25</sup> It is this self-offering, fully expounded in Hebrews, which is evident in the life of Jesus, not least as told by John: Jesus lays down his life of his own accord (Jn 10.18). But, as Gunton points out,<sup>26</sup> this human gift is interpreted as being simultaneously the gift of God: 'God so loved the world, that he gave his only son' (Jn 3.16). Gunton further makes the vital point that this double gift turns the Old Testament notion of sacrifice on its head. *God* is now the one who sacrifices, not Israel or her priests. So, returning to Genesis 22, we may say that Abraham and Isaac *together* truly foreshadow the readiness of God, Father and incarnate Son, to give himself up.<sup>27</sup>

### c. The ram and the lamb

Third, however, we note the further richness (and complication!) of resonance that enters in when we consider the ram provided by God in the place of Isaac. For here we face the *contrast* between Abraham and Isaac on the one hand, and the action of God in Christ on the other. Abraham and Isaac were both spared, and the ram was provided to take Isaac's place. The *parallelism* now shifts from 'Isaac ~ Christ' to 'ram ~ Christ'. By the same token, Isaac can be seen as representative of the humanity now spared because of the intervention and provision of God.

Irresistibly, it seems, Christians from New Testament times onwards have seen in this image of the ram mercifully provided by God a picture of his ultimate act of merciful provision in Christ. God, through the ram, averts a terrible fate for Isaac (and Abraham): God,

through Christ, averts a terrible fate for humanity and the world, and so for us there is endless pathos in the promise of Abraham to Isaac: ‘God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son’ (Gen. 22.8). Here indeed is a graphic picture of substitution, which evokes for us John the Baptist’s words: ‘Behold, the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world’ (Jn 1.29).<sup>28</sup> We receive this lamb with open arms as, we imagine, Abraham did the ram in the thicket.

The substitution of the ram for Isaac in Genesis is not in any way *penal* substitution. There is nothing in the text to suggest that the sacrifice of Isaac was initially required as a punishment for his (or Abraham’s) misdeeds – or that an animal could in any way be ‘punished’ instead. Sacrifices were offered for a variety of purposes in antiquity generally, including within Yahwistic religion.<sup>29</sup> No clear indication of how the sacrifice of Isaac was to be conceived is offered to us; we learn only that Abraham intended to go and ‘worship’ (Gen. 22.5). This is a substitution which simply functions as sheer relief to Abraham, Isaac and the reader. It is not even as if we feel the magnanimity of God here: we are just glad that God ‘did not want that after all’. We are relieved that ‘there was another way’.

To glimpse Christ in this ram, and the ram in Christ, is to sense this relief in a profound and cosmic way. The upshot of the story is indeed that God did *not* require human sacrifice. The New Testament takes this further, showing that he does not now require animal sacrifice either. But relief is succeeded by bracing challenge. These kinds of sacrifice are replaced by a greater. The ultimate cost of this cosmic relief was infinitely more than the blood of a single ram. It was the conscious, obedient self-offering of God’s Son (Heb. 10.5–7). And that unique sacrifice sets in train the true human sacrifice which transcends all ritual (Rom. 12.1). God came most painfully to sacrifice *himself* for his people, and the upshot is that they themselves are caught up into his cosmic purposes, the vanguard of his legions in the ultimate battle.<sup>30</sup>

#### d. The promised child as victim

The fourth intertextual echo worth listening to between Genesis 22 and the New Testament is the theme of the promised one becoming the victim – apparently by the ordinance of God. Isaac, in the narrative of Genesis, was not just any ‘beloved son’, but the child of promise, the one through whom Abraham had been pledged a multitude of descendants, through whom the nations would be blessed (Gen. 12.2,

