

## **SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT - B**

**February 25, 2018**

*First Reading – Genesis 22:1-2, 9a, 10-13, 15-18*

*Responsorial Psalm – Psalm 116*

*Second Reading – Romans 8:31b-34*

*Gospel – Mark 9:2-10*

**My dear people of God:**

I wish to start our reflection today with our Responsorial Psalm: *“I will walk before the Lord, in the land of the living”* and one entire stanza: *“O LORD, I am your servant; I am your servant, the son of your handmaid; you have loosed my bonds. To you will I offer sacrifice of thanksgiving, and I will call upon the name of the LORD”*.

That entire stanza will usher us into a deeper understanding and appreciation of the First Reading. But first allow me to quote a bible scholar who said that: *“the Bible may be described as a four-part symphony, moving from creation to the fall, then on to redemption and finally re-creation. The book of Genesis lays the foundation for the rest of the Bible by narrating briefly the first two movements, while beginning the third. The fourth movement is the subject of the last two chapters of the Bible”*.

Genesis is the first book of the Bible and the first of five books (the Pentateuch) written by Moses. Eleven chapters of the Book of Genesis describe the creation of all things by the mighty acts of the One True God, human rebellion, punishment, and restoration (Genesis 1–11:9). The remainder of the book (from chapter 11:10 till chapter 50: 26) explains the origins of the people of God, Israel, and their place in God’s plan of redemption.

Brothers and sisters, please know that there isn’t much background information in regards to historical and cultural information that Moses wrote in Genesis 22:1-19. But we will try to look into the whole Pentateuch (the five books) an awareness of the historical origins of Israel. It is important in order to understand the significance of our first reading.

**First: We must understand that Moses is telling the story of the Patriarch Abraham as God tested him to sacrifice his son Isaac. Moses is telling this story to his own people. Knowing who the audience is and how they could have reacted at the hearing of this story is of much value as we undertake to comprehend this portion of the Old Testament (Hebrew Scriptures).**

Israel is the recipient of this message. This is the story of God's test to Abraham, yet His providence is present in the midst of it. The theme of sacrifice is significant in this passage. An awareness of the culture of Israel at the time is important to know as well. Three questions can come to mind as one reads this story: (1) If God had forbidden child sacrifice in Israel, why would God ask Abraham to offer his child as a holocaust (a burnt offering)? (2) where is *"the land of Moriah"* in verse 2? (3) why is there not a word about Sarah in this episode?

**Second: We must understand that the context of Genesis is in relation to the entire Pentateuch (five books). The Pentateuch has the same author and same audience. In relation to Genesis 22:1-19 what happens before and after is of much importance to know. What occurs before is that God makes a covenant with Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3) promising him to be a father of many nations, land, and blessing. Abraham has a son Ishmael with Hagar but he is not the son of promise (Genesis 16). Abraham has *another son Isaac with Sarah* and *he is the son of promise* (Genesis 21).**

Ishmael and Hagar are sent away (Genesis 21:8-21) by Abraham. In the midst of it all, God is asking Isaac to be sacrificed unto Him (Genesis 22:1-19). Why would God ask such a thing if He is to fulfill the promises He had made to Abraham?

The story turns out well for Abraham (although Abraham's experience was a harrowing one), as he has faith and acts in obedience to the request from God and Isaac's life is spared.

What occurs after that? Soon after, we will hear about Sarah's death and burial (Genesis 23) followed by the search for a bride for Isaac (Genesis 24). This passage is in the midst of God's purposeful instruction with Abraham and those who were to come.

In Salvation History, this story is found after the FALL and before REDEMPTION. The covenant with Abraham is a promise of the kingdom of

**God: God's people (Abraham's descendants) in God's place (the Promised Land) under God's rule and therefore enjoying His blessing. It is a promise to reverse the effects of the FALL.**

**We must understand much of the Old Testament in the aspect of God's Redemptive History. This concise narrative is a chapter in the history of salvation. Awareness of this larger story heightens the drama. For it is not only the life of a single child (Isaac) that is in jeopardy; nor is it the existence of Israel, but the coming of the Messiah and the entrance of the nations into the Kingdom of God. Pausing and meditating on this aspect is significant; it is a decisive moment in Salvation History. Having said such, please allow me to say that Isaac can be a figure of Jesus Christ, though the analogy is weak and lame. Weak and lame because God provided a ram as a substitute for Isaac. But God did not spare His own Son, Jesus.**

