Call to Worship

At times, O Maker, it’s like You have forgotten us or that You have hidden your face from us; but we trust in your steadfast love.

At times, O Christ, it’s like you have let us bear the pain in our hearts and sorrow in our souls all day long; but we trust in your steadfast love.

At times, O Spirit, it’s like You have hidden the light from us and we are sleep walking towards oblivion; but we trust in your steadfast love.

At this time, Holy Trinity of Love, assure us of your love, remind us You are there, help us bear our pain and sorrow, and awaken us to You presence amongst us as we worship as we trust in your steadfast love.

Prayers of Approach, Confession and Forgiveness

Ancient One,
we trust You, we adore You, and we worship You,
for You have been ever faithful.
When we doubt You, turn away from You, or mishear You,
Your arms are always wide open in welcome as we turn back to You.

Lord Jesus,
You call us to follow You,
just as Abraham of old was called to leave everything to find new life and faith.
Help us, as we follow, to listen for your voice,
spoken in ancient words, and contemporary interpretation,
heard in song and silence,
held in discernment and discussion,
reverberating deep in our consciences, filling us with awe and joy.

Abiding Spirit,
inspire us to turn around as we hear Your voice,
to change our preconceptions,
to leave behind bitterness, anger, and self-righteousness,
that in humility we may hear anew and respond with love -
Your love which echoes throughout all eternity. Amen.

Friends, here is good news,
the Most High, the Eternal One, aches with love for us,
and forgives us when we get it wrong.
Turn back to God, allow yourselves to be loved completely,
and to respond by showing love in all we do. Amen.

All Age Introduction

It’s very easy to misunderstand something we hear – the older we are the more we may miss things that we thought we’d once hear easily. Today we’re going to hear a story about Abraham who really believed God had asked him to do something but when we read the story we struggle to believe that God had asked him to kill his son. Maybe Abraham misheard – it’s easy enough. (Go and whisper something to the nearest person to you and ask them to whisper it to someone else. They can’t repeat or discuss it, simply pass it on. See how well the message has been conveyed once it’s been round lots of people) One of the reasons we make decisions in groups in our church is because we believe that’s a better way of understanding and hearing God’s voice; we believe God speaks to us in groups, through discussion, reflection, question, even gentle argument. I suspect Abraham might have heard God better if he’d had a discussion with Sarah!

Prayer for Illumination

Open our souls Eternal Majesty,
that as we hear the Word read and proclaimed,
it may resonate in our hearts.
Open our hearts, Lord Jesus,
to hear and interpret Your Word for us this day.
Open our minds, Abiding Spirit,
that as we hear Your disturbing Word,
You might provoke an inextinguishable longing for truth in us. Amen.

Readings

Genesis 22:1-14  |  Psalm 13 1 – 6

Sermon Notes

The Genesis passage is horrific and distressing. How do we deal with a passage that is so far removed from who we understand God to be? Do we change our view of God or our view of the passage? Believers have wrestled with it for millenia.
Where’s Sarah? Abraham, Isaac, the servant, the wood, the knife, the fire, the Ram, and God are all there but no Sarah! The rabbis of old thought that this episode caused Sarah grief and led to her death – she dies at the start of the next chapter. Maybe Sarah was grieved as she had a different view of God to Abraham – maybe she knew God would not command such abuse; what Abraham felt was transcendence she saw was horror. Did Abraham tell Sarah of his plans? Did she object or collude? Did she die of grief when Abraham went or in shock if he told her after the event?

Abraham offers no objection to what he thinks is God’s command. He did, earlier on in Genesis, object to God’s plans to destroy Sodom and made a bargain with God about finding righteous people there, but today he does not argue, question or attempt to bargain with what he believes to be God’s voice.

But Abraham is a problematic figure. He’s already moved away from, and moved Sarah from, his homeland and family. He’s been more than happy to pass Sarah off as his sister not his wife when Pharoah expresses interest in her. Abraham does rather well out of that deal – Pharoah and Sarah rather less so. Abraham has another son, Ishmael, but Isaac is Sarah’s only son.

Consequences – what’s Isaac’s relationship like with his father after this? Abraham lives in Beersheba but Sarah lives out her last days in Hebron – did she leave him? (Who could blame her if she did?)

Traditionally the passage is used to show wholehearted dedication to God where God demands someone that Abraham loves more than life itself yet, at the last minute, God, having asked for sacrifice, provides the Ram instead. But what on earth was going on here? This was no way to show obedience to God. This was no way to show religiosity to his wife. For those of us who wish to love children and God this is not a good passage. For those of us who know anything about child abuse this passage is terrible.