3; 15.5). So Jesus, too, was heralded as the long-awaited deliverer. Just how early in his life this perception arose, and what precisely various individuals thought they meant by the titles they gave him, and how exactly he understood his own vocation, will no doubt remain matters of dispute among historians. For our purposes, however, it is sufficient to note that the central subject of the New Testament witness is a paradox. The New Testament does not simply say that God came to fulfil his promises; nor does it simply say that a charismatic figure died a shameful (though transformative) death. It says that *it was precisely through the death of the promised Messiah that the arrival of the time of fulfilment was confirmed*.<sup>31</sup>

Reading the Isaac story in the light of this paradox, we may start to be able to glimpse the strange purpose even in this apparently perverse 'test' of Abraham. If in God's ultimate plan even Jesus Christ, the supreme 'child of promise', must die, there is a sense in which all the lesser 'children of promise', before and after, must die too. Or rather, the heirs of the promises must 'die' to every temporary manifestation of the promises' fulfilment, in order that their hope and joy may rest in the ultimate gift, not in its temporary foreshadowings or reflections. And of course in Genesis 22 it is really Abraham, not Isaac, who is called to die: Abraham who is called to put an end to cherished dreams on a cruel altar.<sup>32</sup> That calling can only begin to make sense as a part of the grand narrative at whose climax God himself discovers what it is to die, as the awful prelude to realizing his glorious dream of cosmic atonement.

It should be apparent that no one perspective on this story can possibly do justice to the wealth of echoes that it awakens. There can be no single, all-encompassing Christian reading of the passage. Indeed this text illustrates, as well as any other, what Augustine called the *mira profunditas* or 'wondrous depth' of Scripture, which we can scarcely begin to fathom.

Christian preaching that is faithful to such a text will surely seek to awaken this sense of awe at mysterious truth, always beyond our reach yet visible in flashes, audible in echoes, which transform our understanding and move our hearts and wills. It will not pretend to have mastered a text which has perplexed scholars and theologians for centuries; nor will it shirk the hard questions it elicits from readers and hearers. The following sermon seems to fulfil these requirements.

**Sermon**<sup>33</sup>

Some time later God tested Abraham  
And what a test: 'sacrifice your son, your only son'.  
Take him to a mountain and bind him and sacrifice him.

Human sacrifice wasn't uncommon  
Abraham had answered the call to obey god in the past  
And now he realized that this god was just like all the other gods  
For some reason needing human sacrifice  
And so he took his son and set out on the fateful journey.

Can you imagine it?  
Early the next morning, when he got up, the sinking feeling that he felt  
Right in his guts, in the pit of his stomach  
He was going to obey this god and kill his son

This is unthinkable to us  
And to him, well he could hardly move with grief

As he saddled the donkey, he thought of the past  
All the good times they had had  
He had seen him grow from a baby  
Heard his first words  
Seen him walk  
And grow and grow  
This was part of him and today it was going to die

And think of his mother  
How would she cope?  
Hearing that her son had been sacrificed by her husband

Imagine him cutting the wood for the burnt offering  
Each stroke of the axe bringing pain  
This was his son who was going to die

And each step of the journey to the mountain  
Did he think of turning back?  
Did he think of throwing it all in and going his own way?  
But he was constrained  
Trapped in the will of god

Unable to depart from him  
Even with this horrible thing hanging over him

And then, as his son spoke the words he had feared all along  
It was too much for him  
'Dad, where's the sacrifice?  
We've got everything but not the lamb for the sacrifice  
Fire. Wood. The knife but...'  
I wonder if Isaac suspected  
Even if he didn't the pain in Abraham's voice  
The look on his face must have given it away  
His words stuck in his throat  
'God will provide it' he said.

I wonder, as Abraham arranged the wood, if Isaac was looking around for the sacrifice.

I wonder if Abraham was able to look into the face of his son as he tied him to the altar.

Could he look into his eyes?  
As he reached for the knife  
As he lifted it up in the air  
As he paused, ready to strike...

Stop

You have passed the test  
You fear God. You did not withhold your only son from me

One day God tested Abraham.  
God did indeed provide  
And because of it, all nations have been blessed  
One day God tested Abraham.