**The first location where Abraham heard the voice of God was in Beersheba. Then God commanded Abraham to head towards the land of Moriah. It is interesting to know, "The distance from Beersheba to Mount Moriah was about 50 miles. It must have been an excruciating Moriah Carry (*no pun intended for the lady singer*) for Isaac to carry the wood to the summit.**

**The characters which are involved in this story are God, Abraham, his servants, Isaac, and the angel of the Lord. Here are seven scenes in this passage:**

**Scene 1: God and Abraham (verses 1 to 2)**

**Scene 2: Abraham and his servants (verses 3 to 5)**

**Scene 3: Abraham and Isaac (verses 6 to 8)**

**Scene 4: Abraham and Isaac (verses 9 to 10)**

**Scene 5: The angel of the Lord and Abraham (verses 11 to 14)**

**Scene 6: The angel of the Lord and Abraham (verses 15 to 18)**

**Scene 7: Abraham and his servants (verse 19)**

**The author's (who happens to be Moses) big idea seems to be: The Lord provides a ram/lamb for a burnt offering so that Isaac may live. The main question that must be asked is what is God's message to Israel by way of this story? What is the point for Israel? The genre of this passage is narrative, it's a story. Through the plot selection it will be argued that this is the author's (Moses) big idea.**

Brothers and sisters: looking into scene 1, God tests Abraham (verses 1 to 2), we can see that God tests Abraham; and as readers, we are aware, but Abraham is not. Please be mindful that the divine command which God gives to Abraham here is intense and we need to be analytical in terms of grammar. The test is magnified by the three direct objects of the imperative: (1) *your son*; (2) *your precious son whom you love*; (3) *Isaac*. Abraham is instructed to offer Isaac as a holocaust or a whole burnt offering.

It seems quite contradictory and there are many speculations to why this is occurring but we must understand that : “any Israelite who heard this story would take it to mean that his race owed its existence to the mercy of God and its prosperity to the obedience of their ancestor”.

It may be difficult for us to comprehend how Abraham could have even considered obeying God’s appalling command. But we need to accept that such command was a test of Abraham’s faith, as Moses ( the story teller) stated in verse 1: “to put Abraham to the test”. And Abraham passes the test. Abraham’s willingness to obey the divine imperative is sufficient evidence that he is committed to God. The story defines the meaning *yir’eh elohim*. It is ‘obedience which does not hold back even what is most precious, when God demands it, and commits to God even that future which He Himself has promised”. Abraham gave a commemorative name to the spot: *yahweh yir’eh* (“Yahweh will provide”).

Abraham realized that through the ram God was providing a substitute for Isaac, his son. This incident was foundational for the Mosaic way of thinking. Later on, our own Christian teaching of substitutionary atonement followed the Israelite thinking. A proverb arose which commemorated the Moriah test. Some disagreement exists as to how the proverb should be translated. Some render it, “On the mountain of the Lord, it will be provided”; others say it as “on the mount the Lord provides.” In either case the meaning is captured: When God’s people reach the summit of their faith, the Lord will always provide (22:13–14).

The outcome (verses 15-18) is that Isaac is spared and Abraham obeyed God. We speak of “the meritoriouness of Abraham” and we are convinced that “the central thrust of the story is Abraham’s wholehearted obedience and great blessings that have flowed from it.

This passage is Christocentric as it relates to the Person, Work, and Teaching of Christ as revealed in the New Testament. God, not Abraham, paid the price of redemption. Indeed, only God could pay the price. He paid it, not in providing a ram or a lamb, but in providing His own Son. In the fullness of time, the Lord provides His Son as the final ransom required for redemption. John the Baptist introduces Jesus as *“the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”* (John 1:29). Jesus Himself proclaims that He came *“to give His life as a ransom for many”* (Mark 10:45).

Let us go to the Second Reading: Confidence can be a very good thing. Paul gives us every reason to be confident, not in ourselves but in the sovereign God who is accomplishing it. Paul’s words offer us hope and confidence in the midst of a fallen world; these are words of comfort and reassurance.