Maybe Sarah saw God as love; maybe Abraham saw God with unthinking awe and fear.

The earliest Jewish interpretation of the story is in the Book of Jubilees which saw this as a test God allowed Satan to perform - like he would do of Job. Satan, the rabbis believed had said that Abraham’s love for God wasn’t complete. The test then was to demonstrate publicly what God and Abraham already knew – that God would never truly ask this and that Abraham had faith that God would stop it.

In times of persecution Jewish people used the story – Abraham’s altar was only a trial but the lived experience of Jews throughout millennia has involved real sacrifice with millions being killed yet still believe in God’s faithfulness prevails. When forced to convert to Christianity in medieval Europe Jews might kill each other as a sacrifice, inspecting the knife for blemishes, before saying a prayer of sacrifice and making reference to this story.
Christian interpretation has focused on Jesus’ Passion. Jesus’ prayers in Gethsemane are reminiscent of Isaac asking his father why this must happen. Yet there are differences – in Gethsemane the victim pushes himself forward; he’s bound by enemies not his father. Isaac becomes a type of Christ. Other Christian interpretation focuses on God having an angel stop Abraham’s actions; God protects the weak – though that forgets the bit about God ordering the sacrifice in the first place – though the rabbis struggled with this interpretation due to their experience of God not stopping the persecution.

Danish theologian Kierkegaard saw in this the suspension of the ethical due to Abraham’s great faith. Religious faith, he wrote, trumps the normal ethical norms and standards – whether that’s a good thing is a matter of some debate! Kierkegaard saw Abraham’s greatness as trusting in God despite the odds. Without faith Abraham might have offered himself, wrote Kierkegaard but his great faith made him offer Isaac; one suspects Isaac might have wished for rather less faith on his father’s part.

What might we do with this? Might we say that Abraham misunderstood God and finally came to his senses? Might we say that if Abraham can get it wrong then so can the Church when it hides abuse of all sorts, especially child abuse? Might the compiler of the Lectionary have suggested Psalm 13 as a lament that Isaac or Sarah might have prayed? Might a sermon focus on listening to God, realising that discernment happens in groups, and that getting it wrong can be devastating?

Affirmation of Faith

We believe, O Most High, that you speak to us in song and silence, in word and witness, in worship and work. Help us to discern Your voice.

We believe, O Lord Jesus, that You call us to listen and follow, to turn around and change direction, leaving behind all that drags us down. Help us to discern Your voice.

We believe, O Holy Spirit, that You speak to us as we discern and discuss together, always calling us to love and justice. Help us to discern Your voice.

We believe, O God, that You are always heard best in community. Help us to discern Your voice.

Intercessions

We bring our prayers to God, the Eternal Trinity who knows our needs, soothes our pain, and inspires us to act.

We pray, Majestic One, for those who suffer at the hands of those who believe they have heard Your voice but use Your words to wound and maim. We pray for women silenced in many faith traditions, told how to dress, denied education and agency at the
hands of religious leaders who claim to know You. We pray for those who are persecuted by those who think they know You and Your ways. We pray for those abused and harmed by the Church. (pause)

**Give comfort, sustain faith, and through us, bring justice.**

We pray, Crucified One, for those who torment and torture in the name of faith. We pray for those who abuse and use others, who find the Church a safe place to wound and bully, and for the hierarchs who deny and hide the truth, that they may all hear Your voice, and see your blinding light which will both terrify and change them. (pause)

**Give comfort, sustain faith and through us, bring justice.**

We pray, Abiding Spirit, that we may know Your love, a love that speaks into our souls, disturbs us, makes us see the world as it is, and to question what we read – even what we read in the Bible. May You speak to us as we discern and discuss in community, that we understand, and follow, Your will for us – Your will for love and liberation. (pause)

**Give comfort, sustain faith and through us, bring justice.**

We pray, Eternal Trinity, for those we know and love who are in any kind of need....(longer pause)

**Give comfort, sustain faith, and, through us, bring justice.**

We join all our prayers together as we pray as Jesus taught saying....Our Father..

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**Offertory**

Our Biblical story today is often seen as being about sacrifice and giving; instead many think it’s about not fully discerning God’s will. Giving is part of our faith, thoughtful giving which looks at how to alleviate need, fulfil our responsibilities and change our world. Our giving, whether that’s loose change or notes in the collection, planned giving through envelopes or the bank or one off gifts to church or charity all help change our world and ourselves. We are changed by giving, our giving changes things. Let’s pray.