*One day God tested himself.  
And what a test: 'sacrifice your Son, your only son'  
Take him to the hill and bind him and sacrifice him.*

*Human sacrifice wasn't uncommon  
The Romans were doing it all the time  
Would he pass the test?  
It seems a barbaric thing to ask  
But committed to righteousness and justice  
He took his son and set out on the fateful journey*

*Can you imagine it?*

*That last morning when he got up, the sinking feeling that he felt  
Right in his guts, in the pit of his stomach  
He was going to do this and kill his son*

*This is unthinkable to us  
And to him, well the grief welled up in his mind  
He watched it all from a high vantage point  
As he appeared before Pilate and the chief priests  
As he went from soldier to soldier  
As he was struck and spat upon  
Maybe he thought of all the things he had seen and planned*

*All the good times they had had  
He had seen him grow from a baby  
Heard his first words  
Seen him walk  
And grow in the wisdom and stature of God  
This Jesus was part of him and today it was going to die*

*And think of his mother  
How would she cope?  
Hearing that her son had been sacrificed by his own Father*

*Imagine him  
He had made the very tree  
Created it from his own hands  
He had seen it cut down  
And fashioned into a rough cross  
And all the time he thought about his son*

*And as he saw each step his son took  
On the way to the hill  
Did he think of calling it all off  
Did he think of throwing it all in and letting these people go their own way*

*But he was constrained  
Trapped by his own love  
Unable to depart from his own plan.  
He had sworn by himself  
Right back in Abraham's day, that all people would be blessed  
And now was the time to bless the nations*

*And he never broke a promise  
Even with this horrible thing hanging over him*

*And then, as his son spoke the words he had feared all along  
It was too much for him  
'Dad, where's the sacrifice?  
We've got everything but not the sacrifice  
The cross and the nails but...'*

*We know that the son suspected  
We know that the son knew all  
But even then it stuck in the father's throat  
'I will provide the sacrifice' he said*

*I wonder if the Father could look, as the crosses were laid on the ground, ready for  
their victims  
I wonder if Abraham was able to look into the face of his son as he was nailed to  
this altar  
Could he look into his eyes?  
As the hammer blows rained down  
As the cross was about to be lifted up into the air  
As he paused,*

*Stop  
BUT NO ONE WAS THERE TO SAY STOP  
No one was there  
And the cross was lifted up  
And this son  
And this father  
Experienced the agony of separation  
No one to say stop as they mocked him as he died  
No one to say stop as they gave him wine vinegar  
No one to say stop as those being crucified with him hurled insults at him  
No one to say stop as he cried out  
Oh and how those words rang in the father's ears  
My God my God why have you forsaken me?  
Why? Why?  
What sort of God are you?  
What sort of dad are you?  
But there was no one to say stop  
And he died*

*You have passed the test, God*

*You kept your promise.*

*You did not withhold your only son from me*

*You passed the test*

*One day God tested himself*

*He did what he had never asked anyone else to do*

*God did indeed provide the sacrifice*

*And because of it, all nations have been blessed*

*God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only son so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but have eternal life.*

*God, who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?*

### Commentary

In what respects does this sermon illustrate our preceding discussion?

First, we note the simple two-part structure: the story of Abraham and Isaac, then the story of Jesus. God tests Abraham: God tests himself. One story is ‘laid alongside’ the other, in a way suggestive of the idea of ‘parable’.<sup>34</sup> This conjunction of stories stays close to the form of Scripture, which presents a variety of discrete narratives alongside each other, offering many possibilities for the reader to make mutual interconnections, but which often draws few explicit conclusions from those links. On a grand scale this is true of the conjunction of Old and New Testaments. The New Testament does of course make a number of explicit connections with its predecessor narrative, but these function as tokens or hints, pointers to the reader to make their own explorations – for which the possibilities are almost endless. This sermon takes the hint supplied by Paul in Rom. 8.32 and sensitively draws out some of the possibilities of intertextual echo between Genesis 22 and the story of Jesus’ passion.