Paul uses a question and answer format. Verses 31 to 34 contain one or more questions. The questions are personal, “Who?” rather than impersonal, “What?” The confidence and comfort Paul wishes us to experience results from the fact that there is no answer. The question, “Who will bring a charge against God’s elect?” (verse 33), gives great comfort because there is no answer. No one will bring a charge against us.

### If God is for us...

In the context, the “us” must mean, *“those of us who are in Christ.”* God is “for” His children. He is “for us” in the sense that He has chosen us, predestined us to be conformed to the image of His Son, Jesus Christ, and cannot be interpreted or applied apart from His purpose. God is not “for us” in some nebulous, undefined way. We do not have the promise that God will deal with us in any way that we ask or desire. The prosperity gospels promise a God who is a kind of magic genie, as though we need but inform Him how He can serve us. God is “for us” in a way that produces the “good” He has prepared for us for all eternity. It is *God’s prerogative* to define “good,” not ours.

Since God did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up to benefit us all, we may be certain, after such a gift, that He will not refuse anything He can give. The only one who can mete out divine punishment has meted it out on His own Son so that we might be saved. Who, then, can accuse us? Who, then, can condemn

us? No one can legitimately accuse us. No one can rightfully condemn us. The One who was our *Judge* has become our *Justifier*.

Today self-confidence is looked upon as a virtue and lack of self-assurance as a vice. Even in Christian circles we are being told how we can raise our children so that they feel good about themselves, are self-assured, and confident. The Bible calls for *humility*, not pride; for dependence on God, not self-sufficiency. Let us beware of seeking that which God's Word condemns. Let us look to God, to God alone. He is our refuge and strength. In Him alone, is our confidence.

Now, let us go to the gospel: please understand that in the narrative of the Baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist, it is not clear if anyone else saw the heavens opened or the Holy Spirit descending upon Jesus. The voice from heaven was for Jesus alone to hear.

The Transfiguration is a very different kind of a revealing, however. Jesus becomes a beacon, like a lighthouse planted in the middle of the desert. The heavenly voice addresses all the witnesses: Peter, James, and John. Today, Jesus is revealed and certainly noticed.

There is an open manifestation of WHO JESUS IS in the TRANSFIGURATION. The Transfiguration narrative must be viewed as the celebration of the visible. The Transfiguration presents an opportunity to declare love for the one called "Son." We are in the presence of THE HOLY. The Transfiguration does not sketch an image of intimidating purity or self-satisfied and inviolable majesty. It is tender holiness. The scene is a reminder that holiness, as a characteristic of God, is participatory and shared. God loves, so God interacts. This holiness expresses itself in self-giving, for that is what happens when someone adores and celebrates SOMEONE ELSE.

The sights and sounds of the Transfiguration also suggest that Peter, James, and John find themselves on holy ground, in privileged company. After all, Jesus appears alongside Moses and Elijah, the two greatest prophets in Jewish memories. The prophecies of the prophets of old, as symbolized by the presence of Elijah; and the laws as legislated by Moses find their fulfillment in the PERSON OF CHRIST. Such is the most profound manifestation in the Transfiguration.

**Many things made those two ancient prophets great. For one thing, in the Bible each shares a moment of striking intimacy with God, through Moses' face-to-face ENCOUNTERS with GOD and his glimpse of God's backside (Exodus 33:7-23) and Elijah's ENCOUNTER with GOD in a strange "*sound of sheer silence*" (1 Kings 19:11-13).**

**At the Transfiguration, then, Jesus stands in impressive company, sharing the moment with two others who know what it is to share close communion with God. The bright light of the Transfiguration affirms life, a light that shines UPON US into Lent to keep that season in perspective, never without hope and confidence. This light re-affirms a promise that God is here. And that God is knowable. God seeks relationship. Because God is life. The Transfiguration is the promise of a kind of life beyond what is apparent to earthly eyes most of the time. Both Moses and Elijah, two figures whose passing were mysterious, were believed by many Jews to be God's precursors of the end times.**

**Brothers and sisters, because Elijah went bodily into heaven (2 Kings 2:9-12); and because the grave of Moses can never be located because he was buried by God Himself in a valley in Moab as we can read in the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 34, verses 5 to 7, these two men of the faith were thought to be available for God to send back. God would send them to inform humankind that God's reign was at hand. It is no accident that these two appear with Jesus on the mountain.**

**May we see the glorious countenance of God in heaven for all eternity. Amen.**