Eternal God,
all good things come from you
and, in our giving, we allow more good to come.
Bless these gifts, and enable us to be blessed as we give,
that Your Kingdom will come. Amen.
Holy Communion

The Lord be with you! And also with you!
Lift up your hearts. We lift them up to the Lord.
Let us give thanks to the Lord our God. It is right for us to give thanks.

It is right, always and everywhere, to give You thanks, Eternal Majesty; since before the ages began You yearned to love and care for Creation and, in the fullness of time, You called a people to be Your own.
From the Jewish people You raise up women and men to hear and respond to You.
In due course You became one with humanity through Jesus, Your enfleshed word.
He taught us to live for you, welcomed the poor and the outcast, preached good news and overturned the tables, proclaiming Your coming kingdom.
He was struck down yet You raised him on high, and called all people to Your side, loving us even when we mishear or misuse Your words of love.

And so, with angels and archangels, we join with all creation to sing your praise:

The Ash Grove Sanctus

O holy, most holy, the God of creation, for ever exalted in pow’r and great might.
The earth and the heavens are full of your glory.
Hosanna, hosanna and praise in the height!

How blessed is He who is sent to redeem us, who puts ev’ry fear and injustice to flight;
who comes in the name of the Lord as our Saviour.
Hosanna, hosanna and praise in the height.

Eternal One, we give You thanks and praise for all Your many gifts to us, we remember how, throughout the ages, You have called us to be Your people.

As Your people, we have, in many ways, allowed You to change and challenge us. We have learnt of Your care for all people, of Your nurturing, mothering love, we have learnt of the way You take power from the powerful and lift up the poor and oppressed.
We have learnt, despite the silence,
of the many women You have used
to spread Your Kingdom of love, peace, and joy.

And now we remember one man who gave up power,
and who became like us in all things but sin.
We remember Jesus, who washed his servants' feet,
and who, before dying, took some bread,
said the blessing, broke it, gave it to the others and said,

"Take this all of you and eat it.
This is my body which will be broken for you, do this and remember me."

Later on he took a cup filled with wine,
said the blessing, gave it to the others and said:

"Take this all of you and drink from it, for this is the cup of my blood,
the blood of the new and everlasting promise of God
which shall be shed for you and for all, do this and remember me."

As the people of God, let us proclaim the mystery of our faith.....

**Christ has died! Christ is Risen! Christ will come again!**

Eternal One,
we ask You to send Your healing and wise Spirit
upon these gifts of bread and wine;
bless them and make them holy.
We ask that You transform them into the Body and Blood of Jesus,
and to continue to transform us into truly being Your people.
With the entire company of Your people throughout the ages,
we join with those who are oppressed and excluded
to proclaim Your love and liberty for all.

Through Jesus, with Jesus, in Jesus,
all glory and honour belongs to You,
Eternal Majesty, with Your Abiding Spirit,
for ever and ever. Amen.

To prepare ourselves to meet the Lord in Holy Communion let us sing the Lamb of God.
Lamb of God (Ar Hyd Y Nos)
Nick Fawcett © 2008 Kevin Mayhew Ltd

Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world.
In your mercy, come and heal us, Lord hear our prayer.
Take away our sins, forgive us,
Lamb of God, restore, redeem us,
grant us peace, Lord, in your mercy, Lord hear our prayer.

Post Communion Prayer

Lord God, in deep gratitude for this moment, this meal, these people, we give ourselves to You.

Take us out to live as changed people, because we have shared the living bread and cannot remain the same.

Ask much of us, expect much from us, enable much by us, encourage many through us.

So, Lord, may we live to Your glory, both as inhabitants of earth, and citizens of heaven. Amen

Blessing

May the One who calls us in the day and the night, allow you to hear and understand.
May the One who let the silenced speak and the downcast rise, enable you to speak and be heard.
May the One who inspires love and justice, bless you with passion, and the blessing of Almighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, rest upon you now and always, Amen.
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RS - *Rejoice & Sing* | CH4 – *Church Hymnary 4* | StF – *Singing the Faith* | MP – *Mission Praise*

A metrical version of Psalm 13 to 7676D can be found here
https://hymnary.org/text/how_long_wilt_thou_forget_me_o_lord_thou

A contemporary hymn about the Genesis passage, *When Abraham Went Up* Carolyn Winfrey Gillette can be found here [https://www.carolynshymns.com/](https://www.carolynshymns.com/) It’s set to Leoni so don’t also have *The God of Abram Praise* or *Praise to the Living God!*