The structural device of simply following one story with another – with just enough echoes of the first in the second to spark the imagination, but not so many as to suggest that wooden point-by-point typologizing or allegorizing is being attempted – invites a profound mutual illumination between them and allows the hearer to ponder the mystery of the overarching narrative of God’s purposes

which holds the two together. For many hearers, this might well shed startling fresh light upon the meaning of the passion: not so that 'it all makes sense', or becomes easy, but on the contrary so that it is broken open from the safe tameness of 'standard' explanations in which it can easily become enclosed, and be glimpsed as the unfathomable cosmic drama it really is.<sup>35</sup>

Second, we note the focus of the intertextual echoes which are awakened here. It centres upon the second of the four broad possibilities outlined above, viz. the close relationship between father and son, augmented by aspects of the fourth, viz. the promised child becoming a victim – especially in relation to the cost paid by both fathers. The other possibilities lurk in the shadows – the obedience of Jesus, the substitution of the ram – but neither of these receives direct attention. It was surely a wise decision not to overload the sermon with these (or other) further dimensions. The preacher needs to tread a path between (on the one hand) opening up the wealth of Scripture's possibilities and (on the other hand) offering to the hearers a single clear trajectory for them to pursue on this one occasion. There is rich fare here for ongoing meditation, without any implication that this exhausts the story(-ies) or constitutes the final word upon them.

In focusing upon the father-son relationship, the preacher alludes to the language of Rom. 8.32, not shrinking from some shocking expressions (*He was going to do this and kill his son... And think of his mother / How would she cope? / Hearing that her son had been sacrificed by his own Father*). But he guards against the danger, outlined above, of isolating Paul's words in such a way as to drive a wedge between the persons of the Trinity. He succeeds in this fundamentally because, in the second story, the pain being communicated is clearly that of the Father as well as that of the Son; indeed even before it is that of the Son. In presenting the attitude of Jesus, the emphasis is very much on the traditions of his agony and despair (*What sort of God are you? / What sort of dad are you?*), rather than those of his humble obedience, but this is balanced by the vivid and moving expression of the essential unity between Father and Son (*This Jesus was part of him and today it was going to die*).

Third, see the way in which the preacher helps the hearer to enter into the emotion of both stories (and therefore the overarching story), without shirking the pain, yet without sentimentality. Scripture's restraint in *describing* emotion is not, as Erich Auerbach showed with respect to Genesis 22,<sup>36</sup> equivalent to a lack of interest in *suggesting* it. Indeed its very restraint makes the emotion more powerful, and this is surely as true for the passion narratives as for Genesis 22. The

preacher stands between the text and contemporary hearers. Simply to replicate the text(s) in all respects would be to abjure the calling to preach: mere repetition is not our business. We are called, surely, to help people to enter into the moods of the various stories, and that means to draw out, without mawkishness, some of their suppressed and implied emotion. This entails an act of imaginative empathy both with the stories and with our hearers.

Thus the preacher speaks of ‘the sinking feeling that he felt / Right in his guts, in the pit of his stomach’; the fathers’ memories of ‘All the good times they had had’; the mothers’ feelings; the fathers’ sense of being constrained and trapped; the appalling moments as the climax looms (‘Could he look into his eyes?’); the utter bewilderment of the son (apparent more in the presentation of the second story, but clearly echoing back from it into that of the first). Note too the preacher’s respect for the congregation in not seeking to impose emotion upon them or imply that his own reading is ‘canonical’, seen in the repeated phrase ‘I wonder...’. In all of this, not just overt messages but a subliminal one are being conveyed: that the drama of atonement is played out not just on a distant and alien heavenly stage, but on earth, among men and women very like us. The human embrace of the sermon reflects – *contributes to!* – the atoning God’s own embrace of humanity.

Thus like all productive sermons, and Scripture itself, this one suggests far more than can be captured in words, yet tells the gospel story with striking simplicity.