

**Homily for the Second Sunday of Lent, Year (B)**

for St. Anthony Messenger Press Lenten Audio Series

by

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Readings from Cycle B

Genesis 22:1-2, 9a, 10-13, 15-18 - The sacrifice of Abraham, our father in faith

Psalms 116: 10, 15, 16-17, 18-19 I will walk before the Lord, in the land of the living

Romans 8:31b-34 - God did not spare his own Son

Mark 9:2-10 - This is my beloved Son

**Looking into the Heart of the Father**

I remember the day so well. The parish secretary phoned over to the rectory looking for me. A call had just come in asking for a priest following a tragic accident at the home of a family which had recently moved into the parish. The father and his teenage son were building an addition on to the house. The father went into the garage to get some tools. The son continued working on the supports beneath the structure when it suddenly collapsed on him. The boy was killed instantly. He was the man's only son.

There was not a person in the parish who was not deeply affected as they saw how this terrible blow left the father grief stricken. Despite the fact that the father and the son were relative newcomers, people connected with him in a very deep and intimate way as they shared his sorrow.

His words said so much about the ache in his heart. Over and over again during those days he repeated a phrase that still echoes in my ears: "It would have been easier for me to die than to lose him. It would have been easier for me to die than to lose my only son." I recall those words so clearly because the Gospel on the Sunday following the accident was so similar. It was the text of John 3:16, the often quoted saying of Jesus: "God so loved the world that He gave us his only son."

We all heard that text in a different way that weekend. This man's heartache, which touched us so deeply, seemed to open for us a unique glimpse into the heart of God the Father. It was as though this man's grieving lament could well have been said by God the Father: "It would have been easier for me to die than to give my only Son."

The connection between this father's loss and the sacrifice of the Father of Jesus was so striking. It helped us see that the truth of God's love expressed in that line from John's Gospel was meant for our hearts and not just our minds.

Someone once said that the Bible is simply the story of God's patient and continual attempt to convince us of his love for us. I would add that it is a story aimed at our hearts and not just our minds. Everything God reveals about himself aims at bringing us to understand and to accept the unbelievable and astonishing truth that while his heart is full of grief at losing his only Son, it is even more full of love for us. In fact, because this plan of God is so beyond our understanding, beyond belief, God said it over and over again in varied ways throughout the centuries, preparing us to accept the scandal of his Son's death on the cross.

That is how we should read the story of Abraham, who in the first reading today is preparing to sacrifice his only son Isaac because God is testing his faith. At first glance this seems to be a cruel test or a mad hoax by an equally cruel and mad God. After all, God promised Abraham that he would be the father of many nations. Only in their old age did God finally make good on that promise of a son to Abraham and Sarah. Now God wants Abraham to slay this only son on an altar of sacrifice.

But we need to read this story, this text, as but the first episode of the story of God's repeated attempt to reveal his love for us. Here God begins to reveal how much he loves us and the plan he has for us to share his life. It is a plan that will only be revealed fully on the cross. There, on Calvary, the full irony of Abraham's test is revealed. The irony is that God is the one who is willing to offer up his Son. Abraham gives us the first glimpse of this divine plan. That is why he is called the father of faith, for faith is about seeing into the heart of God. God uses Abraham to give a human face to what is otherwise unbelievable, namely that he plans to suffer the grief of losing his Son to gain us.

Jesus comes into the world to reveal fully the Father's love for us and to complete his plan to share his life with us. In the gospel scene of the transfiguration, Jesus takes the disciples Peter, James and John to the mountain just before his journey to Jerusalem and the cross. He lets them see the whole panorama of what God has slowly been revealing bit by bit over the ages through the law and the prophets. The disciples enter into the conversation with Elijah and Moses, those who have seen the face of God,

those who know God's heart. This experience of looking into the heart of the Father forever changes them.

As they come down the mountain they do not fully understand, since the sacrifice of God's only Son had not occurred. Yet, they begin to discuss the unheard of—what the resurrection of the dead meant. This is the first hint of the transformation that they will undergo as disciples believing in the Risen Lord. Just as they will share in his resurrection, on this journey to the mountain they are transfigured with him and they begin to imagine living in a totally new way.

St. Paul, perhaps better than any New Testament writer, expresses how our Christian life is forever changed once we are graced with seeing into the Father's heart—once we come to believe with our hearts that the Father is more full of love for us than grief for his crucified Son, everything changes.

Paul's radical conversion came in the form of turning aside from a former way of life that narrowly limited God's plan and love to the people of Israel. The overwhelming generosity of God's gift of his only Son had to have a

corresponding effect with the salvation of all of humanity. Paul comes to see that by emptying himself of everything, even the life of his Son for us, God has clearly revealed that all of humanity has a place in his heart.

Paul's change of heart has much to teach us, particularly as we live in a time marked by sharp divisions in the human family and our own families. Whether it is a child in the womb or a criminal on death row; whether it is a hungry family in Africa or a member of our own family starved for love; our hearts have to have the same kind of overwhelming generosity that God reveals in giving up his Son for us. All belong to us because the Father tells us we all belong to him. He has shown us in giving his Son up to death that his ache for all of humanity will be satisfied even if it costs the life of his only Son.

Paul also reminds us that when we truly accept with our hearts that God loves us with such abandon, this totally changes the way we relate to the goods of the earth. "Will not God, who did not spare his own Son, give us everything we need?" The human heart, gripped by materialism and avarice, can so easily grow cold with little concern for those in need. We can also be overcome by worry and

anxiety in our own need. Paul tells us that the best antidote to worry, anxiety, avarice or greed is a faith that sees into the heart of God and his complete love for us.

In these days of Lent, Christ takes us to the mountain to look into the heart of his Father. We see that from the very beginning and through the ages he has but one aim in mind: To convince us of his love for us, purchased at the price that is more dear than dying himself, the price of giving up his only son. Any parent who has ever lost a child knows this pain. God is willing to take it on, so much does he love us. Accepting that truth in our hearts is the beginning of the risen life, the transfigured life, which heals all natural divisions and learned hatreds, which undercuts all self-centeredness and casts out any doubt of our self worth, and which melts hardened hearts to seek and give forgiveness.

As people in the parish reached out to the grieving father who lost his son in a tragic accident, they came to a new appreciation of the central truth of our faith. By sharing in his agony and pain, they got a glimpse, a fresh insight, into the heart of the Father, seeing not just his agony and

pain, but also his love for us. Over the years I have come to learn that God matures our faith, our spiritual lives, in these moments in which we draw close to people who are suffering. These are all fresh moments of grace to see more clearly into the heart of the Father who loses his son to gain us, something he has been trying to tell us from the very beginning of time.